

Sphere of influence

San Bernardino invests in public art

12:11 AM PST on Wednesday, December 7, 2005

By **CHRIS RICHARD** / The Press-Enterprise

The brightly painted concrete spheres lie scattered along the sidewalks near San Bernardino City Hall, like oversized marbles left behind by some giant child.

Set amid the one-way glass and concrete facades of downtown office buildings, they seem out of place. But to a group of city officials and Cal State San Bernardino artists, the spheres represent a whimsical introduction to a transformation in San Bernardino's civic life.

The 10 spheres are painted with designs ranging from images of dancers to high-heeled shoes. They're the first in a series of new public art projects scheduled throughout the city, said Jim Ruester, Mayor Judith Valles' cultural and international affairs director.

Cal State student artists also are at work on a sculpture and fountain that are planned for a shopping center at Northpark Boulevard and University Parkway, and competing for another sculpture near the university campus. In a separate commission, a professional muralist is preparing a design based on historic Route 66, planned for a building at Second and E streets.

The student work is subsidized through a \$300,000 grant by the development company Watson & Associates pledged to the university art department for public projects.

The fund has paid small commissions to student artists and covered materials costs for projects like the spheres, art department chairwoman Sant Khalsa said. She hopes to add about 10 spheres a year downtown. Khalsa said she'd like to see the arts program expand to include more civic support, including competitions for established artists.

Ruester, too, envisions a day when the people visit San Bernardino for its art. But it's not clear when that day will come.

Since 1990, San Bernardino has levied a half-percent development fee charged on building permits for new commercial and industrial construction that funds the arts. In January, City Council members distributed about \$126,000 among eight musical and theater groups.

After several years of skeleton-thin budgets, the city government will end this fiscal year with a surplus of about \$4.2 million, Finance Director Barbara Pachon said. But it will need that money to break even next year.

Meanwhile, city officials are looking to demands for other services, especially more police officers.

Still, modest as the new installations may be, they're getting a friendly reception, said Glenn Baude, San Bernardino's code-compliance director and head of a city committee that oversees art projects. In the month since the first spheres were placed, he's received about 100 calls from members of the public, almost all of them complimentary, Baude said.

Waiting for a bus near City Hall recently, Brian Williams said he has checked out all 10 spheres.

"Anything they do along these lines is a good thing," Williams said.

Reach Chris Richard at (909) 806-3076 or crichard@pe.com



Greg Vojtko / The Press-Enterprise

A concrete sphere painted to resemble a pink lotus blossom is installed on the median in San Bernardino. It is part of the first in a series of new public art projects.