

Sitting Pretty

Written by Mindy Lucas

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New Beaufort community public art project is as practical as it is artistic.

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If you've ever walked around downtown Beaufort for its less busy streets for very long, you may have been hard pressed to find a place to sit and rest for a minute.

Sure, there are Waterfront Park's iconic swings and benches looking out over the Beaufort River, and you may have rejoiced at finding a lone bench in one of Beaufort's enchanting neighborhood parks, but search for a place to stop and sit along a side street or venue and you may have come up short.

Now, thanks to a new community-based public art project featuring six custom painted benches, visitors and residents alike will have a few extra places to sit as well as something to ponder while they rest.

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Spearheaded by the Cultural District Advisory Board, the project started as an idea to introduce more public art to Beaufort's Cultural District, similar to what other cities across the country have done.

Think the Chicago cows, or the Lexington, Kentucky horses – both projects that have brought in scores of visitors, not to mention additional revenue, to those cities. (Twenty years ago, Beaufort enjoyed a similar boost when the Arts Council brought 28 cows from the Chicago herd to town, calling the project Cows on Vacation.)

While Beaufort's community leaders certainly weren't shooting for something quite that grand of scale with the benches, (Chicago's project alone featured some 340 life-size cow statues), the idea was the same.

"Beaufort is an arts town and so we thought there is plenty of art in wonderful galleries, but there's no reason there can't be something like this here," said Bonnie Hargrove, Director for USC Beaufort's Center for the Arts and member of the Cultural District Advisory Board.

Board members also liked the idea of a bench project as public art since it would serve a community need as well, Hargrove said.

In fact, on visitor surveys conducted by the Beaufort Regional Chamber of Commerce, tourists cited benches or places to sit as something they'd like to see more of, said Rhonda Carey, Events and Tour Operations Coordinator for the City of Beaufort.

"People were literally saying it would be great if there were places to sit down and take it all in," said Carey, who worked on the benches project with the advisory board as well.

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