

## Plant City to celebrate new mural, 125th anniversary

By GEORGE H. NEWMAN | The Tampa Tribune

A Jan. 10 celebration in historic downtown will herald a new mural, parking lot and the 125th anniversary of the city.

A centerpiece of the celebration will be a 14-foot by 70-foot mural, "Heart of Plant City," depicting historical people and iconic landmarks in the city.

It was 125 years ago on that date when residents of the area voted to incorporate as a city, electing a mayor and four councilmen.

A lot has changed since then, but the celebration of the city's birthday will honor the memory of the past and the hope of the future, mural committee member Sandee Sytsma said.

"Just like all birthdays this one will have cake and refreshments," Sytsma said. There will also be entertainment and guest speakers, she said.

The free party, from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m., will also celebrate the completion of a municipal parking lot that is on the site of nearly a block of buildings destroyed in a 2005 fire.

The Paul Hetrick mural dominates the south wall of the Whistle Stop Caf , 102 S. Collins St. The mural overlooking the new parking lot includes depictions of such landmarks as the train depot and 1914 Plant City High School Community Center, along with such leaders of today and yesterday as former City Manager Nettie Draughon, City Commissioner Mike Sparkman, prominent strawberry grower Roy Parke, former state lawmaker James L. Redman, retired car dealer B.M. "Mac" Smith, local historian David E. Bailey and others.

"People have watched this mural progress since the day I first put my brush and paint to the brick wall," Hedrick said as he put the finishing touches on his work Dec. 23. "As the mural has progressed I have enjoyed talking with people who stop to look and ask about it."

The painting started in September, but the concept began in June when Jerry Lofstrom, the owner of the Whistle Stop, first approached Hedrick about the project.

The restaurant's southern wall was left exposed by the 2005 fire that demolished nearly a block of buildings on Collins Street.

The land was eventually cleared and evolved from a weed-filled empty lot into a limestone and dirt parking lot as the property changed hands. Eventually the city bought the land, and plans for the municipal parking lot and later the mural began to take shape. On Aug. 24 the city commission heard from the Heart of Plant City committee members including Sytsma, Lofstrom and others.

During that commission meeting the proposal for the design of the city parking lot and the conceptual design of the mural were approved. The committee pledged \$5,000 to enhance the area around the mural and parking lot.

The parking lot includes about 27 parking spaces, plus two spots for handicapped parking. The parking lot and adjacent area includes landscaping, historic lamp posts and sidewalks in keeping with the downtown streetscape design.

Lofstrom donated the use of the restaurant's southern wall, but Hedrick's work, about 400 hours, was paid for with donations. The donations paid for other parts of the project as well.

"The committee came up with a list of about 40 families and individuals who might be interested in being represented in the mural," Sytsma said. "We began asking them to donate \$1,500 each to be a visual part of the project. The response was overwhelming."

There are 53 figures in the mural. Some are bystanders or distant figures that don't actually represent anyone in particular, such as a depiction of a Florida Strawberry Festival queen riding on a float.

Police Chief Bill McDaniel, a birthday celebration committee member, will provide items to place in a time capsule that will be buried on the site. The capsule, to be opened in 2085 on the city's 200th year anniversary, will include photos, coins, memorabilia of our time and items donated from businesses and individuals.

The Plant City High School class of 1969 donated a 25-foot flag pole and the American flag near the mural. There will also be lighting and benches set in the area for comfort and viewing. A spot will be created where individuals can stand and be photographed as if they are a part of the mural.

"The mural project and all things associated with it has far surpassed what I thought it would be," Sytsma said. "I consider the mural a gift to the city from everyone who has been a part of the project. The mural will be part of the cityscape for many years to come."

Murals have been a part of the more than century-old downtown since its earliest days. One of the best known, a John Briggs mural painted in the 1970s, was considered a local treasure until it and the fire-damaged wall on which it was painted were razed in 2008.