

NEWS-RECORD

of Maplewood and South Orange

March 30, 2006

Residents voice anger about 'Tau'

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On the heels of learning that tax dollars will go toward furnishing South Orange with the Tony Smith sculpture, "Tau," some residents are challenging the decision of trustees to go forward with the project.

"This is not the best use of government money by any means," said Howard Levison during a phone interview on Monday. "There are too many other priorities the village has, and this isn't one of them."

"People are irate," said John Purkert, who also lives in South Orange.

Levison and Purkert are just two residents who are responding to a meeting that occurred earlier in the month when trustees revealed they had initially misspoke regarding how the project would be funded.

Originally, trustees declared the sculpture would be covered by a \$250,000 federal community development grant. Since then, trustees have discovered federal dollars can't be earmarked for the sculpture, but can be used for development projects, like the South Orange Performing Arts Center.

Their solution is to take \$250,000 slated for SOPAC and apply those dollars toward partial funding of the sculpture. In total, the sculpture will cost about \$410,000. The \$160,000 difference will come from private donations. Cheryl Arnedt, who is spearheading the Smith project, said \$60,000 has already been raised.

"I don't see how trustees can allow for this to happen," said Levison. "How can we fund an art project we don't need when we have pressing problems with our infrastructure that need to be addressed."

Two "more pressing issues," according to Levison, include rehabilitation of Village Hall, where part of the roof recently collapsed in village Administrator John Gross's office, and the South Orange Public Library,



The South Orange Village will receive a fabrication of this sculpture, called the 'Tau,' and crafted by the late Tony Smith, a renowned artist and former South Orange resident. The work featured here is at the Hunter College Campus in New York City.

which he said has been plagued with roof leaks and a defunct air conditioning system.

"We have a reputation for deferring our maintenance problems until there's a problem," he said. "Well, guess what, there's a problem, and we're not fixing it."

Purkert agreed, calling the trustees decision to move ahead with the project an act of "insanity."

"It wasn't clear until that meeting, but we were lied to about how this project was going to be funded," he said. "Now that we know this project is coming out of public coffers, there's a rising tide against it. We pay enough in taxes already. This is a joke."

Residents first heard news of the project four years ago, when art enthusiasts were trying to pursue an original Smith piece.

After they discovered it could cost upwards of \$700,000, they decided to go with a fabrication of the "Tau" for \$85,000.

What's tripling the cost are site preparations, since the sculpture is set to be installed on Sloan Street, near the train station. In order for the installation to take place, a gazebo has to be moved and relocated, and the property has to be revamped to accommodate the 14-foot-high, 21-foot-wide sculpture.

Village officials hope the sculpture will serve as a draw for residents and visitors, and believe its an integral part of the ongoing efforts to revamp downtown.

But Purkert said the placement of the sculpture is another point of contention among residents.

"I don't see why it has to be crowding that space, and I don't see why we have to move a gazebo that was recently built to a different area to make room for this. We just paid for that, and now we have to pay to move it, and move this in."

