

Q & A with Cyndi Conn

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Cyndi Conn is executive director of Creative Santa Fe, an independent, nonprofit organization dedicated to “strengthening Santa Fe’s creative economy and enhancing the quality of life for citizens and visitors through collaboration and innovation.”

Conn, who holds a master’s degree in curatorial studies and arts administration, grew up in Albuquerque and lived in Paris, Mexico City, Austin, Texas, and New Orleans before returning to New Mexico. She talked with *The New Mexican* about several of Creative Santa Fe’s more advanced initiatives and the impact the organization hopes it will have on the city’s economy.

What are the major projects that Creative Santa Fe is working on? Could you give us a quick overview?

Conn: One of the main initiatives is [Connect Santa Fe], a walkability/connectivity project looking at connectivity in the literal sense: How do we connect downtown Santa Fe and make it a more walkable, more user-friendly place for both locals and tourists? So much of the time, we see tourists dropped off at the Rail Runner or dropped off at the Plaza, and they don’t know how to get from point A to point B; they don’t know how to get to the Railyard; they don’t know how to get to Canyon Road.

When downtowns are vibrant, are connected, are walkable, they’re safer, they’re more attractive to tourists. There’s a huge economic impact if downtowns are walkable. People actually walking from place to place has a very dramatic effect on the restaurants, stores, shopping. There is a quantity of data out there that shows that downtown walkability is not just a luxury, it’s an actual necessity for a vibrant city. If [downtown] is not a healthy, vibrant place where both locals and tourists want to go, the rest of the city suffers dramatically.

And so our first step in this larger walkability initiative is the reopening of De Vargas Park on June 15. What we’ve done is partnered with the city of Santa Fe and over 30 partners for this park project to showcase what a vibrant downtown can really look like. Rodeo de Santa Fe has changed the time of their parade and rerouted it so that it will circle around the park and end at the park around 3:30 p.m., when the mayor will do a ribbon-cutting ceremony. In the afternoon and evening, we have everything from a fashion show to the Santa Fe Culinary Academy doing some cooking events; we have live music, bands, some children’s dance performances and light shows.

[Our] intention for this park project is to show that this is the first phase of a much larger development project all along the Parque del Rio, which is the linear park that goes along the river in downtown Santa Fe. ... We’re going to show the public what that park could look like and how it could be used as a

multimodal trail and as an actual downtown access to the river, a new place for locals and tourists to go to really walk and connect.

We also will be showing a lot of interactive light and video art in the park that evening, with the idea of introducing the concept of having an international light festival in Santa Fe in the winter and a new class of festival for our city.

Could you say a more about what you mean by a light festival?

Conn: There are cities throughout the world right now — Lyons, France; Sydney, Australia; San Antonio, Texas — where the city comes together and does everything from video art projects — temporary installations, sculptures, video projections, walking paths — that all feature this incredible light work that highlights the scenic architecture of a city, so Santa Fe is perfectly positioned for that. It's really a broad range of art, and it's also a really interesting opportunity to showcase this unique industry that Santa Fe has — and that is the intersection of art and science. So there are opportunities for visiting lectures, for conferences, for information about art, science and technology and how this all comes together in Santa Fe to really boost and to bring together some of the really unique aspects of the city.

Collaboration and relationships seem to be very important ...

Conn: Absolutely. A critical aspect of success is community buy-in. Every initiative that we take on is a grass-roots-based initiative based on information about what the community wants. We have no specific agenda other than helping facilitate change that the community wants to see happen in Santa Fe.

What are the barriers to collaboration? What kinds of problems do you run into when you are trying to set this up this kind of relationship?

Conn: We have found that as soon as the community started to understand our larger goal — which is that we want bring the community together to build public-private partnerships — and we started attracting money from outside sources, we really began to see the collaborations happen. I think the first challenge was really getting the community to understand that we did not have a competitive agenda and that we are looking to bring new money, new ideas, new resources, new residents to Santa Fe — not to grow Santa Fe in any major way, but to start replenishing some of resources that we've been losing with an aging tourist population, an aging resident population. It's great to have an aging population, but you need to start having action and movement in situating a city such that you attract younger residents and younger tourists as well.

What do you think are the major challenges the city faces?

Conn: I think that in Santa Fe, as in any historic city that takes pride in its legacy of architecture and the way things are done, introducing the idea of change can meet with some questioning, some caution, so I think that one of the biggest barriers is getting the community and city leaders to understand that you can have innovation within preservation, and that change doesn't always mean explosive growth. The

challenge is helping people understand that we're not looking to change the city; we're just helping to bring all the assets to the forefront.

Why should the people who live here care about your projects, particularly the people who are underserved or marginalized?

Conn: Our two main initiatives, Connect Santa Fe and the Arts + Creativity Center, are focused on a systemic approach to addressing some of Santa Fe's most challenging and complex issues. Over and over, we hear of our community's need for more jobs, attracting young talent, retaining the young population we currently have, bringing in a new tourist base, more nightlife options and affordable housing, so that our youth and creative population can live and thrive in the city. In the book *Walkable City: How Downtown Can Save America One Step at a Time*, author, city planner and industrial designer Jeff Speck says that 'the walkable city is not just a nice, idealistic notion. Rather, it is a simple, practical minded solution to a host of complex problems that we face as a society, problems that daily undermine our nation's economic competitiveness, public welfare, and economic sustainability.'

We need a downtown that attracts creative and entrepreneurial talent, is safe for youth after dark — the [newly refurbished De Vargas] skate park will be lighted every night until 11 p.m. — and we need affordable live/work spaces for artists and creative people in our community so they can become contributing members of the local creative economy. Our initiatives are beginning, through widespread community support and public private partnerships, to take these issues on to make change for the entire population.

For more information about the full range of Creative Santa Fe projects and initiatives, visit www.creativesantafe.org.