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First Federal makes pledge supporting Truth

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The First Federal Savings Bank of Angola Board of Directors voted on Tuesday to pledge \$15,000 toward a statue depicting Sojourner Truth to be placed in the Steuben County Courthouse lawn. The board members include, front, from left, William Eyster, George Gilbert and Charles Nedele; in back are Scott Gruner, bank president, and Chad Wise, Sandy Sanborn and John Weicht.

Eyster Photo and Graphics

ANGOLA — The effort to erect a monument to abolitionist Sojourner Truth on Angola's Public Square received a huge boost when the First Federal Savings Bank of Angola Board of Directors approved a \$15,000 pledge toward the project on Tuesday.

The Downtown Angola Coalition is getting ready to apply for a Preserving Women's Legacy Grant through Indiana Humanities and the Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs whose purpose is to recognize 100 years of suffrage in the United States.

Truth was not only an abolitionist, but advocated for women's rights, particularly suffrage. After much controversy not only before but after, Truth gave a speech in downtown Angola in June 1861, speaking from the Steuben County Courthouse porch. She reportedly spent about a month in Steuben County.

If funded, the statue will be on the northwest side of the Steuben County Courtyard.

Scott Gruner, president of First Federal, said the Sojourner Truth project was important not only to the community but to the bank's board and the ideals it shares with Angola and Steuben County.

"The Sojourner Truth statue represents many things to our Board. Her bravery and commitment to women's and civil rights were important in her time, and remain so today. Those qualities and issues are also important to our Board," Gruner said in a statement made to The Herald Republican.

Gruner pointed out the bank's history in downtown Angola, tracing its roots to its first original office on the southwest quadrant of the Public Square. The bank remains in the downtown, just east of the Public Square, where it continues to serve local residents and businesses.

"Our Board believes this attraction will further beautify downtown, but more importantly serve as a reminder of key issues our country continues to deal with. It will serve our downtown, visitors, and those businesses for many years to come," he said. "First Federal Savings Bank of Angola has been located downtown since 1933. In the late '90s when banks started making their way north and leaving downtown, our Board of Directors made the commitment to downtown and doubled the size of our facility in its same location."

Much work has been put into seeking the grant in a compressed amount of time. The grant application is due Monday, which is a month later than originally announced due to an extension because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Colleen Everage, president of the Downtown Angola Coalition, which is guiding the project along with Coalition Treasurer Karen DeForest, said the pledge from First Federal was very welcome and another example of its commitment to community and the tribute to Sojourner Truth.

"We have an amazing community. I believe this project is something we can all be very proud to be a part of by honoring a tribute to civil rights, women, and also to our Civil War era and African American history in the area. This has been a great collaboration between the city of Angola, Steuben County Commissioners and community stakeholders," Everage said.

She was ecstatic over First Federal's support.

"First Federal's financial commitment to the project was very much a needed and welcomed delight for the project to move forward. Their overwhelming support shows a sincere dedication to the community they serve. We are blessed to have such generosity offered toward this community effort," Everage said.

Pursuit of the project was first approved by the Downtown Coalition board earlier this year. The statue's placement was approved by the Steuben County Board of Commissioners in May. The Angola Historic Preservation Commission ruled in favor of the statue's historic fitness on June 2.

If the Women's Legacy grant is approved, the statue will be commissioned with sculptor James Haire, formerly of Crawfordsville and now of Colorado, with installation on the Public Square next year.

Installation and a public dedication of the statue is planned for next June. The event will include a speech by a woman who will portray Sojourner Truth and a reception.

The cost of the bronze statue is estimated at about \$35,000. It will be life-sized. Truth was said to have stood about 6-feet tall.

The pledge from First Federal is the first one for cash toward the project. All other pledges thus far have been in the form of in-kind gifts. The grant must be matched dollar-for-dollar, and the First Federal pledge takes the effort a long way toward meeting that goal.

"Relative to our budget, the bank makes significant annual financial contributions to several local non-profits and was a leader in supporting the Steuben County YMCA when it opened, the Steuben County Community Foundation when it relocated and Cameron Memorial Community Hospital when it expanded. This lead gift commitment is consistent with our charitable giving to the community," Gruner said.

He added that the pledge is in line with the bank's commitment to local causes and the community.

"We are Steuben County's only local bank, so it is important to our Board we give back to our customers and community. Our slogan, 'Community People You Know,' is simply who we are," Gruner said. "With so many banks in Angola, as well as credit unions who do not pay federal income tax, it is very competitive, yet we are finically positioned to re-invest in our community with projects such as this."

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