



Georgia Planning Officials Newsletter

February 2008

Arts, Culture, and Planning

by: M. Christine Dwyer
Excerpted from *The Commissioner* (Fall 2007)

Arts and Culture can strengthen your community. Increasingly, community planning toolkits include strategies related to arts and culture. The argument for investing in arts and culture has typically been economic—that arts festivals, historic buildings, and performing arts bring in dollars from visitors and will boost or maintain the economic vitality of the city, town, and region. But today, a planning commission should be interested in other ways of gauging the value of cultural investments. In a recent series of American Planning Association-sponsored focus groups, we learned that planners are coming to believe that community-building outcomes may be at least as important or even more important than economic results when weighing the merits of arts and culture. While there certainly are measurable financial benefits associated with cultural activities, arts and culture projects are also particularly well suited to strengthening the quality of community life.

The APA focus group participants speculated that the most effective projects are likely to be those with “double outcomes” – that is, those that aim for success in both community building and economic development. In fact, focus group participants argued that it would be shortsighted to think of results only in economic terms and ignore the kinds of benefits that arts and culture projects are uniquely suited to achieve. Here are a few examples of double-outcome projects we have been examining:

Public Art

A neighborhood improvement project included public art within typical streetscape improvements. The result helped increase foot traffic in several underutilized corridors and enhanced safety for the neighborhood. There are short-run economic benefits for neighborhood retail and local hospitality businesses that may stimulate longer term residential development.

Community Center

The designers of a community center incorporated a theater and gallery along with “incubator” spaces for small businesses with a cultural connection, such as design, craft, and technology firms. The result is a high-use multipurpose community venue that becomes a community gathering place and eventually attracts other related businesses and visitors interested in the cultural offerings and business services.

Cultural Industries

A local economic council uses information about existing cultural assets, including the skills of the local talent base (e.g., specialized craft persons), arts education opportunities, and supplier networks to conceptualize and market a new type of cultural industry cluster (such as textile design, glass production, web and software development for industry groups). The data is used to attract interest from industries and employers who find local assets attractive for potential expansion.

Public Engagement

A planning consultant engaged artists to work with groups of residents to decorate neighborhood transit facilities with mosaics, murals, and maps, which make the transit facilities the object of local attention and pride. Maintenance costs and ongoing expenses decreased because graffiti had been eliminated. Improved facilities encourage neighborhood residents and others to use public transit. Users have an enhanced sense of security.

Taking advantage of the “double outcome” concept

Consider how to get the most out of any type of planning investment.

In addition to the primary outcome of a new project, think about what else can be achieved.

Consider more than one outcome.

If the project fits into the cultural sphere, don't be satisfied with only one type of outcome. Enhance your chances of success by promoting economic & community-building results.

Arts and Culture

The broader benefits of arts and culture programs are wide ranging: safety and security improvements; engagement of youth in positive leisure activities; neighborhood “ownership” and civic pride; better representation through public engagement; reduction of health risk factors; increased numbers of visitors; and attraction and retention of an educated workforce.

As a result, these programs have also brought favorable economic development outcomes to communities across the country, often measured by job creation, tax revenues, retail activity, and increased property values.

The following article speaks to incorporating arts & culture into planning, and by choosing projects that have “double outcomes”, a community can maximize the results and benefits.

In addition, here are but a few of the successful public arts & culture programs across the country:

City of Raleigh, NC Arts Commission: www.raleighnc.gov
City of Santa Cruz, CA : www.ci.santa-cruz.ca.us

Adding more value.

If the project is not in the cultural sphere, is there a way to get more value and meaning by adding a cultural component?

Using multiple perspectives.

When tracking the results of investments, carve out time to document the value from several perspectives so that you do not miss out on what has actually been achieved for your community.