

New art lines the Salt River in Tempe

by **Colleen Sparks** - Feb. 5, 2009 08:17 AM  
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The public can finally walk, bike and skate around artwork on a pathway that has been a vision in Tempe since the late 1990s.

The Rio Salado South Bank Multi-Use Path, three-fourths of a mile long, opened to the public Jan. 30.

Lined with artwork that frames desert life and the urban landscape, the pathway runs along the Salt River from Tempe Center for the Arts west to Priest Drive.

"People have been waiting for it," Eric Iwersen, senior planner for the City of Tempe said. "It's nice looking and it is a great new community amenity."

Along the path, rusted steel geometric, window-like sculptures frame Camelback Mountain, Papago Buttes, Piestewa Peak, the Salt River and Tempe Town Lake.

"We're hoping people are going to stop and look through the 'windows' at both sides, look at the environment in a way that they haven't otherwise," Ruben Valenzuela, design team head and owner of Terrano Landscape Architecture said.

Desert milkweed and other native Arizona vegetation planted in a free-form fashion decorate the path closest to the Salt River while yucca and other vegetation planted in an orderly pattern to represent the city sprout from the side nearest to downtown Tempe.

"We're very excited about this whole project," Tom Strich, a Tempe sculptor on the pathway design team said. "It's very gratifying to get your work out into the world."

Around the late 1990s the city identified the path and in 2002 a city panel selected Valenzuela's team out of a few groups that applied, Iwersen said.

Last year, Tempe officials considered rejecting the pathway art after construction material costs increased but eventually they decided just to scale it back, he said.

The nearly \$1.5 million pathway included about \$300,000 for artwork, Iwersen said. Federal transportation money pays for most of the pathway and city transportation funds cover the artwork, he said.

State, federal and city groups reviewed the design making the task a lengthy endeavor.

"We're happy to see all the effort that went into it actually came to fruition," design team member Virginia Senior of Senior Rae Kristoff Architecture said.

Senior designed the pathway's steel 16-foot-tall shade structures with triangular-shaped fiberglass roofs in blue, green, orange and red modeled after a former Tempe Beach Park pool house roof.

Sitting under the shades are rounded concrete benches Valenzuela and Strich designed with river rocks ground and inserted into them.

Other artwork on the pathway includes a piece called Leonardo Da Vinci's Window with a steel circle and several overlapping rectangles and squares.

At the path's Priest Drive end, a 20-foot-tall structure with three steel beams holds colorful former city street signs riveted together on one side and solid colors on the other side.

Valenzuela said the team worked together well and he's happy with the result.

"We do these things to help beautify the environment, to provide a rewarding and interesting experience for people using the path," he said.