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The Town of Bel Air Arts & Entertainment District

What:

Maryland was the first state in the country to sponsor Arts and Entertainment Districts as a way to stimulate the economy and improve quality of life. Bel Air became the 19th designated A & E District in Maryland in September, 2010.

Local jurisdictions, municipalities, counties, or a combination thereof, apply for this special designation. Once approved, they can offer tax incentives as provided by law. The Maryland State Arts Council also offers technical assistance and support so that artists, business people and visitors can take full advantage of the opportunities in these boundaries.

Who:

In Bel Air, the Town of Bel Air's Department of Economic Development oversees the A & E District. Significant partners include the town's Cultural Arts Commission, the Bel Air Downtown Alliance and a 10-person advisory committee.

Where:

Performance venues in the A & E District

Bel Air High School's Performing Arts Auditorium has an 800-seat auditorium that was constructed with advice from nationally recognized theater designers. Production companies have access to sound systems, dressing rooms, a ticket booth and plenty of onsite parking. During planning of the auditorium, the Board of Education planners worked with Charles Cosler Associates, a nationally recognized theater consultant group. The auditorium features variable acoustics, a fly loft, extra insulation to block exterior noise, a high quality acoustical stage shell, wireless sound system, a motorized lighting system and generous storage/dressing areas.

The side seating in the auditorium is moveable, allowing for variable seating arrangements that match the performance.

Bel Air Armory, a Greek Revival structure built in 1915, still maintains a distinctive presence on Main Street.

Once a full-time National Guard Armory, the building is now owned and operated by the town for events, performances and meetings. There is a stage (670 square feet) and an open space that measures 5,264 square feet. The open space can be furnished with chairs and/or tables to match the needs of the event.

The building has been updated to include an accessible entrance that blends with the historic architecture. Performers will have access to modern restrooms and locker rooms. These spaces are also accessible to the stage area. There is a stage lighting system with multiple lights and a control board. The audience space is empty and can therefore accommodate a variety of set ups. For example, organizers of the Bel Air Film Festival arrange tables and chairs so that those attending can sit in intimate groups that encourage conversation after the screening.

The Armory has been the site of regular performances by the Bel Air Theater Drama Company, Theater Works Live!, teen dances, the annual Bel Air Film Festival and numerous seasonal events, including the Bel Air Chocolate Festival, the Chesapeake Cancer Alliance Festival of Trees and Christmas theater and musical events.

The Frederick Ward Armory Park was dedicated in summer, 2010. The park's walls and columns have a Port Deposit stone facade that matches the Armory's historic stone. The ground is covered with permeable pavers to support storm water management. Clematis covers a "living wall" that anchors the rear of the park. Tables and chairs provide a refuge for shoppers, workers and town visitors.

The park is dedicated to late businessman and community supporter, Frederick Ward and developed through funding from the Department of Natural Resources, Community Parks and Playgrounds/Program Open Space and donations.

The next phase of the Armory Complex development is the garage area known as Armory Marketplace. The bank of five garage units is being developed as a business incubator that will provide start-up businesses with an opportunity to test the market and introduce their products. Armory Marketplace will be a commercial hub that will connect the Hickory Avenue and Main Street areas.

Armory Marketplace Suite 104 is home to The Harford Artists Gallery. The gallery, which holds rotating exhibits as well as space for community workshops, is a non-profit 501 C(3) co-op, featuring original art work by local artists in Harford County. Their mission is to promote visual arts in Harford County.

Rockfield Manor is a Craftsman style manor house and barn that sits on 51-acres of parkland on the edge of town on Rt. 22. The Town first acquired the land that surrounds the house in the 1990s and set out to develop a community park including gardens, trails, nature areas, a creative playground and three active recreation fields. Later, the Town acquired the house and outbuildings

and began to develop it for use as a community and cultural center. That vision continues to evolve as the manor house is booked for wedding, meetings and community events. Outdoor events, such as the Harford County Wine Festival and the Rockfield Easter Egg Hunt also take place on a 4 – 5 acre grassy space where visitors can bring chairs, small tents and picnic baskets.

Shamrock Park is a 9.9-acre level grassy public space that features the William A. Humbert Amphitheatre. The amphitheater is the site of numerous events, most notably the free, twice weekly summer concert series offered by the Bel Air Recreation Committee. The park is centrally located in Town and is steps away from ample street and garage parking, restaurants and retail shops.