

VISUAL ART



ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

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Embracing Our Differences to hold on a while

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Now, here's something you don't read every day, not these days anyway — an art exhibit that not only isn't being shut down, but its run is actually being extended.

The Embracing Our Differences installation in Bayfront Park, which had been set to run through April 5, will stay up through the end of the month.



The Embracing Our Differences exhibit is one of the few safe options available in town to look at art of any kind.

"We're thrilled that the exhibit will remain open to the public for the entire month of April," says Sarah Wertheimer, executive director of Embracing Our Differences. "This is one of the few arts and cultural activities people can safely enjoy during these difficult times of COVID-19. We offer our heartfelt gratitude to the city of Sarasota and to local

government for their support and generosity to allow us to keep the exhibit open.”

The annual outdoor exhibit, which began in 2004, consists of 50 billboard-size renditions of artwork selected from more than 16,000 entries from around the world, each conveying a message that promotes diversity and inclusion. Each image is accompanied by a quote written for the exhibit.

The Embracing Our Differences exhibit usually runs for about two months, but as Wertheimer was getting ready to schedule a crew to dismantle the installation, she went to the city, which owns the park and each year donates its use for the exhibit, and asked if they would consider letting them leave it up a while longer as a benefit to residents.



Between the size of the artwork and the outdoor setting, the exhibit allows for safe viewing with proper social distancing.

“This is definitely a time that we need some inspiration and some bright spot in our community, to allow people to at least have one thing they can enjoy during this difficult time of social distancing and isolation,” Wertheimer says. City officials immediately liked the idea, says Sarasota Senior Communication Manager Jan Thornburg.

“While we are urging our residents and visitors to stay at home as much as possible, we understand that people want to get outside and take a stroll, and Bayfront Park is one our most popular parks,” Thornburg says.

They also need to get their minds off the coronavirus now and then, Thornburg adds. The Embracing Our Differences exhibition allows people to get that much-needed fresh air and sunshine while they can also examine the collection of oversize imagery for both their artistry and their deeper meaning. And people can do that while keeping a proper distance from one another.

Most years, the Sarasota Boat Show would prevent an extension, but year’s show, which had been scheduled for April 24-26, has been cancelled, like most other events.

And keeping the exhibition in place doesn't cost the city or the organization anything extra, Thornburg points out. In fact, she adds, it's something that, from the city's perspective, could go on even after April if need be.



The exhibit consists of 50 images selected from entries from around the world then blown up to billboard size.

The Embracing Our Differences exhibition is always a popular attraction. Wertheimer says the organization usually has volunteers keep hourly tallies of the number of visitors at the park. They use the figures in a formula the Parks Department uses to estimate attendance. Last year, the exhibit drew about 218,000 viewers in two months.

With the extension, this year's exhibit will run nearly twice as long. Of course, they can't have people out there keeping count these days, Wertheimer says. And many school field trips to the exhibit were canceled. But they were keeping tabs at first, and based on those numbers, she believes this year's exhibition's viewership will easily exceed 300,000.