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Salem unveils downtown art

By Tom Dalton
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SALEM — It didn't take long for four large sculptures to start drawing a crowd.

"On Monday morning these pieces were being installed, and within five minutes people were taking pictures and sticking their head through it," said Tom Daniel, the city's economic development manager.

Three of the abstract sculptures, the city's first significant venture into public art in recent years, were installed on the Essex Street pedestrian mall and the fourth at the corner of Washington and Front streets. They will stay up until November.

This is not a one-time happening, Daniel said, but the beginning of a public art program in the downtown. During a series of workshops this winter on the future of the pedestrian mall, the same subject kept coming up.

"One thing we heard is that people are very interested in more public art," he said.

Salem is not pretending to be New York City, where Christo draped Central Park in fabric, or even Chicago, which displayed hundreds of "cows on parade" a few years ago.

But it's a start, officials say.

And, interestingly, it is a start that got an indirect boost from Chicago.

Michael Lash, the former director of public art for the city of Chicago, is opening a gallery in the downtown and helped procure the four sculptures by Rob Lorenson, an artist from Middleboro.

"He's been very generous with volunteering his time and his talent," said Daniel.

Daniel, too, is no novice in this field. As the former economic development manager for Minneapolis, he helped develop public art policies for that city.

While the downtown sculptures may be new and different, they are not the only examples of art outdoors. After all, this is a city of statues, fountains and historic homes.

Last summer, an unusual public art project sprang up in Lappin Park, the postage stamp of grass surrounding the "Bewitched" statue, a piece of public art that prompted both cheers and jeers when it was unveiled in 2005.

In that park, Beverly artist Greg Orfanos painted whimsical creatures on the surfaces of electrical boxes. The idea of painting unsightly utility boxes came from a resident, Dave Pelletier, who presented it to a businessman, Gulu-Gulu Cafe owner Steve Feldmann. Together, they went to the Salem Redevelopment Authority for approval.

"It's pretty popular in other cities like Boston, Cambridge and Somerville," said Feldmann.

If Salem has its way, public art is here to stay.

Earlier this year, the city applied for a \$100,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to design a conceptual plan for the pedestrian mall. That design includes a master plan for public art.

"I think Salem is just ripe for a public art program that allows the community to tell its story and share its experience," Daniel said.