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Omaha Mural Project, *Fertile Ground*

WHAT: Omaha Mural Project, *Fertile Ground*

WHO: Meg Saligman, world-renowned Philadelphia muralist

WHEN: Completion June 2009

WHERE: East face of Energy Systems Inc. plant at 13th and Webster St.

OMAHA NE (June 30, 2008) -- Omaha's newest and largest public art project in history is beginning to emerge downtown. The Trustees of the Peter Kiewit Foundation, in partnership with the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts and Energy Systems Inc., announce this unique collaboration that is creating a 22,000 square foot outdoor mural on the east exterior wall of the Energy Systems plant on North 13th Street between Cass and Webster Streets. The mural is located in the heart of one of downtown Omaha's most rapidly re-developing neighborhoods near the Qwest Center, Hilton Hotel, Creighton University, the Saddle Creek Records development, and FilmStreams movie theatre. Painting of the design began last week. When finished in June, 2009, this mural will be one of the largest public art murals in the United States.

The Peter Kiewit Foundation is funding the project and the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts is administering the project with on-site management and project oversight. Todd Johnson, President of Energy Systems Inc., donated use of the east exterior wall of his company's facility to serve as the "canvas" for the mural as well as interior storage space for the project production. The life-expectancy of the mural is 30 years or more, but at the ultimate discretion of Energy Systems.

After conducting a national evaluation of qualified artists, a world-renowned Philadelphia muralist, Meg Saligman, was commissioned by the Foundation and the Bemis Center to create a unique design specific to Omaha, past and present, and to execute a mural masterwork for Omaha. Many of Saligman's acclaimed murals are located in Philadelphia, including her hallmark work, the iconic mural, "Common Threads." Ms. Saligman is renowned for her large-scale paintings and her technical innovations in mural design and execution, including her adaptation of a method of painting on cloth, which has become an industry standard.

Saligman is also a pioneer in the use of a computer to design murals. She was recognized by Public Art Review in 2006 as one of the ten most influential muralists in the nation. She has received numerous awards for her work including honors from the National Endowment for the Arts. She is a member of the advisory committee for "Rescue Public Murals", a national non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C. This Omaha mural project is being monitored and documented as a "best practice" case study by conservation groups including: the Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center in Omaha, the National Institute for Preservation (Washington, D.C.), Rescue Public Murals (Washington, D.C.), and the Preservation Studies Program at the University of Delaware.

Saligman spent hundreds of hours in Omaha conducting extensive local research to develop a unique design that reflects Omaha: its landscape, its history, its people, and its values. Saligman visited the archives of the Durham Museum and the Douglas County Historical Society to gather historical photos and data about Omaha. She also interviewed dozens of Omaha residents, historians, business people, and education and community leaders to help refine the mural design, which is entitled

“Fertile Ground.” The mural presents a photo-realistic, three-dimensional “timeline” that draws upon Omaha’s history, its development as a city, its culture, its physical landscape, and its people. The title is a reference to Omaha as a place with depth of character and as a modern city that has deep roots, both in nature and in the community. Omahans served as models for all characters in the mural.

The Peter Kiewit Foundation initiated this project in 2006 with the expertise of the Bemis Center. Energy Systems Company was asked to collaborate for the mural in early 2008.

Work to prepare the actual building wall for the mural painting began in early June. Artist Saligman and a team of 6 trained artists started painting the mural last week. The mural is expected to be approximately 60 percent complete by the end of October. Cold weather will prevent painting during the winter months. Completion of the mural is expected by June, 2009.

The Trustees of the Peter Kiewit Foundation initiated this project as a gift to the City of Omaha, similar to its “String of Pearls” Abbott Drive Beautification project, which was also funded entirely by the Foundation.

“Our Trustees’ goal for this project is to contribute a world-class public art masterwork as another contribution to the invigoration of downtown Omaha,” said Lyn Wallin Ziegenbein, executive director of the Peter Kiewit Foundation. “We hope that this project will add new energy and visual impact to the rapidly developing ‘NoDo’ area and contribute to the ‘buzz’ about Omaha as a progressive city with an enviable quality of life,” she said. “Peter Kiewit loved his hometown and he was especially committed to the vitality of downtown. We can think of no better place to present a project of this magnitude as a tribute to our community and citizens than in the heart of downtown Omaha,” Ziegenbein said. The Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts is equally enthused about the impact of this project on Omaha and its reputation for having an active and vital arts community. “The Bemis Center is thrilled to be part of this landmark public art project. I can’t imagine a better gift to the citizens of Omaha and our cultural landscape,” says Bemis Center Executive Director Mark Masuoka.

The Peter Kiewit Foundation is a private, independent philanthropic trust created from the estate of the late Omahan, Peter Kiewit. It is one of the largest private foundations in Nebraska. The Peter Kiewit Foundation is not connected legally or administratively with the operating companies, which also bear Mr. Kiewit’s name.
