

## EMERGING THEMES - A WORKING DOCUMENT

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The first phase of the Pierce County cultural plan and community needs assessment got underway in October. The consultants conducted an initial round of meetings with the Cultural Plan Steering Committee and the Pierce County Arts Commission, as well as in-person and telephone interviews with 16 individuals. We have also reviewed materials about Pierce County and its cultural sector, both in hard copy and on the web. This document brings together what we heard, organized into six issue areas that reflect emerging themes.

We present them here in a working document to continue the conversation and to serve as the basis for the next phase of community input. This includes five small group sessions held in different communities throughout Pierce County in early November, and through continued feedback from the Steering Committee and others. As the process advances, we will be using these themes, as refined by additional input, for continuing conversations by asking these questions: What rings true? What is missing? What is not emphasized sufficiently? Where are the opportunities for change embedded in these themes?

Please note that the order in which information is presented here does not imply priority, but rather the spectrum of issues and themes heard.

### ORGANIZATIONS, ARTISTS, EVENTS

- A.** The County is rich in creative organizations, artists, efforts, and facilities. In many ways cultural organizations and artists in Pierce County are finding their footing, becoming more sophisticated in both programmatic and administrative ways.
- B.** There is a year-round array of festivals, fairs, and events that focus on or include arts, culture, and heritage throughout the County, ranging from neighborhood- and community-focused activities to major regional events.
- C.** A number of smaller cities in Pierce County have created significant arts and cultural identities that are recognized county-wide, though Tacoma remains the area's artistic hub.
- D.** Tacoma is home to an energized community of artists, with a substantial community of artists residing on the Key Peninsula and other artists and artisans scattered throughout the county.
- E.** There is increasing attention to historic preservation of buildings and districts in the County and growing appreciation for preservation's aesthetic, cultural heritage, and economic development value for communities.



- F.** While there are dynamic collaborative and entrepreneurial efforts underway, there are significant challenges to earning a living as an artist in Pierce County.
- G.** Pierce County has a few ethnically specific arts organizations that are vibrant but most have relatively small budgets, operating primarily through volunteers.

## **EDUCATION**

- A.** Much of the visual and performing arts in schools is provided by cultural organizations. For example, the Broadway Center's Kennedy Center affiliation drives much of its programming in the schools and reaches over 40,000 students annually.
- B.** Some innovative arts education and outreach efforts are occurring in Pierce County that may hold the potential to be leveraged if used strategically to bring national attention and funding as well as local benefit. These include work being done by Arts Impact, the Broadway Center, and the School of the Arts.
- C.** There is growing interest in personal creative pursuits and life-long learning in the arts among County residents of all ages in many neighborhoods and communities.
- D.** Higher education provides a growing range of cultural and artistic opportunities for students and residents. For example, community colleges are playing a larger role in cultural life and are attentive to opportunities that reflect the diversity of cultural backgrounds in the County. Universities in the area occasionally are program partners with cultural groups.
- E.** Arts education and cultural opportunities are seen as being a critical, if underutilized, tool for reaching and engaging youth, especially those youth who are at risk.

## **PARTICIPATION AND ACCESS**

- A.** Community and neighborhood engagement and volunteerism in the arts – which includes many traditional forms of cultural expression, community college efforts, festivals, collaborative artist ventures, and neighborhood activities – account for a broad and diverse level of participation beyond the more visible arts and heritage institutions.
- B.** There is an increased awareness of the importance of programming for diverse audiences. Examples include the Broadway Center's balance of programs, Tacoma Art Museum's Dio de los Muertos celebration and the annual Asian Pacific Cultural Center ethnic festival at the Tacoma Dome.
- C.** There is concern that some communities (whether geographic, ethnic, or income-based) have limited access to arts, heritage, and cultural opportunities and that these



communities are unlikely to develop a sense of the value of arts and culture without improved access.

## **VISIBILITY AND AWARENESS**

- A.** The cultural sector is not believed to be unified and tends not to work together consistently on issues of awareness or advocacy, although such work is seen as critical for the benefit of the sector and the larger community.
- B.** While many elected officials and civic leaders appreciate the value of arts and culture, they often do not see it as a cohesive industry or sector and have not had a compelling case made to them on how to provide meaningful public or private support.
- C.** The role of arts and culture in support of community economic development, tourism, community cohesion, and quality of life is believed to be central, even if not currently articulated clearly or positioned effectively.
- D.** There is a belief that Tacoma and the County are poised today to have a strong arts and cultural identity and image but that it will require an intentional, strategic, and collaborative effort to take the next step.
- E.** The role and function of the Pierce County Division of Cultural Services are poorly understood. Those people who are familiar with it are aware primarily of its grant making function.
- F.** Among those with some familiarity with the Division of Cultural Services there is concern regarding resource capacity and focus, though there is great support for the County's efforts in developing a stronger and more strategic approach.

## **COLLABORATION, PARTNERSHIPS, AND COMMUNICATION**

- A.** There have been some successful collaborative efforts related to marketing, in particular the arrangements among the three downtown museums, but there remain important opportunities to build stronger and more cohesive relationships within the cultural sector.
- B.** Developments in communication, especially electronic communication, have created vibrant opportunities to foster communication and collaboration in the arts and cultural community. For example, the Tacoma arts listserv has been a catalyst for sharing information and access to opportunities for artists and others interested in the arts, and the evolution of City Arts magazine has increased knowledge about the high level of activity in the county.
- C.** Individuals believe there are numerous untapped collaborative possibilities among and between cultural organizations and also between the cultural sector and, for example,



sports or recreational interests or human service agencies. This might include use of non-arts-specific facilities for arts and cultural purposes.

- D.** There is no entity in the County that facilitates the building of partnerships or collaborations so it is hard for groups to figure out how to do so in significant and sustained ways given their limited staffing capacity. There is a need for tools, process facilitation, and a better understanding of options.

## **LEADERSHIP AND RESOURCES**

- A.** There is strong concern that the potential social and economic benefits of arts and culture to the County are poorly understood by many civic leaders.
- B.** Tacoma has made good progress in building visible arts leadership from within the cultural sector and local government.
- C.** A broad array of volunteer resources and entrepreneurial approaches are being deployed related to arts and culture across the County. This use of creative resources and ideas is vibrant but fragile and may require stronger leadership and more support and coordination to flourish.
- D.** Lack of financial resources represents a significant problem for most cultural organizations in Pierce County. While the current economic downturn has made the situation especially difficult, the problem is deeper and of longer standing.
- E.** The economy's decline has had a significant impact on foundation and corporate giving by limiting contributions and strengthening interest in fostering collaborative strategies among cultural organizations.
- F.** There is concern that resident cultural spending is declining, having an impact on earned income in the arts, especially in terms of sales of art work and ability to pay ticket costs or class fees. This situation especially impacts the ability of artists to make their home in Pierce County.
- G.** There are pockets of potential funding in the public and private sectors that might be deployed to support arts and culture – including, for example, job training, crime prevention, wellness, federal stimulus efforts, etc.