

The Virginian-Pilot

NEON District provides an eyeful on public art tours

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May 6, 2018



David Macaulay | For The Virginian-Pilot
The NEON District waking tour at Jason Levesque's mural at the corner of Granby Street and W. Olney Road.



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Mike Middleton of Hampton Roads Hikers talks about Matthew Geller's swing that represents sea level rise.



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Mike Middleton and participants on the first NEON District tour

Mike Middleton does not have a formal background as an art critic, but he has plenty of experience pounding the sidewalks of Norfolk with groups of walkers.

He hopes this will give a new perspective on the “pedestrian experience of art” in Norfolk’s rapidly changing NEON District, an area he believes does not see its full tourism potential.

Middleton is setting up paid art tours in the NEON District, which is an acronym for New Energy of Norfolk. The area’s buildings and plots are adorned with murals and other installations from a wide array of artists.

Middleton of Norfolk is better known as the organizer of the meet-up group Hampton Roads Hikers. He has set up a 90-minute guided tour of the NEON District that covers 1.5 miles from the Chrysler Museum east to Monticello Avenue, south to Brambleton Avenue and north to Virginia Beach Boulevard.

He said the Downtown Norfolk Council and the Chrysler Museum supported the idea.

“There’s tons of artwork here,” he said, citing 26 pieces of art on the tour. There

are many more but Middleton wants an informative experience that does not tire walkers.

“The city has been putting stuff down here for 30 or 40 years,” Middleton said. However, many of the art installations in the NEON District have arrived in the last few years.

Middleton has organized Hampton Roads Hikers for six years. While most of the meet-up walks are free, the NEON District public art tours will cost \$27 per person with a portion of the proceeds going to the Downtown Norfolk Council, Middleton said. Tours will be held every two weeks.

“Norfolk has done a lot to make this area pedestrian friendly. We started hiking down here three or four years ago and it’s really grown on me,” Middleton said. “Walking is really the best exercise out there.”

Middleton reached out to all the artists he features on the tour. About 70 percent of them replied and some gave feedback on Middleton’s script. Middleton gave a free introductory tour to members of Hampton Roads Hikers on April 14. The tour started outside the Chrysler Museum Glass Studio with Julia Rogers’ glass and metal family figures.

The tour includes a metal swing made by artist Matthew Geller on W. Onley Road. It represents Norfolk’s link to the sea and sea level rise. “It leverages a storm water management technique,” said Middleton. When it tilts, water runs off the top of the swing into a garden.

Boston-based street artist Cedric Douglas gave input to the script. His mural can be found on a building on Wilson Street. “Mr. Douglas drives a mobile art lab called the Up Truck. He has done more in Boston to proliferate public art than anybody,” Middleton said.

Many of the people on April 14 tour were from Virginia Beach and were unaware of the diversity of street art in the NEON District.

“It’s pretty cool. I would have never found out about these art works,” said Morningstar Misa from Virginia Beach. “I’m not familiar with Norfolk at all.”

“This is a neighborhood that I usually drive by without stopping,” said Joyce Worthey from Virginia Beach. “I will be more inclined to stop and see things now.”