



April 14, 2026 City Council Meeting

Title

Consider approval of the proposed sculpture design by Maxwell Emcays for the roundabout at the Spraygrounds at Ralph Sampson Park — Chris and Steve Carpenter

Summary

The 6,000-square-foot Spraygrounds at Ralph Sampson Park opened July 1, 2025, with 36 spray features and interactive elements designed for various ages. Harrisonburg residents Steve and Chris Carpenter wish to privately fund the design and installation of three public artworks at the Spraygrounds. On January 13, 2026 City Council approved for the Carpenters to issue three calls for artists. The Carpenters seek City Council permission to proceed with commissioning artist Maxwell Emcays to produce his submitted sculpture design for the roundabout.

Recommendation

Option 1. Approve the proposed sculpture design by Maxwell Emcays for the roundabout at the Spraygrounds at Ralph Sampson Park

Fiscal Impact

There is no fiscal impact associated with this item as the public art is entirely donor funded.

Context & Analysis

Steve and Chris Carpenter have lived in Harrisonburg for 23 years and actively attend church on the site of the City's historic segregated pool, where they learned of the trauma the Northeast Neighborhood community experienced during the period of Urban Renewal in the 1950s and 1960s.

Experiencing public art during their travels led the Carpenters to propose a collaboration designed to add creativity and joy to the new Spraygrounds while also recognizing the neighborhood's history.

A public meeting was held on November 20, 2025 to introduce the project to community members, who generated ideas for the new works of art and preferred locations. The project committee (the Carpenters, representatives from the City, the Arts Council of the Valley, and the

Northeast Neighborhood) used feedback from the meeting to select the three locations and develop artistic themes.

On January 13, 2026 City Council approved the issuing of calls for artists for the three selected sites. Artists were encouraged to consider the designs and colors incorporated into the Spraygrounds, the history of the Northeast Neighborhood, and the joyful nature of children at play. Artist responses were reviewed in March by an evaluation committee who recommended the roundabout sculpture opportunity be awarded to artist Maxwell Emcays. His sculpture design features four children playing Double Dutch. Mr. Emcays is a Chicago-based multidisciplinary public artist dedicated to creating large-scale works that bring communities together through storytelling, history, and shared identity. Mr. Emcays has a BFA from the University of Illinois and has spent over a decade developing public artworks across the United States. In his application, he shared that his art often explores themes of social justice, education, unity, and cultural heritage while engaging local communities throughout the creative process.

Mr. Emcays' proposed design for the roundabout sculpture was brought to a March 26 meeting of the Northeast Neighborhood Association and received positive community feedback due to its alignment with the Northeast Neighborhood Small Area Plan. The plan highlights that “while some public art exists—mainly along the western edge near N. Mason Street—there is an opportunity to strengthen Neighborhood identity and sense of place through the expansion and strategic placement of public art and public realm improvements.” In the Focus Area of History and Culture, Strategy 1.3 calls for incorporation of public art that raises awareness about what was lost during the Urban Renewal process and celebrates the Neighborhood's diversity of languages and ethnic backgrounds today through a variety of public art media.

Upon completion, ownership of the artwork will be conveyed to the City of Harrisonburg.

Options

Option 1. Approve the proposed sculpture design by Maxwell Emcays for the roundabout at the Spraygrounds at Ralph Sampson Park

Option 2. Deny the proposed sculpture design by Maxwell Emcays for the roundabout at the Spraygrounds at Ralph Sampson Park