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## Burien as artist colony? Maybe ...

**By Cara Solomon**

*Seattle Times South King County reporter*

Burien is tired of being seen as a sign on the road to Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. But even city hall will admit: It's hard to know how to draw more people in.

Someone should ask Dane Johnson, a new member of the city's arts commission, and the operations manager at Seattle radio station KUOW-FM. He's got it all worked out. Right there on the tagline for his e-mail:

"Burien is the new Brooklyn."

Well, he said, maybe not yet. But as Seattle's artists move south in search of affordable homes, some have picked the South King County city as the place to make their mark. The migration has helped revive a long-standing arts scene in Burien, with newer residents planning everything from Shakespeare in the park to art installations from the counter-culture arts festival Burning Man.

Burien has always shown a solid commitment to the arts. Theater troupes. Art galleries. A professional symphony. The arts commission was among the first the city formed after its incorporation in 1993.

But as Burien grows and reaches for greater sophistication, the arts scene is changing as well. The commission has turned over almost entirely in the past five years, its members shifting more toward contemporary art. Last fall, the city made a critical new hire: Al Parisi, former organizer of the Fremont Fair.

### Burien by the numbers

**Population:** 31,830 (2006 estimate)

**Demographics:** African American 4.9 percent; American Indian 0.7 percent; Asian American 10 percent; Hispanic 14 percent; white 67.1 percent; multiracial 3.4 percent (2006 estimate)

**Median household income:** \$47,326 (2006 estimate)

"I see an 'if you build it, they will come' mentality," said Parisi, the city's new cultural-arts coordinator.

So he is busy building. This summer the city will see a series of firsts, from a "trash fashion" show at the Burien Strawberry & Arts Festival to a hip-hop act at the summer concert series. The first outdoor cinema series. The first performances of Shakespeare in the Park.



ELLEN M. BANNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES  
Stu Smith, of Normandy Park, reads a paper while Ross Houghton and Holly Giffin, both of Burien, enjoy a beer in front of the Tin Room bar and restaurant in Burien on a recent evening. The city broke ground this spring on Town Square, a civic plaza with retail space, condominiums and a new regional library.



ELLEN M. BANNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES  
Photographer Paul Conrath is curator of the Burien Arts Gallery and a member of the local arts commission.



ELLEN M. BANNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES  
Michelle Codd, co-owner of Cucina in Burien, offers suggestions regarding a wine purchase to customer Bruce Mennella, of Burien. The shop features specialty foods and wines with a European flavor.

**Median home value:** \$271,436 (2007 estimate, owner-occupied housing).

*Sources: DemographicsNow; Claritas*

*Compiled by Seattle Times news researcher Gene Balk*

An arts summit this fall will ask residents where they want the city's arts program to go. But for now, the arts commission is forging forward, adding the new while honoring the old.

Holding fast to the idea that maybe, just maybe, Burien can become, if not the new Brooklyn, then its own vital arts destination just outside the big city.

### **"It's a transformation"**

Burien residents are buzzing these days that the city of 31,000 is headed for something big.

Just this spring, the city broke ground on Town Square, a civic plaza with about 40,000 square feet of retail, 400 condominiums and a new regional library. Several upscale boutiques, bars and restaurants already have opened nearby.

"It's more than a transition," said Mayor Joan McGilton, a longtime resident. "It's a transformation."

Burien started out a century ago as a vacation spot, evolved into a bedroom community for Boeing, then finally hit a wall in the 1960s, with the building of the Southcenter Mall in Tukwila. Storefronts went stale. Businesses shut down.

Now, finally, there are signs of a revival. Charlie Rathbun of 4Culture, King County's cultural-services agency, said a recent visit to Burien surprised him.

"It just seemed like a beautiful, funky, lively little downtown," he said.

And a natural asset, he said, for any city trying to grow its arts scene. This summer, 4Culture is funding a sprawling outdoor sculpture blocks away, in the woods that surround Burien Art Gallery.

#### **Arts in South King County**

• **For more information on arts and culture in Burien**, including the city's Strawberry & Arts Festival and sketches of the sculptures for Town Square, go to <http://www.burienparks.net/>.

• **The South King County Cultural Coalition** formed in 2004 to promote arts south of Seattle, ranging from the Evergreen City Ballet in Renton to the Pacific Rim Bonsai Collection in Federal Way. For information and a calendar of events, go to <http://www.sococulture.org/>.

### **"What the heck is this?"**

Walk five minutes from downtown and you'll find it, Burien Art Gallery, otherwise known as "the little blue house in the woods."

A group of residents known as Burien Arts Association turned it into a community arts gallery decades ago, and tended it for years. But by the time Paul Conrath, a contemporary photographer, joined the arts commission, the gallery had gone tired.

For his first exhibit as artistic director, Conrath hung abstract, sometimes political prints from artists in Georgetown. "People were like: What the heck is this?" he said.

During a recent visit, community art was still on display upstairs: A handsome portrait of dogs, entitled "Compulsive Border Collies"; a feast of color called "Springtime in Roslyn."

But cutting edge clearly had taken over the ground floor. On the walls were clumps of earth encased by cast bronze sculpture.

Carol Selander, former president of Burien Arts Association, said she loves the renovated space. Still, she was a little dismayed to see the old crafts disappear.

"It's hard to see such a big change, you know," said Selander, 86. "I'm getting used to it."

## "We saw a lot of potential"

There were good reasons to come. The houses were affordable. The city showed signs of promise. So after years of living in Seattle, Johnson, a former gallery owner, and his wife, Kathy Justin, a lighting designer, took the teasing, crossed their fingers and made the move.

"We saw a lot of potential — not only communitywise, but artwise," said Johnson, a founding board member of Ignition NW, an arts group associated with Burning Man.

Six years later, the couple are on the city's arts commission, and Johnson is trying to bring Burning Man art to Town Square. With Seattle moving toward high-profile art, he said, Burien could really make a name for itself as an upstart on the emerging arts scene.

"Take that, Olympic Sculpture Park!" Johnson wrote recently on the Web site for Ignition NW.

The Burien City Council has yet to approve the Burning Man idea. But Johnson is optimistic. The city, he said, is an open-minded, risk-taking kind of mood these days.

Or not.

Burien certainly has a progressive strain. It was the first small city in the state to offer domestic-partner benefits to employees. It's the only city in South King County where residents run a chapter of Drinking Liberally, a national, left-leaning discussion group.

But the city still has a conservative bent, on display recently when sketches surfaced of pieces the arts commission recommended for Town Square. Two fit neatly into the family-friendly category. The other is a 40-foot tall western red cedar with a spiraling saw blade around its trunk.

Dan Corson, the Seattle artist, called it a "challenging" piece for any community. But a good kind of challenging, he thought.

Until the City Council voted it down, 4-3, last week. "Violent" is a word that came up often in letters to the local paper. Violent and menacing and cold. It just doesn't feel like the right fit for Burien, one woman wrote to The Highline Times.

"It's a phallic-looking screw bolt from heaven," she said.

Rochelle Flynn, chair of the arts commission, described the vote as a disappointment. Still, she said, for a while there, art was the topic of conversation wherever she went, from grocery stores to doctor's offices.

Burien is known to get riled up over politics. For years, the city has debated the possible annexation of about 31,000 people in the Highline area. But protest over art?

Flynn was pleased.

"We welcome it," she said.

*Cara Solomon: 206-464-2024*

*or [csolomon@seattletimes.com](mailto:csolomon@seattletimes.com)*