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Manchester's Imagine Main Street Group Seeks Feedback

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MANCHESTER — The nonprofit group that has been working for almost two years to make downtown a destination for arts and culture is seeking feedback through an online survey.

Imagine Main Street has hosted First Thursday events downtown since June 2012, and organization leaders want to know what they're doing well and how they can improve, Imagine Main Street committee Chairman Steve Gates said Wednesday.

Available at <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/5JRVQ9L>, the survey asks if respondents have attended First Thursdays, whether they shopped or dined downtown and whether they experienced "anything new... that made you want to return to Main Street." Responses will help the organization plan First Thursday events later this year, Gates said.

The group is a collaboration of town staff, local businesses, artists, nonprofit organizations and the Downtown Manchester Special Services District. It was launched in the spring of 2012 with a vision of a flourishing arts community that would benefit Main Street restaurants and shops.

The organization's first big effort was in June 2012 as part of Pride in Manchester Week's Strollin' on Main event. Imagine Main Street volunteers revamped vacant shops as art galleries, live music venues and other attractions. The storefront "staging," which was repeated in subsequent First Thursdays, was meant to get people thinking about how downtown could look and what kinds of shopping and activities might be offered.

Imagine Main Street also has launched other projects, including Main Street ART Benches, meant to convert public benches into artworks, and Runners ART Parade, which employs life-sized mannequins of male and female runners as blank canvasses for artists.

The group also was instrumental in the opening this month of Young@Art on Purnell Place, which provides artists ages 15 to 25 a space to work, collaborate and learn. The 2,200-square-foot space is a "pop-up" store model, which allows an organization to use a place rent-free for two months, paying just for utilities.

Imagine Main Street also has found a steady partner in MCC on Main, the Manchester Community College downtown satellite and art gallery, which Gates said will continue to host live music for First Thursdays.

Gates noted that the town's plan of conservation and development, Manchester 2020, included a goal of establishing an arts and cultural district.

"We've been on a slow build toward that," he said.

February's First Thursday, on Thursday, of course, is to include live music and an art exhibit at MCC on Main, 903 Main St., and an open house at Young@Art, 50 Purnell Place.

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