

## Art to liven up vacant storefronts and businesses in downtown Manchester

By David Huck

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MANCHESTER — More than 30 artists will have their work on display at several businesses and vacant storefronts along Main Street beginning Thursday.

As part of an effort to make downtown Manchester an arts destination, organizers have artists lined up to showcase their work as a kick-off event for a regular Friday night arts series to be held through the summer.

Four spaces on Main Street that are vacant and have received approval from property owners will be used for displays, some of which will stay up throughout the month.

To help draw in developers, the committee has staged the vacant spaces. One is set up as a vintage clothing store, while another is set up as an art gallery.

A local rock band that plays a mix of covers from Pink Floyd to Wilco, as well as originals, 41 Prospect, will perform at 974 Main St., the site of the former furniture store next to the Forest Street parking lot.

City Steam Brewery from Hartford will offer free beer samples at that location.

The event starts at 6 p.m. and admission is free.

The "Imagine Main Street" committee includes town staff, local business owners, artists, nonprofit organizations, and the Downtown Manchester Special Services District.

"Our goal is to enhance our already-vibrant downtown with an increased focus on the arts," Imagine Main Street Chairperson Steve Gates said. "We envision downtown Manchester becoming a destination for the arts and arts-related businesses."

Gates said the group will host a regular series of art showcases throughout the downtown area beginning on Friday, July 6. The community members have worked with local businesses that have pledged to stay open later to bring in crowds looking for a meal and night on the town.

At the center of the arts revival is the Manchester Community College classroom and art space in the former Regal Men's Shop. In

early July, the building will open with an art exhibition.

"We hope to continue to use whatever vacant properties we can downtown to bring some artists in and have some pop-up galleries," Gates said of the Friday series.

Decades ago on Thursday nights — typically pay day for most area workers — residents strolled the sidewalks along Main Street or cruised the length of the street in their cars. Most businesses had longer hours that day and the sidewalks were bustling.

"We are trying to create the same kind of atmosphere where folks can view it as an arts destination, have dinner, wander Main Street, and visit three or four arts destinations," Gates said.

He said that organizers are hoping to have a successful event Thursday so business owners will find partnering with the group more attractive. Gates said that the group also hopes to meet with representatives from Real Art Ways in Hartford to help build a base for the arts east of the Connecticut River.

