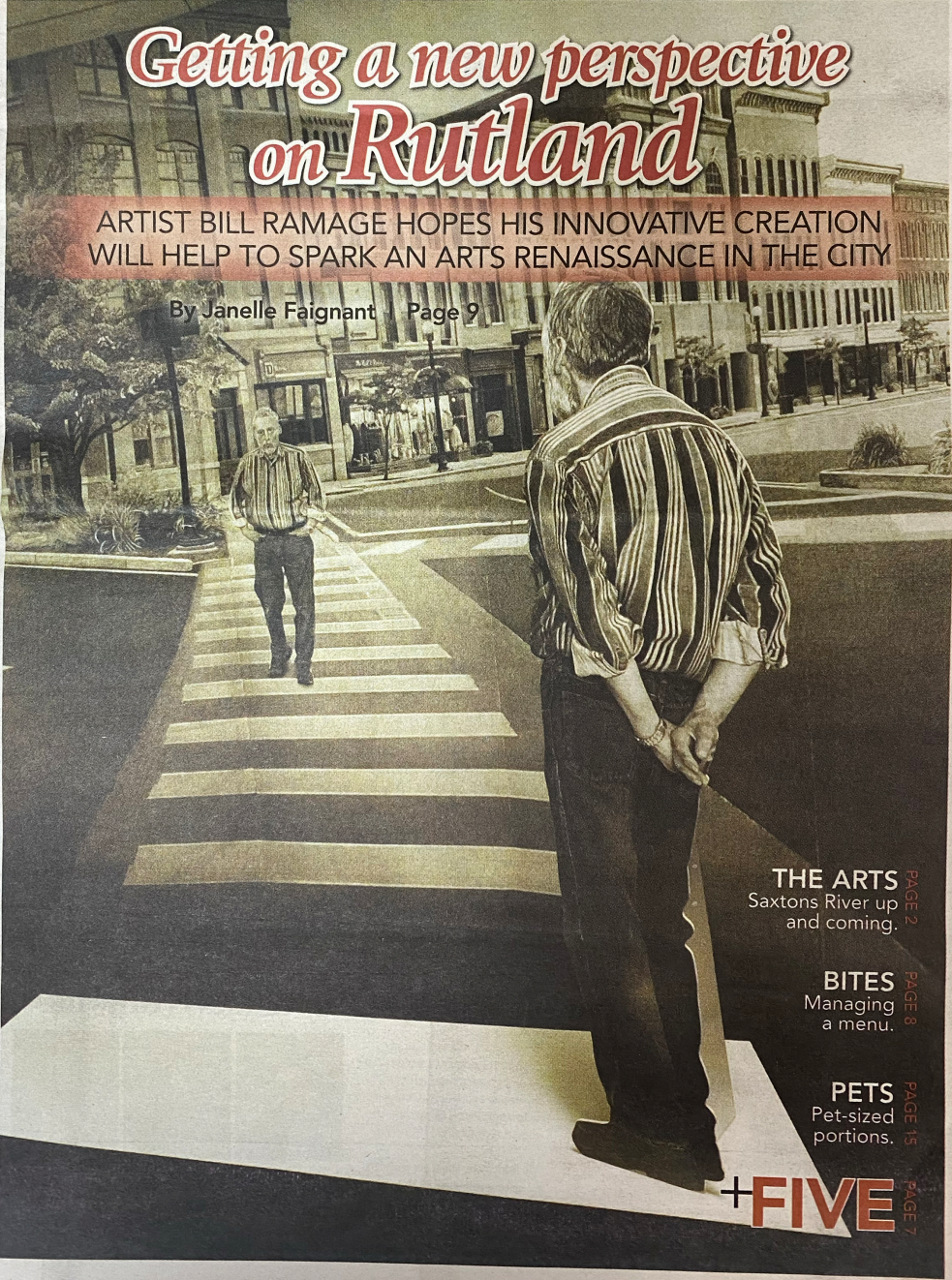


FREE

Getting a new perspective on Rutland

ARTIST BILL RAMAGE HOPES HIS INNOVATIVE CREATION WILL HELP TO SPARK AN ARTS RENAISSANCE IN THE CITY

By Janelle Faignant Page 9



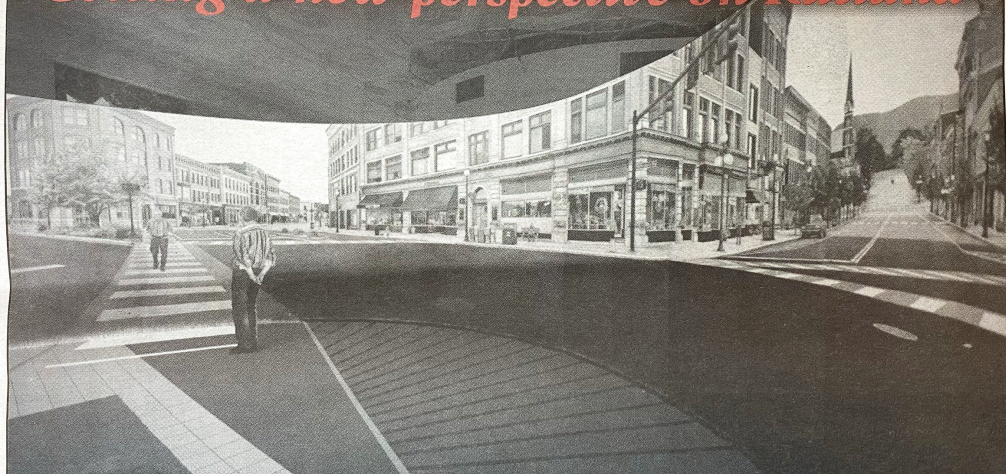
THE ARTS PAGE 2
Saxtons River up and coming.

BITES PAGE 8
Managing a menu.

PETS PAGE 15
Pet-sized portions.

+FIVE PAGE 7

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ARTIST BILL RAMAGE HOPES HIS INNOVATIVE CREATION WILL HELP TO SPARK AN ARTS RENAISSANCE IN THE CITY

By Janelle Faignant

It's like one of those jokes you just have to be there in order to get, Bill Ramage says, kidding. But the life-size panoramic drawing he's talking about is no joke. His hand-drawn scale replica of downtown Rutland is something you have to see in person for yourself.

"It's really a physical experience," Ramage said. "I can honestly say you're walking into the drawing, the way it surrounds you."

Spread across 180 degrees of the interior of the new Castleton Downtown Gallery II and bumping up against a mirror, a 360-degree streetscape envelops viewers walking into the space. The display was created from a composite of 30 photographs taken in July of 2012, and was completed in November 2014.

A grand opening of Castleton's second downtown gallery drew a crowd of around 70 people last week to celebrate retired Castleton University art professor Bill Ramage's "Rutland: Ideal City" — a permanent installation that wraps the circumference of the gallery in 18 panels. No other artists will be displayed in this gallery — Ramage's is the permanent exhibit. When you're there you see people taking selfies positioning themselves in proportion to the drawing.

The concept of his 11-feet-tall, 43-foot-long rendering of downtown dates back 35 years. But really, Ramage says, there's another angle to the story. "A much more interesting and more important story."

He is more interested in talking about the bigger picture of what the new gallery means for our area, and the true impact the arts are having on Rutland.

"What I find much more interesting is that Castleton University and the downtown galleries are a movement," Ramage said. "The university and myself and Sarah Karczmarczyk, who's the director of the gallery, are basically trying to present as much visual art in Rutland as possible, [to make] people aware of how important they are to our community."

Several recent articles in national publications have credited community artists in cities across the country for driving the revitalization of their struggling towns.

"Pittsburgh is not unique in looking to the arts as an economic catalyst for revitalizing a downtown," an article in The Atlantic

said. "Cities across the country, small and large, realize that a vibrant arts scene can attract people downtown and spur the opening of restaurants and other supportive amenities."

And Dr. Jeremy Nowak, president and CEO of William Penn Foundation, and chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, credited the arts as a vital contributor to a community's well-being in a recent talk, saying, "The arts and art making are not the dessert, but are a key part of the meal."

To that end, there's a lot in the works for our area.

In addition to Castleton's two galleries downtown, a third is set to turn what was the Lake Sunapee Bank on the corner of Merchants Row and Center Street into an exhibition space called the Castleton Gallery Downtown Annex, featuring art from twenty regional artists.

In a collaboration with the Rutland Free Library, Ramage and Library Director Abby Noland are set to hang the work of 80 Vermont artists throughout the building beginning next Monday.

"We have Chaffee paintings here and we've wanted to bump it up," Noland said. "We have a lot of very tall walls that are just crying for something interesting."

The University galleries and the Rutland Downtown Partnership are also working together to offer guided art tours of different sites in Rutland and the seven murals in town. Ramage says the first tour is being prepped to start the last Saturday of November and run for four Saturdays leading up to Christmas. And Nolan says there is talk about looking at the old jail in the library basement as part of the tour, which would be facilitated by a docent.

"So there's a real push to make art a significant component in what they call the Rutland Renaissance," Ramage said. "The university and myself have this notion, and this is sort of an important part I think, that the relationship between art and the community, art and Rutland is a symbiotic relationship. And that is, and this is true everywhere, art can only really thrive if the community feels good about itself. But conversely, a community is more likely to feel good about itself and prosper if it's the kind of community in which art can really thrive."

This has worked in other communities like Brandon, Brattleboro, Bellows Falls and in urban areas like New York City, where the arts transformed communities like Soho and Chelsea.

"Now it's moving into Bushwick in Brooklyn, and it will transform that community,"



Anthony Edwards / Staff Photo
Diane Liccardi examines Bill Ramage's piece titled Empirical Study III during the open house for Castleton University's Downtown Gallery II on Nov. 13.

PHOTO PROVIDED
"Ideal City," a life-sized drawing by Bill Ramage.

Ramage said.

Ramage includes all the arts in his ideas — theater, music, literature, poetry and the visual arts — believing that if they become an important part of the weave of a community, it really does make for a strong community.

"This drawing of mine, the president of Castleton has invested in because he thinks it and all the art that's now in Rutland can be a destination point for people," Ramage said. "That people might actually know about the arts in Rutland and come here."

"That potential for not just the spiritual well-being of the community but also the economic future of Rutland is one of the reasons Castleton is interested in investing here."

"This whole thing about art thriving in a community this symbiosis, that doesn't happen by itself," Ramage said. "It needs insightful people like Dave Wolk at Castleton University, Mark Foley, who is a true philanthropist and very invested in the arts, there are lots of people who are supportive of this whole thing."

Sarah Karczmarczyk, director of Castleton University Art Galleries, says the biggest change she's seen in the community since Castleton opened the new gallery is a sense of excitement and discovery.

"People come in and love that there's something like this happening in downtown Rutland," she said. "People come in who have never been in an art gallery before and are so happy that something like this is accessible to them. The idea in putting all of this artwork out there is as much about starting a conversation as it is about giving people something new and interesting to look at."

Karczmarczyk says there isn't an official opening date for the new annex space yet, but possibly by the end of November so that it would be included in the Arts Tours.

"So there's a much bigger, more important story than just the drawing," Ramage says. "What's interesting about the drawing is it forces you to step back and notice how beautiful the city really is. I mean, it really is a beautiful city."

Janelle Faignant is a freelance writer covering the arts, health, and human interest stories. She lives in Rutland.

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