

The Minnesota State Capitol – the People’s Capitol

Representative Diane Loeffler

Minnesotans of all ages and backgrounds love their Capitol. I will long remember the many people at the public hearings held around the state and reading the comments of the thousands who participated via an online survey about what stories art in the Capitol should tell visitors.

I remember one participant stopping me after a hearing in Minnetonka. She said “This was one of the most meaningful things I’ve done. Thank you for inviting us and listening to us. To be able to help shape the Capitol experience for future generations was something I never expected to be part of.”

I’ve spent decades attending and participating in public hearings and other citizen engagement activities. These art hearings were different. While some came with agendas and preformed ideas, most didn’t. While some were art historians, history buffs, or artists, most were just ordinary citizens of all ages who came to listen, learn, and with encouragement from skilled volunteer facilitators, found themselves contributing their impressions and ideas.

What all shared was a love of our Capitol and a willingness to explore together how to make it even better. Many were unaware of the controversial artwork that portrays early relations with Native Americans. Many remembered the Governor’s portraits from school days (boring... was a common refrain but others found them interesting). Even those who considered them boring (or felt they placed too much attention on white men of long ago) got excited at the idea better interpretation (or an interactive virtual gallery) that would tell the stories of their time – what were the key issues? Did the Governor and legislature get along? Did any laws pass that changed the course of the state’s history?

Most spoke fondly of the beauty of the Capitol and of being impressed with the overall experience. Some told of personal pain at the disrespect of their ancestors or the portrayal of women in art as semi-nude bit players. Others said it didn’t feel very welcoming when they saw no one like them.

But no matter where on the spectrum of pride or disappointment they began the meeting with, they all seemed to meld together in enthusiasm as they shared ideas for how to tell a broader range of Minnesota stories and make the Capitol experience even more educational and rewarding using the beauty of art and good interpretation.

They loved the idea of showcasing our beautiful landscapes to encourage visitors to travel to other parts of Minnesota. They loved the idea of images that show the role of ordinary citizens and that help visitors understand and get engaged in our government. Many do not view the Capitol as a museum but instead see it as the lively focus of our government and a place to celebrate the openness of democracy. They enthusiastically endorsed changing exhibits that would showcase the work of current talented artists telling Minnesota stories.

I hope that many of those who participated will come visit their Capitol periodically to watch it evolve as a place that celebrates not just the past but the ongoing contributions of Minnesotans and the attributes of the unique state we live in and love.