

Des Moines Register

ALTOONA

Washington artist painting huge 'Where the Wild Things Are'-inspired mural in Altoona

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Altoona's newest piece of public artwork is going to be wild.

The 20-foot-tall and 50-foot-wide mural — inspired by the popular children's book "Where the Wild Things Are" by Maurice Sendak — is being painted on the west side of the city's new \$36 million city hall and police station.

Altoona Mayor Dean O'Connor met Washington-based artist Justin Hillgrove last year at an art festival in Salt Lake City and was immediately captivated by his work — specifically a piece titled "The Night Max Wore His Wolf Suit," a painting heavily inspired by Sendak that features "Where the Wild Things Are" main character Max in a police lineup with monsters from the book.

"I have two boys ... I read (the book) to them a lot when they were little," O'Connor said. "I would kind of act out the monsters and stuff, so I had an attachment to it."

After ordering a print for his office, O'Connor thought Hillgrove's piece would be the perfect addition to the large west-facing wall of the new Altoona police station, which can be seen from the nearby bike path.

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"I was actually really surprised when I got the request and it was such a fun opportunity," said Hillgrove "It's on the side of the police station, I mean that's the punch line. It's funny and super ironic."

The mural cost about \$45,000, according to O'Connor. The city paid for half that with money earmarked to jump-start the city's arts and culture committee initiatives. The other half came from a Bravo Greater Des Moines grant.

Bravo grants support local art initiatives in the metro and are made possible by 17 local government partners that contribute a portion of hotel/motel tax revenue into the grant program. O'Connor said this is the first time Altoona has received large support in grant funding for public art.

"It's our first big mural art piece in the city, so I hope citizens enjoy it," said O'Connor.

Most of Altoona's other public art are metal sculptures by John Brommel of Des Moines.

He's the artist behind a 25-foot-tall rocketship that stands in Haines Park; the 11-foot-tall "Moai Dude" sculpture at Ironwood Park modeled after famous rock statues on Easter Island; and a massive frog that sits in front of the library.

In October, Hillgrove drove to Altoona with his son, close friend, and supplies hoping to finish the mural in two weeks. Unfortunately, at about 60% completion an unforeseen snow squall halted the project until spring.

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Although the mural is currently unfinished, O'Connor says it's already received some buzz in the community with people already taking photos with it — momentum he hopes will spark more public interest in public art projects in the future.

"Hopefully it gets other people excited about art and making what you see every day even more exciting and interesting," said Hillgrove. "I like the idea of turning a place into a destination rather than something you just pass through."

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