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Bristol Chamber Unveils 100th Anniversary Icon, Changes Tune Of Tourism

BRISTOL, TN — Construction activity taking place in the front corner of the Bristol Chamber of Commerce parking lot over the course of the past six weeks has generated a flurry of public speculation about what the project could be. The object of speculation was revealed at a media conference on Wednesday, April 29 at the Chamber offices when officials unveiled a 20-foot guitar that will commemorate the organization's 100-year anniversary, as well as serve as a gateway to tourism in the region.

According to Pete Holler, Co-Chair of the Chamber's 100th Anniversary Committee, all members were in agreement that a special project should be undertaken to mark this auspicious milestone for the organization.

"The criteria for the project was that it needed to be something uniquely Bristol, and it needed to be visible to those who live here, and welcoming to those who visit," Holler said.

And the guitar certainly will be visible. According to recent traffic counts released by the City of Bristol, TN, 10.76 million vehicles pass through the intersection of State Street and Volunteer Parkway, the corner where the Chamber offices are located, each year.

Lisa Meadows, President & CEO of the Bristol Chamber, says the idea for a high-visibility reference to the Chamber's centennial was formed over a year ago. "At the time, we were inspired by some of the commemorative markers that were being displayed in larger metropolitan areas," she said. "We initially considered a commemorative seal, but we wanted something that represented the embodiment of Bristol, as well as serving as a reminder of the Chamber's anniversary.

The design phase of the project was awarded to Bristol architectural and engineering firm, Thompson & Litton, who tuned up the commemorative ideas and developed the concept for the 20-foot guitar.

"The guitar rests partially in the ground, as though growing from it, and stands as a new beacon for Bristol, as the Birthplace of Country Music," said Scott Wilson, Professional Engineer with Thompson & Litton. "The design responds to a rich musical history with a folk art air to embody the unique cultural heritage of the City of Bristol," Wilson added.

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While the idea of a 20-foot guitar may sound good on the drawing board, the actual task of making the guitar a reality fell to Johnson City-based Snyder Signs. With strong expertise in the fabrication of **Bristol** sculptural signage, the project was music to the ears of Snyder's fabricators.

"Based on the original concepts from Scott Wilson and Emily Hope with Thomas & Litton, our design team drafted a structure that is the marriage of many different materials," said Rod Snyder, Owner, Snyder Signs.

A feat of engineering that required over 700 hours of precision labor, the guitar is formed around an internal steel structure with hidden supports and framework. Snyder explained that a large underground concrete and steel reinforced foundation, along with a flat stone rock base, creates the foundation that holds the guitar secure. The neck of the guitar is a combination of machined parts along with composite molded construction in order to achieve strength and durability, yet keep the weight of the structure to a minimum.

It's an icon, a beacon for tourism, and an identifier for Bristol, but the fact remains that Bristol's new 20-foot guitar is, above all, an inspired work of art.

"The neck even supports steel cables that mirror in scale the proper size guitar strings," said Snyder. "Many of the components and details that you see are either machined or hand crafted in order to gain a level of realism not normally seen in a structure this size," he added.

"I can't think of a more fitting icon to welcome visitors to our region," said Jeff Byrd, Co-Chair of the Chamber's 100th Anniversary Committee. "This is a project that will continue to grow, sharing the legacy of the Bristol Chamber, as well as celebrating the city's birthright as the Birthplace of Country Music," he added. Byrd explained that the guitar unveiling represents the first phase of the legacy project. Additional phases to be completed over the next five years will include additional components and public reflecting areas created from a historical perspective.

"The entire project is positive for Bristol, tourism and the Chamber," said Byrd.

According to David Wagner, Chairman of the Bristol Chamber Board of Directors, the project was funded through the Gold Club membership of the Chamber. "This is a project of our Gold Club that is to commemorate the chamber's 100th anniversary," he said. The costs for the first phase of the guitar project are \$44,000.

"The Gold Club is comprised of nearly 50 Chamber members who pay additional dues earmarked to fund capital projects and improvements to the Chamber office," Wagner added.

The unveiling of the new Bristol gateway icon isn't the first time in the Chamber's 100-year history the organization has been involved with launching a regional icon. What visitors now recognize as the historic Bristol sign was a promotional project of the Bristol Chamber first displayed in the early 1900s. The sign, which touts Bristol as "A Good Place To Live," is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Bristol Chamber of Commerce was formed in 1909, and includes approximately 750 business members, primarily from the Tri-Cities region.

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[NOTE: The build process for the Bristol Chamber of Commerce 100th Anniversary guitar has been extensively documented with photographs. If interested in these photos, please contact Jennifer Molley Wilson at 423.989.4850, or via email: jwilson@bristolchamber.org]