

'Permission wall' for art?



DAVID SANDELL/THE CAPITAL TIMES

Don Wettach's spunky little Statue of Liberty graces the west-facing wall of Mother Fool's Coffeehouse, 1101 Williamson St. He and a group will approach the Plan Commission about making the east-facing wall a regulated "permission wall" for local muralists.

Graffiti group seeks an outdoor canvas

By Kathryn Kingsbury

The Capital Times

Graffiti has been tagged by the Madison business community as one of its worst headaches. It costs the city \$250,000 a year to remove tagging, not counting the bus shelters.

One alderman, Tim Bruer, has proposed a "Graffiti Stoppers" hotline with cash rewards.

But tonight, a group of graffiti artists and friends will approach the city with a proposal for a regulated, revolving art show on a wall on Williamson Street — a "permission wall."

"Basically, we just want to paint," says Don Wettach, a 28-year-old self-identified graffiti artist.

He believes that art belongs in public spaces,

where anyone can see it for free, he said. That idea is what inspired him to approach local businesses this summer with the idea of creating permission walls where painting is not only legal, but encouraged.

"I wanted to create a place where we can do graffiti type art in a rotating setting, almost like an outdoor art gallery," he said.

Along with a group from the Marquette neighborhood, he will approach the Madison Plan Commission tonight with a proposal for what would be the first neighborhood-sanctioned, public spot in Madison: the east-facing wall of Mother Fool's Coffeehouse at 1101 Williamson St.

(In June, New Orleans Takeout restaurant

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owner John Roussos allowed two other graffiti artists to spray-paint a mural on his building on Fordem Avenue. It was art, but it carried the restaurant's logo. "I've got an advertisement, and I've got graffiti-proofing," he said at the time.)

Jon Hain, co-owner of the coffee shop, said the mural idea fits into Mother Fool's role as an arts venue. "In my mind it's kind of like our open mike for music," he said.

Artists would have to sign up in advance and agree to take responsibility for keeping the wall clean and free from vandalism, but their images would not need pre-approval from the city, the neighborhood association, or even the owners of Mother Fool's. Each piece would stay up for two or three months, after which the next person on the list would paint over it.

The only stipulations? No nudity, no profanity, no violence, and no commercial messages. The Marquette Neighborhood Association would have the final say on any piece, and could order artists who violate these rules to paint over the offending murals.

"There won't be anyone looking over the artist's shoulder as they put up the image," said Ald. Judy Olson, whose ward includes the Marquette neighborhood.

Mother Fool's allowed Wettach to put up a mural in late September in order to gauge community support for the plan. So far, responses to the wall-sized image of the Statue of Liberty have been unanimously positive, said Hain and Olson.

"I haven't heard a single person say anything negative about

it," said Olson.

"We're excited about it," said Marsha Rummel, secretary of the Marquette Neighborhood Association. "Many business are concerned about graffiti and this is a creative way to both honor the artists, who are not mainstream, and solve a problem. It's a way to help struggling artists who wouldn't be able to afford to put up a mural three or four times a year."

Linda Grubb, director of the city's building inspection unit and a member of the mayor's Graffiti Abatement Team, said she supports Wettach's efforts. But she added that data from other cities does not clearly show a correlation between what she calls "permission walls" and reduced vandalism.

"We're kind of staying away from making broad statements about how it will affect vandalism in the city," she said.

Wettach says he created the Statue of Liberty mural to celebrate the positive attributes of Americans that came out after the Sept. 11 attacks. "It was supposed to be about unity," he said.

"The Statue of Liberty is really about the people who live in this country. How many of our parents and grandparents got goosebumps when they first saw her?"

Olson said that the ability to be spontaneous and to convey "anything that speaks to the moment" is one of the big strengths of the rotating mural plan. "That's very new, very different."

She believes the mural plan has a good chance of passing the Plan Commission's muster. "The (Statue of Liberty) mural is obviously up before we're asking for permission. That's somewhat risky. If the Plan Commission turns it down, we'll have to remove it. But it's meant to be taken down anyway."