



July 28, 2026 City Council Meeting

Title

Consider approval of the proposed archway design by Maxwell Emcays for the entry to 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 archway design for the entry to the Spraygrounds.

Recommendation

Option 1- Approve the proposed archway design by Maxwell Emcays for the entry to the Spraygrounds at Ralph Sampson Park

Fiscal Impact

No fiscal impact—100% donor funded

Context & Analysis

Steve and Chris Carpenter have lived in Harrisonburg for 23 years, actively attending church on the 400 Kelley Street site of the City's historic segregated pool; and learning of the trauma the Northeast Neighborhood community experienced during 1950s-1960s Urban Renewal.

Their exuberant experience of public art during their travels led the Carpenters to propose a collaboration designed to add an extra touch of 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, generating ideas for the new works of art and preferred locations. The project committee (the Carpenters, with representatives from the City, Arts Council of the Valley, and the Northeast Neighborhood) used feedback from the meeting to select the three locations and develop content themes.

On January 13, 2026 City Council approved for the Carpenters to issue three calls for artists. The Arts Council of the Valley then released these calls for artists on behalf of the Carpenters. Artists were encouraged to consider the designs and primary colors incorporated into the Spraygrounds; the history of the Northeast Neighborhood; and the joyful nature of children at play. Artist responses were returned in March 2026 and reviewed by an evaluation committee selected by the Carpenters. The committee recommended the archway opportunity be awarded to artist Maxwell Emcays based on the concept design he submitted. Mr. Emcays is the same artist selected for the roundabout sculpture. 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.

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

This donation aligns 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 (e.g., sculpture, performances, festivals).

Options

Option 1- Approve the proposed archway design by Maxwell Emcays for the entry to the Spraygrounds at Ralph Sampson Park

Option 2- Deny the proposed archway design by Maxwell Emcays for the entry to the Spraygrounds at Ralph Sampson Park