

Norfolk's arts district about to get public neon display

By *Hillary Smith* on June 7, 2016



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A predecessor of the upcoming local display, titled "Seep NFK." (Courtesy of Downtown Norfolk Council)

NORFOLK – The city's NEON District is getting a large neon public art installation thanks to a Chicago resident who was taken by the energy of the area.

The glowing red display will flow across the north-facing upper exterior of 801 Granby Street. Artist Erik L. Peterson created the first version of the piece in 2014 for an international [art expo](#) in Chicago, and last year he made it part of [Work | Release](#)'s opening art exhibition.

After seeing the city's NEON District and growing a connection with the area, Peterson decided to leave the piece with the arts district.

"My wife and I drove down from Chicago, and we fell in love with the city and the folks who are doing all the good work in the Neon District," he said. "We both lived in St. Louis for a while, and there's a similar type of grassroots work ethic here that we saw in St. Louis: If you don't do it, no one's going to do it."

Eventually, Peterson was put in touch with Rachel McCall, the Downtown Norfolk Council's special projects manager, who helped make the building display happen.

Peterson worked with local neon sign creator Brian Riehl of Riehl Deal Sign Company to extend his original 16-foot neon artwork to three times its size, so it could fill up the building's wall space.

McCall helped attain a \$6,000 grant from the [Business Consortium for Arts Support](#) for the project. The Downtown Norfolk Council is providing another \$6,000 to cover the other half of the costs.

The building (left) at 801 Granby St., where the neon work will be installed. (Courtesy of the Downtown Norfolk Council)



The Downtown Norfolk Council has a 5-year contract for the piece, McCall said. The occupants of the condos in the building also approved of the installation.

“They’re all really supportive of the arts district. They’ve chosen to live there because they love the neighborhood,” McCall said. “I see most of the residents out enjoying the NEON Festival and Work Release – I think they all enjoy the neighborhood.”

The piece is valued at \$30,000 according to McCall. Its design, which once symbolized Chicago and Lake Michigan, was reformatted to fit the physical space and character of the Norfolk location, according to Peterson.

“Here it really gained more interesting connotations, thinking about the streets sort of flooding with rain water and turning the street into rivers,” he said. “I think it speaks to a little bit of hope. Norfolk, and the region, gets inundated with water and you figure it out. And come back stronger.”

The piece is being installed this week.