

Swiss photos of city nixed

By Sue Book
Sun Journal Staff

The work of a Swiss photographer who crossed the Atlantic four times to capture the pulse of sister city New Bern in pictures hit a community nerve with the prints.

Many of those on the 300th Anniversary Celebration Committee and Swiss Bear Development Corporation board thought Michael von Graffenried's images showed New Bern in an unflattering, even racist, light.

A delegation of local leaders will travel to von Graffenried's November 2007 exhibition in Bern, Switzerland, but neither the official anniversary committee nor Swiss Bear plans to help get the photographs published in book form.

Anniversary committee members moved away from any endorsement or sponsorship last week, and on Wednesday the Swiss Bear

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board voted unanimously to abandon a search for grant money to publish the pictures.

Von Graffenried first came to New Bern in May 2006 and told reporters, "Everybody feels like I belong."

But subsequent visits in June, July and August 2006, shooting photos for an October 2006 exhibit at The Bank of the Arts and later published with captions and an article in *L'Illustre*, appeared to blur the first vision.

"There are so many clichés in Europe about Americans," he told a *Sun Journal* report-

er. "We have to see what's true or not true and we don't do that enough."

The 42 photographs in Von Graffenried's exhibit, "New Bern, an inside look at the U.S. today," depicts New Bern with chubby female and bubble-blowing male athletes, focuses on poor neighborhood architecture, highlights civilian guns and police and military presence, and a captions a picture of a black prom couple standing by a policeman as "a rare occasion for blacks to mingle."

Swiss Bear board members present Wednesday said they didn't like the view.

A 300th Committee member, Jimmy Hicks, has been an emissary from the city to the sister city in Switzer-

land. He sent word to Swiss Bear that the photographer's family "feel badly for us."

Rep. Alice Underhill, who plans to attend the exhibit at the Kornhaus Museum in Bern, sent word that she "would have liked to have been aware of the history" before she committed to go to the exhibition in Switzerland.

"You knew this guy was provocative when you brought him here," said Susan Moffat-Thomas, Swiss Bear director. "The city of New Bern sanctioned his visit and his work was discussed by Swiss Bear, that it could be controversial. The purpose of the book is to show what he saw."

But the difference be-

tween art and public relations was highlighted by members. Those who liked the photographs did not like the picture of New Bern they collectively showed.

Nelson McDaniel, who put together the 300th trip to Bern, said it was clear the photographer was trying to make a statement.

"I thought the idea was to help promote New Bern," said Tom Braaten. "This doesn't promote the New Bern I'd like to promote." A further look told him the New Bern pictures are "emblematic of Michael von Graffenried's work. He is looking for the seamy side."

Von Graffenried has published books of photography on war in Algeria and a cou-

ple hooked on cocaine. "What will happen if we don't help?" Mary Peterkin said. "He'll probably publish it anyway. He's going to win either way."

Sandy Chamberlin, who directs New Bern Riverfront Convention Center, Craven County Visitor's Center and Tourism Development Authority, said her opinion and the feedback she got from others made her oppose publishing the photographs.

"We don't want to fake it but this is a tourism issue," Chamberlin said. She said the photographs may highlight social issues but they negatively stereotype New Bern.

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