

## **Arts, recreation and more boost Lee County's quality, vibrancy**

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** More and more, potential residents judge the esoteric notion of "quality of life" by looking at things like recreation opportunities, a community's engagement in the arts and leisure choices. In Part 4 of this series of stories produced by the Sanford Area Growth Alliance in conjunction with The Herald, we look at those things that boost the livability of the community we call home. The series continues Sundays and Wednesdays through May 14<sup>th</sup>.

**SANFORD** — Hundreds of people pour out of Temple Theatre, many of them bouncing from the building with a quick dance step or humming a tune they just heard on stage in "Legally Blonde The Musical."

This scene repeats itself all year long. Professional actors took the stage for seven Main Stage shows this season and were joined in the Temple's 33rd season by a roster of touring bands and comedians that kept downtown buzzing.

While the scene may be common in Sanford, it's not common for other cities Sanford's size, even with all of the economic and social pluses it brings.

"It's very unusual and it benefits Sanford," said Peggy Taphorn, Temple Theatre's producing artistic director. "Our overall economic impact is up to about \$2.8 million a year. Having an arts-based group downtown centers the downtown and advances the quality of life for everyone."

### **City of Art**

Especially for people living beyond Sanford, Temple Theatre may be the most visible artistic enterprise elevating the quality of life. But it's certainly not the only one.

Not many other communities its size have an orchestra either, but the Lee County Community Orchestra is now wrapping up its 29th season, with volunteer musicians from high school students to senior citizens performing under the baton of conductor Tara Villa Keith, who also serves as music director for the Davidson College Symphony Orchestra.

Other arts have a much longer local tradition. Pottery has been produced in Lee County for centuries, but legendary artist A.R. Cole put Sanford on the map when he moved his studio to the city in 1934 and produced pottery until his death four decades later. His family carries on even today at North Cole Pottery.

Art is everywhere: on public buildings, in the schools and at several public exhibitions each year, most notably the Sanford Arts and Vine Festival each spring and Sanford Brush and Palette Club Art Show every fall. The two-day Arts & Vine Festival draws thousands to purchase work by 50 local and regional artists and to sample wines and beer from artisans across the state.

### **Outdoor Escapes**

Recreation also contributes to the quality of life, and local residents have plenty to enjoy. Parks and Recreation Director John Payne says the community stacks up favorably to others its size, quickly pointing to San-Lee Park, an outdoor education center he describes as "a real jewel." Renowned mountain bike trails, campgrounds and playgrounds draw local residents and visitors, and more are expected soon, when San-Lee Park opens its new nature center.

The area offers 43 miles of riverfront where locals escape to paddle, fish or picnic. There's Tobacco Road Golf Course, a public facility named by Golf Course Architecture as one of the top 50 courses in the world. Deep River Sporting Clays' annual Southern Side by Side Championship and Exhibition draws shooters and gun enthusiasts to celebrate the tradition of wing shooting during a weekend of friendly competition, exhibitions and fellowship.

One recent, noteworthy park addition is the Endor Iron Furnace Greenway. Walkable communities and greenways are critical amenities, and upon completion, this greenway will make a 28-mile loop from downtown Sanford to the historic Endor Iron Furnace along the Deep River. Two segments are already open, including a two-mile paved trail for joggers, walkers and bikers.

But if it weren't for some local visionaries, there might have been no trail. Sanford Mayor Chet Mann recalls the political battle.

"I remember with the greenways, some officials were saying we don't need that and it will never be popular," he said. "But now I go to the greenway and see 300 people that I've never seen before. It's been wildly popular and extremely successful."

### **Does Quality of Life Really Matter?**

There's little doubt that art and recreation elevate the quality of life. But does quality of life actually translate to dollars and cents?

For community development professionals, the answer is: yes.

Mann, who has championed efforts to expand murals, sculpture and other public art, believes it's absolutely essential. He sees art and recreation as part of Sanford's ongoing effort to transform itself from a rural town to an appealing, small urban place.

But it's not just elected officials making the case. Kirk Bradley believes you can't overstate the importance of quality of life. As CEO of Lee Moore Capital and a principal in ECO CP Partners LLC, the developer with deep local ties has created commercial developments that attract people and generate dollars.

Bradley agrees with Mann, citing a popular trend called "urban burbs," essentially a suburban location with an urban vibe and quality of life. With the Triangle's continued growth, Bradley says that becomes a viable model for Sanford's future, especially since people prefer places with an authentic historic downtown — the kind Sanford has to offer.

"While there are always ways to improve, we already have a great quality of life," Bradley said. "We also have elected officials and public staff with the vision to continue improving it."