

Arts Plan NJ: Envisioning a New Era

Since July 2004, five Theme Teams and Working Groups drawn from a wide array of public leaders from various fields have been considering how best to update Arts Plan NJ. After reviewing the goals of the existing Arts Plan, each group met throughout the summer and autumn to identify goals, objectives, and strategies that might further enhance access and participation in the arts, arts education, services to artists, the role of the arts in economic and community development, and the use of technology in the arts. Each also gave consideration to public value created by the arts, and to how those values can be understood, measured, and communicated effectively. Their full final reports can be viewed online at www.ArtsPlanNJ.org. We highly recommend reading them in their entirety, as they provide a wealth of specific ideas. Here we offer an overview of themes and concerns that echoed through many of them, along with summaries of their central points.

The Vision

Taken together, these reports affirm the basic validity of the current plan and acknowledge significant gains, but also strongly suggest that current realities and changes in the landscape warrant both new and refined approaches. Together the reports see greater possibility and envision an environment where the arts and creativity more fully infuse individual lives and communities. The arts define us as a culture, are vital to lifelong growth, and contribute to complementary goals in other sectors. They describe a world where arts activities and artists stimulate fresh perspectives and curiosity, where they energize, inform, suggest alternatives, conjure understanding, or offer notions of beauty and balance through their work:

- Healing is faster for those in health programs;
- Communities are better planned and designed, creating jobs and attracting and retaining businesses, and enhancing the quality of life;
- Public sector amenities such as transportation systems, open spaces, and libraries are more fully utilized;
- Schools and other learning centers – including those that are informal, self-directed, and online – have a greater range of tools with which to facilitate learning and to encourage a well-educated, literate citizenry.

In the Working Groups' vision of this multi-faceted, multi-layered environment, the benefits of arts activity are widely acknowledged, and the variety, reciprocity, and interdependence they encourage are a source of community strength. Leaders from the public and private sectors step forward to serve as stewards and patrons of arts organizations and artists, recognizing the value they bring to individual and community life.

Significant progress has been made toward this vision, as the groups point out. In one area alone – arts education – Core Curriculum Content Standards in the Visual and Performing Arts have been adopted, high school graduation requirements now include the arts, and the first comprehensive survey of arts education in the state has been launched by a coalition including NJSCA, the New Jersey Department of Education, the Music for All Foundation, Playwrights Theater of New Jersey, and the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation. As a platform for future progress, the survey will provide a three-dimensional landscape to help direct programs, services, and resources where they are most needed in the state.

But much remains to be done in all five domains. As one group urged, further successes should be documented, studied, and replicated. Supporting New Jersey artists and the arts is not only about recognizing and honoring the arts community, but also about supporting creative enterprise for all the state's citizens.

Getting There

As they considered how the arts community might make this vision more of a reality, the Working Groups frequently employed the same terms, touching on fundamental values and guiding principles:

- *Inclusiveness.* The Working Group reports recognize and celebrate diverse forms of expression, tradition, and culture; promote appreciation for the many ways and setting in which the arts are created and practiced; and embrace both professional artists and those whose creative pursuits are avocational. The training and dedication it takes to attain a certain level of professionalism should be acknowledged, although all creative effort should be welcome in an amplified sense of the “arts community.”
- *Partnering.* While they allow that an admirable range of partnerships already exists, the Working Groups agree that expanding their number and diversity, particularly with non-arts partners, is essential. Alliances and coalitions with a broad base of community partners can identify other interests and sectors

where the arts can make a significant contribution, and where the responsibility for effective action can be shared.

One group suggested that school districts and institutions of higher education identify their shared concerns, for example, or that health care agencies, senior resource centers, and arts organizations look at theirs. Artists, in collaboration with arts organizations and municipalities, should take advantage of programs like NJSCA's Artists and Communities initiative to create residencies that address local needs. (More narrowly, partnerships still remain an excellent way to secure specific services, such as those provided by Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts, but the frame should be enlarged to include an even wider array of integrated products and services.)

- *Participation.* As one group noted in counseling artists and arts groups to learn what developers, trade associations, and community planners are doing – and how the arts might contribute to their efforts – full participation entails becoming more active as citizens. Serving on town councils, school boards, recreation committees, planning and development committees; lobbying for local, county, and state support; and assisting with community cultural plans or the formation of local arts councils are among the ways of getting more involved.
- *Sharing.* Sharing expertise and resources within the arts community and with other allied sectors, like education or tourism – is one way to jumpstart and maintain partnering activities. The Arts Education Working Group, for example, noted that school-based tools in arts education can also be used to foster lifelong learning in senior citizen centers, places of worship, and libraries.
- *Integration.* If the arts community practices inclusiveness, then partnering, participation, and sharing will ultimately lead to integration with other sectors. Art will be regarded as an indispensable element of all successful communities, and artists as indispensable “providers” of creativity and service. The arts will be infused into other content areas in preK-12 public and private schools; and arts organizations will be included in planning educational facilities, healthcare services, community development, and economic revitalization, among many other possibilities.
- *Impact.* The Working Groups repeatedly noted the need for credible documentation and analysis of the benefits that flow from creative activity, the arts, and the processes they set in motion. Impact demonstrates the difference

the arts make in our lives, not only in the quality of community life but also in the creativity and productivity they stimulate. There are many indicators: walkable cities, new investments in neighborhoods, higher hotel occupancy rates and property values, and more places where people gather, to name a few. Being able to describe impact is imperative to the public's understanding that Arts Plan NJ is both about artists and arts organizations, and about how every citizen and community can draw on the power of creative thought, expression, and action.

What It Will Take

In broad terms, the Working Groups provided a sense of the resources that will be needed to initiate and support the efforts outlined in the new Arts Plan NJ.

- *Political clout and support.* Perhaps the single most important resource the group cited is political standing, which is one key to unlocking other doors. One group suggested that a Leadership Committee be appointed by the Governor to meet twice yearly. Guided by a new, sixth working group dedicated to advancing the cultural institutions of the state, it could address cross-cutting issues highlighted in Arts Plan NJ, infuse discussions with new information, invite perspectives from other sectors, and generally maintain the Plan's currency.

Others imagined a Speaker's Bureau comprised of leaders from other sectors who might serve as ambassadors to colleagues. They should be positioned to convey whom the stakeholders are – taxpayers and residents, investors, large and small property owners, small business owners, civic institutions and nonprofits, tourists, and funders, to name a sampling.

Whatever the vehicle, all five Working Groups agreed that it is essential to get government leaders involved – including New Jersey's Governor and his cabinet, members of the Legislature, representatives from the New Jersey Departments of Education, Transportation, Commerce, and others; county and local government; and state and local agencies involved with aging, juvenile justice, healthcare, and the disabled.

- *Greater visibility.* To nurture an environment where new relationships can flourish, it will be crucial to report on and discuss Arts Plan NJ widely. Understanding is the fertile ground in which to seed buy-in, investment, and participation. Advocacy assistance should be sought from the many partners with whom the arts community has had long-standing relationships. These

partners can bring attention to artists and arts-making processes by describing the fruits of their experiences.

Maintaining a high profile for arts activity will be crucial, as well. Among the ideas offered for doing so: spotlighting and profiling models (such as towns that have been revitalized by the arts); continuing to grow and evolve the statewide arts marketing initiative, *Discover Jersey Arts*; reinstating an Annual Arts Award and promoting the Governor's Awards in Arts Education to highlight best practices and school reform (which could also be done through ACES – Arts Create Excellent Schools); and engaging the Port Authorities and New Jersey transit to showcase NJ arts venues and arts events as compelling destinations.

- *Partners.* Each Working Group offered a comprehensive catalog of potential partners. They include individuals and organizations in government and the public sector, as well as the business, financial, education, service, and healthcare communities – all of whom can provide access to support and resources, and entrée to new activity sites and participants. Evolving current relationships with natural fellow stakeholders – New Jersey's Historical Commission, the Historic Trust, the Cultural Trust, and so forth – might be a good place to start.
- *Central resources.* The Working Groups suggested that while much creative activity is underway, it is too dispersed and uneven. They urged creation of central support systems that can bring together and coordinate information and efforts by functioning as “go to” places. These clearinghouses – whether web sites or organizations – should disseminate research, models, best practices (especially in arts marketing, partnering, and evaluation), policies that govern land use and tax financing, and ongoing conversations on relevant issues. Several recognized ArtPRIDE's role in this regard and suggested building on that.

Priority areas of research include a summary of findings on arts participation, the effects of the arts on children's educations, and economic impact studies. The Wallace Foundation is soon to publish new findings on arts participation, for example, and information on what the START projects have achieved should be made available for dissemination as well.

One Working Group noted the importance of centralizing and consolidating artist services. Artists need dedicated staff (perhaps as part of a new service organization), to broker residencies, assist with marketing, refer employment

opportunities, secure live-work spaces, provide health care, and promote opportunities for continuing education, fellowships, commissions, and awards. The Space Bank Project, currently being developed by NJSCA and Atlantic Cape Community College, will provide a searchable online database of available work and presenting spaces for artists and arts organizations in southern New Jersey – an example that could be replicated elsewhere.

- *Communication assets and vehicles.* Artists are key stakeholders in the Arts Plan; if they become invested, it will succeed. Creating a comprehensive database for ongoing communication with them is thus an urgently needed asset. But information must also be shared with others – educational policy makers, government officials at all levels, funders, and so on. The Working Groups imagined a range of possible conduits for that information, including radio and television, the Internet (using *Jersey Arts E-News* as a start), and local access cable stations, as well as town meetings, performances, and children’s activities.
- *New financial resources.* Greater investment from local and county government should be a particular priority in the context of seeking increased financial support from funders and individual patrons in general.
- *In-kind contributions.* Engaging partners in common efforts may spur some contributions of space and expertise, but other in-kind contributions should be aggressively sought out.
- *Advancements in use of technology.* Help with technology is particularly crucial. As recently as 2003, an “astounding” 75% of arts organizations reportedly had no plan for the role of technology in their operations, and anecdotal evidence suggests a similar “digital divide” among artists along economic, educational, age, genre, ethnic, and/or geographical lines.

The arts community should broaden the understanding and use of technology as a first step in raising the level of technological sophistication. A statewide survey of technology in the arts may offer a starting point. Corporate partners might be enlisted to help create a technology resource center, for example. Such a “Help Desk” would have the potential to become an invaluable resource for information sharing and training, especially if guided by an Advisory Council that includes artists, arts organizations, corporations, businesses, foundations, and tech experts. In-kind assistance with promotion, marketing and communications, research, evaluation, and facilitation would be especially welcome, as well, and should be pursued.

- *Training and credentialing.* The greater integration of arts activity through all layers of community life will require sensitivity – artists are not always comfortable engaging officials from municipal, civic, educational, and corporate systems, it was noted. Training can facilitate that integration, however, so that artists are prepared to work in educational and community settings and residencies, and with specific populations. Institutions of higher learning and arts organizations might be encouraged to facilitate such training.
- *Testimonials of benefits and value.* When children value the arts, their parents listen, as one Working Group pointed out. To secure “buy-in” to Arts Plan NJ from state, county, and local government officials, and ultimately from the general public, people must be offered “experiences and evidence” by those they know, respect, and trust. As a counterpoint to authoritative studies, nothing is as persuasive as personal stories of transformation; they, too, should be collected and shared.
- *The Arts Plan itself.* As one of the Working Groups pointed out, those who participated in the planning process found it to be rewarding and enlightening. They envisioned Arts Plan NJ itself serving as a resource in the workplace and elsewhere. A clear, step-by-step practical guide, for use by citizens and government entities, on how to employ the arts and artists in economic and community development would be a good companion.

Other Issues for Consideration

Thanks to the efforts of so many people over the past six months, much has been done to refresh Arts Plan NJ for a new phase of implementation. The five Working Groups described their extensive work as preliminary, however, and all alluded to other issues that may arise as planning proceeds:

- *Psychological hurdles.* Actively engaging all sorts of partners in all aspects of community life will mean embracing the unfamiliar. It will mean seeing entrepreneurial ideas in a new light, for example, recognizing that making money is not antithetical to artistic missions; understanding how others view the arts, artists, and arts activity; and learning to communicate confidently, even though members of the arts community sometimes feel on the defensive.
- *Understanding why the arts are both valued and undervalued.* The arts community needs to be bolder in presenting its case base upon the true value it creates. Its tendency to feel shy and apologetic is grounded, several groups

hinted, in the widespread feeling that the arts are undervalued. Learning why that is so (and why there still relatively little government support) is an issue that should be studied. Current information and data on cultural participation will help, as will learning what impedes or supports such participation.

- *Clear and concise expectations.* Informed by a better understanding of the true range of potential stakeholders for the arts in New Jersey and the barriers that inhibit their cultural investment, the arts community should articulate clear expectations for Arts Plan NJ, including indicators of progress.
- *Priority strategies.* The Working Groups described a range of strategies that address several objectives. Developing and expanding artist residencies in non-traditional venues was cited as a way to support artists, for example, even as it expands participation in the arts and incorporates artists more fully into community life. The highest priority objectives and strategies should be highlighted in the final Plan.
- *Coordination.* In contemplating many levels and layers of activity, some form of coordination must be considered in order to recognize and take advantage of opportunities as they come along and to keep the momentum going.

The forthcoming statewide conference will enable those in attendance to build on the considerable work that has already taken place in Theme Teams and Working Groups, and to address these or other issues as Arts Plan NJ unfolds.