

## Herd Starts Stampede

The Lake Agassiz Arts Council is combining a unique idea with traditional roots as it undertakes the largest fundraiser in its history.

The majestic bison, which once numbered in the millions in the heart of the Northern Plains, are going to be grazing their way through Fargo-Moorhead, West Fargo and surrounding area – as nearly life-sized works of art.

Patterned after a successful public art project in Zurich, Switzerland, and later by many American cities, Herd About the Prairie: A Virtual Arts Stampede will feature a statuesque herd of North American bison at points of interest around Cass and Clay counties.

“I think it’s an exciting opportunity for the community, artists, businesses, and individuals in the area to get together and do something wonderful,” Martha Olsen, executive director of the Lake Agassiz Arts Council, said.

The project was launched in October at a public unveiling of the first completed bison sculpture transformed by Detroit Lakes, Minn., artist Hans Gilsdorf.

West Fargo Mayor Rich Mattern, who participated in the kick-off event, said the unique idea was a great way to draw attention to the arts community in the region.

“We have such a deep pool of talented people in the area, and this will be something they can all work together on, which will be great. The variety should be very exciting,” Mattern said. Dozens more of the grey fiberglass bison will spend the winter in regional artists’ studios undergoing the transformation from resin statue to public art.

The unique aspect comes through the artists’ expression, Olsen said. For example, the cows in Chicago showed a wide range of creativity and were molded to depict different aspects of culture in the Windy City.

“The bison are beautiful even when they’re not painted, but to get them into our artists’ hands will be very special,” Olsen said. “I can’t wait to see what they do. I think many of them will consider it a labor of love. The people here will see what a gift we have in the artists in our region.” The new herd of bison will be unveiled to the public in the spring and make their temporary home throughout the area inside buildings, in public areas, on street corners, and any other location on the public landscape.

Businesses, corporations, organizations and individuals are sponsoring the bison statues. In the fall, the bison not purchased by the sponsors will be auctioned off, with proceeds going to the Lake Agassiz Arts Council, to be reinvested in area arts projects and organizations. Why the North American bison?

Steeped in its tradition, the bison was an important resource for life, both physically and spiritually, to indigenous people here in the Northern Plains. Native American Tribes, especially the Lakota or Dakota Nation, used almost every part of the animal, from the meat for food to the bones for tools and weaponry.

After settlement by Easterners and immigrants brought the white man to the Upper Midwest, the herds slowly disappeared, hunted to near extinction. More recently, the bison have returned to North America, in smaller herds and on controlled ranches.

There are other buffalo in the world, but there is only one species of North American bison. A true American native, the bison will forever be associated with the Great Plains and the people of the prairie.

The bison image is used prominently in several ways throughout the state. North Dakotans voted to have a bison image embossed on a new U.S. Mint quarter representing the state; Jamestown includes the bison in the city's image and advertising; and North Dakota's land grant institution named their athletic teams after the historic mammal.

Native American artists will take part in the project, adding an ingredient of history and guidance for the Herd About the Prairie display.

"We want to celebrate the bison and all it meant to those who survived in the prairie because these grand creatures were here," Olsen said.

Children are also getting involved in the project. A special program is being conducted with area schools, providing teachers and students the opportunity to transform table-top size bison, bison calves and the full-size statues into works of art.

"This is a unique event for the people of this area to see the tremendous resource we have in our arts community," Olsen said.

For more information about the Herd About the Prairie: A Virtual Arts Stampede visit the project's Web site, [www.herdabouttheprairie.org](http://www.herdabouttheprairie.org), or call (701) 237-6133.

(Editor's Note: This article was written with information provided by Mike Schoemer, Managing Editor of FM Magazine and a member of the promotions committee for Herd About The Prairie; and by Steve Stark, Director of Events Fargo and a contributor to the promotions committee for Herd About the Prairie.)