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GoggleWorks director is departing

By Don Spatz

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READING, PA — After three years leading the GoggleWorks Center for the Arts, expanding its creative programs, bringing in a huge Fantastic Arts convention for the next five years and overseeing the center's 10th anniversary, Phil Walz is leaving at the end of the month.

The executive director of the center at Second and Washington streets was hired in 2012 and had committed to staying three years.

Walz, 57, said he's now looking for other projects but hasn't decided what he'll do.

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"I've been interviewing quite a lot lately," Walz said.

The board has named former GoggleWorks marketing director Wendy Kershner interim executive director while it searches for Walz's replacement, whom it hopes to have by the end of March.

Walz had led the Greater Akron Musical Association Inc. for three years, and earlier had led the Central Pennsylvania Festival of the Arts for 14 years.

On coming to Reading, he replaced Diane LaBelle, who had overseen the 2004 metamorphosis of a vacant, five-story safety equipment factory into artists' studios, offices, galleries and public spaces, then led it until 2010.

Paul Cohn, president of the GoggleWorks board, said Walz brought in several creative programs during his tenure.

Among them was the two-week summer series in which artists could immerse themselves in classes taught by nationally recognized artists and teachers.

And Walz did well in building the staff and keeping them focused, Cohn said.

"There's a lot of moving parts within the GoggleWorks," he said. "He's done a good job of needing to wear a lot of hats at one time."

Cohn said the GoggleWorks has been going through a lot of growing pains. He credits Walz for keeping his eyes on the various components - the artists, the arts-partner organizations, the donors, the public, the facilities - and managing them.

Although Cohn said the traditional visual and performance art forms are important components of the GoggleWorks, he credits Walz for bringing in an emerging art form.

That's the annual IX Convention that the Association of Fantastic Art will bring to the GoggleWorks and surrounding entities for five years beginning in 2016.

Fantastic art also is called realistic fantasy, often depicting magical or supernatural themes but with a bit of overlap with science fiction, especially sci-fi movies.

Tying in to that, the already growing IX Convention will add a film component in 2017 that's expected to bring even more conventioners to Reading.

"It's good for the community to see, and it's right in our back yard," Cohn said.

He said Walz was instrumental in getting a downtown collaborative - the Greater Reading Convention & Visitors Bureau, Reading Movies 11, the Miller Center for the Arts and the DoubleTree by Hilton hotel - available to the expanding IX.

Cohn said the new executive director's next priority will be to build out the GoggleWorks'

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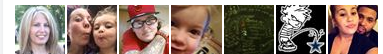
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creative programs, reaching out regionally and nationally.

"It's important to donors for programming to produce positive outcomes," he said.

And, he added, another priority is reaching out to the local African-American and Latino communities.

He said the search committee has four outside members, including a leader of the African-American community and a leader of the Latino community.

He said the board has hired a search consultant, and the job description is posted on the art center's website - www.goggleworks.org.

He added the board hopes to have a number of qualified applicants in a few months.

Kershner, who now runs her own marketing and public relations firm, on Monday will begin shadowing Walz, then take over Nov. 1.

Cohn said Kershner is familiar with the GoggleWorks and is respected by the staff.

Contact Don Spatz: 610-371-5027 or dspatz@readingeagle.com.

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