

New arts pilot project to open on trial basis

By Marcia Downham

With its serene landscapes and diversity of wildlife, Muskoka has managed to attract and breed a vast amount of artists. As their numbers continue to grow, many of them are left to flourish or flounder on their own — creating in the shadows.

But this summer, the public will have a chance to support the many raw talents of Muskoka's emerging artists as part of a new arts pilot project being launched in Bracebridge.

The project, referred to as Six Degrees Muskoka, will provide aspiring artists, especially youth, free access to a street-level, public/private contemporary art forum and gallery where they can display, sell and promote their work.

"What we are trying to do is set up a place that represents an extremely wide cross-section of art as well as a place that is steered by the public for the public — open to everyone," said local architect Don Skinner, who, along with his wife Jenifer, founded Six Degrees Muskoka.

To make the project a reality, the Skinners, who own a number of prominent historical venues, have donated the old Queen's Hotel, in the heart of downtown Bracebridge, to be used as the Six Degrees gallery.

The building, on the corner of Manitoba Street and Taylor Road, was built in 1885 by local entrepreneur Alfred Hunt. The hotel had several different owners

until it was purchased by the Patterson brothers and renamed Hotel Patterson in 1944. Al Beverley later transformed the building into a commercial centre.

"We are extremely excited to be able to mesh together the power of community art, culture and heritage," said Skinner.

"Although this project is only on a trial basis, we hope the public will take an interest and it will roll over into something with longevity," said Tamsen Tillson, co-ordinator with the Arts Council of Muskoka. "It is really an exciting project not only for the local community, but for people who are visiting as well, and during a recession, what better opportunity would there be for emerging artists to show and sell their work."

Because the gallery is in a prime downtown location, Skinner believes it will not only build on the community's culture but help to increase the area's economic assets.

"We hope it helps to attract more summer traffic to the area — it is a space designed to invigorate the downtown in support of, and not in competition with, arts groups and merchants in the area," he said.

During its four-month trial period, from June to September, the Six Degrees gallery will showcase rotating exhibits of traditional and contemporary art content curated by the Arts Council of Muskoka, offer a variety of public art demonstrations and sales, and provide a public art, architecture and nature library.

The gallery will also boast a digital animation studio with 10 workstations. Local youth, from grades 1 through 12, are eligible to enroll in introductory



LOCAL ARTISTS GATHERED inside the Old Queen's Hotel recently to hear about the new Six Degrees Muskoka arts pilot project, to be launched in Bracebridge this June. The old hotel will be the Six Degrees art gallery where emerging artists will get to sell and promote their work to the public free of charge. (Photo by Marcia Downham)

animation courses, which will be taught by Michael Carter, a professional animator and animation producer.

Muskoka students interested in digital animation are invited to take part in a name-the-studio competition.

The winner will not only have their design featured in schools and other local venues, but will also receive a laptop and one week of free animation classes. Second place wins one free week of animation classes, and third gets one intro to an animation class and a T-shirt with a logo on it.

All applications must be received by May 15 at 5 p.m. For contest rules and information or to sign up for summer animation classes, go to sixdegreesmuskoka.com.

"This is an extremely generous and phenomenal offer to help promote the arts and other art venues — I can see a lot of really great things happening in this gallery," said Marc De Groot, a Muskoka wildlife artist who attended one of the Six Degrees public information sessions.

"It's a great concept to enhance the connection between local arts and youth, and I think it will be a great place for the public to indulge in a variety of local art."

High-speed Internet arrives in four more areas

By Matthew Sitrler

High-speed Internet is now being offered in four more remote areas of Muskoka.

The locations where new service is being provided include Baxter, in the township of Georgian Bay; Port Stanton, in Gravenhurst; Lake Waseosa, in Huntsville; and Hillside, in Lake of Bays.

The expansion makes possible between 100 and 200 new high-speed connections, said Muskoka Community Network (MCN) executive director Rob McPhee.

To date, MCN has successfully co-ordinated the arrival of high-speed Internet in 25 previously unserved locations, including the First Nation community of Moose Deer Point.

"That's out of 40 (locations)," said McPhee. "We've got a push on now to finish this project by early fall. We're targeting (completion) for October 2009."

MCN started its regional broadband deployment initiative in late 2005.

The funding — about \$1.7 million from FedNor — wasn't announced until late 2006.

MCN is a non-profit corporation. McPhee said the aim is to provide almost all unserved residents in Muskoka with high-speed Internet.

"Under our current project, we set the threshold that we expected we'd get 80 per cent of the people broadband coverage in these unserved areas," said McPhee.

To provide coverage for the last 20 per cent of areas, MCN has

applied for provincial funding through the Rural Connections 2 program.

"We hope to hear from them any time now," said McPhee regarding the application. "We're hoping that we'll know sometime this spring."

In order to get the funding, MCN has to demonstrate there are still unserved locations here in Muskoka.

Parry Sound-Muskoka MP Tony Clement, the minister responsible for FedNor, admitted the broadband deployment initiative has taken a long time.

"I'm very aware that there are members of our community that still do not have access and I'm certainly encouraging MCN to keep working hard," said Clement.

Although other, larger, private Internet service providers are offering similar services, Clement seems happy if residents are.

"What I've learned is that when MCN takes an interest in an area, Rogers and Bell rush in," said Clement. "In a sense, that's OK, because citizens in our communities are getting service. In a sense, if it's comparable service and affordable, then they don't care who the provider is."

For now, residents like Joe McRobb, a beneficiary of the newly established broadband tower in Port Stanton, are just happy to get high-speed service.

"I had the new service installed earlier this month and it is wonderful to be off dial-up Internet," he said. "It's reliable and it's fast."

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