



Urban Times

ARCHIVES

FROM: SEPTEMBER 2008

Urban Times art show and a battle with humility

IT WAS A TRULY HUMBLING thought, this idea that the Harrison Center for the Arts would use the occasion of its fall gala event to celebrate the positive impact of Urban Times.

“How would you know,” my alleged friends said, almost in unison, when I reported that feeling to them – the obvious implication being that humility is a concept heretofore alien to a certain journalist.

They’re probably right, although those who know me best understand that I am an oversized pile of humble mush underneath a veneer of steadfast confidence.

But back to humility: My son, Matthew, and I are indeed humbled by the idea that Urban Times has had any impact at all on Downtown living. We founded Urban Times in August 2005, based on the success of The Lockerbie Letter, which I took over in 1996 and built into what I think was an eagerly anticipated publication of interest to folks well beyond the boundaries of Lockerbie Square, where I am lucky enough to reside. A few years later, I began producing The Keyhole for the Old Northside Association – after which more neighborhoods wanted their own version.

Economically and practically, the only solution was to produce one publication which could serve several neighborhoods. We opened in 2005 with four neighborhoods – Lockerbie, the Old Northside, St. Joseph and Chatham Arch.



**BABBLIN’
BROOKS**

Musings from the editor about life downtown (or just about anything else he wants to write about.)

By Bill Brooks

□ On Friday, Sept. 5, the Harrison Center for the Arts will host “Urban Times,” a show recognizing the contributions to Downtown neighborhood life made by this newsletter. The event will also feature an informational fair to promote the nine Urban Times neighborhoods.

My idea, it turns out, was too small in scope. The concept was immediately attractive to leaders of the Herron-Morton Place, Cottage Home and Woodruff Place neighborhoods. By our second issue, we had grown to serve all seven as their official neighborhood newsletter. Ransom Place and Meridian Park would come later.

We knew Urban Times would appeal, however, to folks well beyond those boundaries, as had The Lockerbie Letter. Our formula was simple: *Real* and well-written news of obvious importance to people who live in, work in or visit Downtown Indianapolis. No cutesy presentations, no smarmy implications, no writers more interested in amusing and impressing themselves with double entendre.

Perhaps most importantly of all, news which we determine by its importance to our readers – not news determined by advertisers. We’re able to do that because of my many years in the journalistic trenches, having been taught by old-schoolers first at Ball State University and then at the Crawfordsville Journal-Review. And by experience as the managing editor at three other newspapers before evolving into my present urbanite state in 1994.

Looking back to 2005, I must confess that inter-neighborhood communications was not near the top of the list of reasons Urban Times was a good idea for Bill and Matthew Brooks. From the start, however, that was prominent among feedback – that neighbors enjoyed knowing what other neighborhoods were going through, that they could learn from each other.

Count Joanna Taft in that mix. Joanna is executive director of the Harrison Center for the Arts. She and her husband, Bill, and family have lived Downtown for 17 years. She is also someone who has learned first-hand the benefit of reaching out beyond her own neighborhood boundaries

“For the past couple years,” she said, “I have been watching the power of Urban Times in connecting people and neighborhoods around issues that are important to all of us. As a citizen of Downtown, I feel much more informed and much more engaged, and I have seen others affected in the same way.”

Joanna added, “In sincere appreciation for the amazing and important work of Urban Times, the Harrison Center wanted to celebrate the newspaper and the community it brings together.”

She chose one of the center’s biggest nights of the year – Friday, Sept. 5 – when artists will present works based on the idea of urban living. Based on the Harrison Center’s track record, there will be creativity aplenty, and whimsy to spare.

But Joanna also had an even better idea – a neighborhood fair to accompany the art opening. “We recognize that people come to our events and see the energy of our Downtown community, so at the Urban Times event, we will do more – we will give people the tools they need to join us Downtown.”

The Harrison Center’s gymnasium, therefore, will feature most of the nine Urban Times neighborhoods, as well as realtors, commercial brokers and not-for-profits which work to improve the Downtown environment. School options will be represented, as well.

The September event at the Harrison Center typically draws about a thousand people. Joanna, and the Brooks boys, hope that “Urban Times” will smash that mark. “We hope that neighbors will attend this event to celebrate our community and Urban Times,” Joanna said. “We also hope that our neighbors will bring their friends who are curious about Downtown, but don’t have the tools to discover which neighborhood is the right fit for them.”

Amen to that. Those of us who call Downtown home understand the rewards of urban living, but we also know that “the more the merrier” rule applies. More residents to support the independent businesses we already have, more residents to attract even more amenities.

It’s win-win. Just like the Harrison Center show will be for the Urban Times ego. We’ll try to be humble.

Some unfair criticism was directed at the **SINDIANAPOLIS CULTURAL TRAIL** in an Aug. 3 letter to the editor published by The Indianapolis Star. Letter-writer Clark Kahlo called out the trail’s organizers for breaking their “initial promises that the trail would be privately funded and that no tax funds would be used.” No such promise was ever made – and in fact Urban Times

reported in November 2006 that \$15 million in federal funds had been secured to help jump-start the program. That number has been repeated in numerous stories since. What trail organizers can claim, however, is that the trail has not used any money from the beleaguered city budget. Charitable donors have contributed more than \$26 million for the trail, which with the federal funding is well on its way to cover the total cost of \$51 million. The Cultural Trail, a supremely wonderful idea which will elevate the city, will never be perfect – but charges that its boosters have been dishonest with the public about funding are way off the mark.

The “**NO PARKING**” signs found on every parking meter in the 500, 600 and 700 block of Mass Ave. on Friday, Aug. 13, were ominous signs of a larger issue – that the city of Indianapolis still seems to be doing everything it can to put Mass Ave merchants out of business.

Regular readers of this column will remember this debate from last fall, when meters along Mass Ave were red-bagged for several days to accommodate a parade which lasted only an hour. This year, meters along Mass Ave have been closed to parking a total of 15 days – including two Saturdays immediately after the Aug. 13 incident, once for a mini-marathon and another for a bicycle race. (Although that number does not include the days when the signs are posted, but not in effect. Since many motorists only see the large letters “No Parking” and don’t see the other words, the signs still have a chilling effect on parking.)

The events themselves are not the issue, however. The Aug. 13 occasion, in fact, was to accommodate a memorial service at the Indianapolis Firefighters Memorial in the 700 block for a local firefighter killed in Iraq. The issue is that the city accommodates requests for parking restrictions without any consideration of, or comment from, neighboring merchants.

City-County Councilor Jackie Nytes took up the merchants’ banner after the Aug. 13 incident. “We need a better solution,” she wrote to Sarah Taylor, the mayor’s director of constituent services. “The reality is that the Avenue is no longer this sleepy little place. It is a destination and the small businesses cannot incur this sort of impact and stay open.”

Event boosters invariably claim that everyone benefits when events bring people to the Avenue. Sometimes that is true; sometimes it is not.

But what is invariably true is that – on days when parking disappears – so do the customers. There are seven restaurants in the 600 and 700 blocks which serve lunch; on Aug. 13, those restaurants went wanting for customers, and servers went wanting for tips.

How many of us would object if the city waved a wand and told us that we’d lose a day’s pay so that a parade could take place or runners could race? ■