Billboards designed by ECSU students greet drivers

The billboards were designed by seniors in the ECSU Design Group, headed by Jane Bissett-Evans, at the request of the Willimantic Food Co-op.

"The Food Co-op had plans to put up three billboards to advertise their new location. During the university's winter break, Sarah Ketcher, the Co-op's community relations liaison, contacted me and asked me about the mechanics of billboard design," Bissett-Evans said.

"I suggested that the Co-op use me as a design assistant on the project, because that's what the ECSU Design Group is about, doing real jobs for real clients," she said.

"Sarah and the rest of the Co-op leadership thought it was a great idea, and gave me the green light. It was a very tight - deadline, and let me manage things with the students," she said.

The students were given the text for the billboards, and a copy of the Co-op's logo, which includes a large orange carrot. They also visited the store that recently opened on 91 Valley Street.

"I was the first time I'd been there in my four years at ECSU. It was great. The look is kind of retro, so I figured on earthy tones for my design," said Krista Utke, from Southington.

The students submitted digital drawings that went to Vincent Printing in Hixson, TN. The printed billboards, which "tile" the design into a four-by-four sections, were sent to Bob Brown of Standish Johnson Advertising in Providence for installation. The billboards will be up until April 1, or until someone else rents the space.

As it turns out, Utke and her fellow graphic design students Adam McLaughlin and Richard Harrington used similar colors, which prompted the Co-op staff to decide to use three designs, instead of one.

McLaughlin, who lives in Plainfield, also is pleased to see his work so prominently displayed. "That's my most successful work that people have been able to see," he said.

"I took my family downtown to see it. They were very proud," he said.

A fourth design created by Keegan Stiles also was chosen from the originally submitted 10 drawings, and is now being used for the store's "open/closed" door sign.

The billboard designs are just what Co-op was looking for, said the store's manager Alice Rubini.

"We've all been driving around looking at them. I think the students did great. We were very, very happy," Rubini said. "I just saw the one on Route 32 for the first time, and I was really impressed."

"We've wanted a billboard for the past 10 years. We never imagined they would look so great," she added.

For Utke, who has a student job working in the Department of University Relations, the project is a nice culmination of her experiences while at ECSU. Besides working on the billboards, she designed winter banners displayed on the lamp posts that line Main Street in Willimantic, and she did graphic design for the Foxwoods Casino for two months as an intern.

"This is what I've been going to school for four years for. This is what I want to do. Having my artwork in the public eye is the best. I am pretty impressed with my education at Eastern. My senior year has opened up different avenues to explore," Utke said.

Besides telling customers about the Co-op's new location, another goal of the billboards is to let people know that anyone can shop there, not just Co-op members. More information is available online at www.willimanticfood.coop or by calling 456-3611.