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Conversation on arts should result in real action

Our view: Several do-it-now ideas should get traction and get under way

Some of the 150 or so people who gathered for Wednesday's "Community Conversation on Arts and Culture" had long, professional titles on their nametags. On many others, the second line simply read "Arts supporter."

Members of groups like the Southern Arizona Leadership Council and the Tucson Regional Town Hall and Tucson Regional Economic Opportunities mingled easily with artists, volunteers, workers at nonprofit arts organizations and others who attended simply because they love music, theater and art.

Everyone was there because he or she wanted to help assure that Tucson's arts community is vigorous and vital.

We agree with Roberto Bedoya, the Tucson Pima Arts Council executive director, who noted "a great spirit of cooperation in this room, and a tremendous amount of passion."

From that passion several immediate — and doable — actions emerged:

- Create an identity or a brand for Tucson as an arts mecca.
- Build temporary alliances to pull together resources in order to achieve a steady stream of small accomplishments that benefit local arts.
- Develop a comprehensive arts calendar and directory.

The leadership council, TPAC, TREO, Town Hall, the Downtown Tucson Partnership and the Community Foundation for Southern Arizona issued an open invitation for a morning devoted to brainstorming about how to implement recommendations in recent studies by the Town Hall, TPAC and TREO.

Participants were assigned to tables of eight to 12 people and spent more than an hour answering questions about how to invigorate and protect Tucson's arts scene.

Question No. 1 was the most compelling: How to brand Tucson as a culturally, artistically vibrant destination city — or, as Cafe Terra Cotta founder Don Luria ("Arts supporter") remarked, "Santa Fe has an image. How do we get an image?"

Getting to the right answer for that question — finding a way to assure that the world regards Tucson as a destination for arts and culture, as well as for nature and heritage — would help secure the region's prosperity. A first step could be researching how other cities — Austin (Music City), Texas, for instance — built themselves into brands.

We hope a local, interested-in-the-arts advertising agency becomes involved with the research and branding effort.

When the brainstorming sessions ended, the ideas were turned over to TPAC, which will seek allies among the groups present Wednesday to work on various projects.

One small step for the area arts community will be a professional development workshop for small and mid-sized arts organizations, co-sponsored by TPAC and the Community Foundation and produced by the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture, Bedoya said.

More information

For more information on the Tucson-Pima Arts Council, go to www.tucsonpimaartscouncil.org/

This project should help artists and art organizations, who know a great deal about their medium but less about grant writing, leases and the other details of the management side of the arts.

"There are a lot of small steps we can take with finite resources," Bedoya said.

Such specialized programs should be viewed as a building block for development of the arts presence and vitality in the community.

The first larger project we'll hear about is probably going to be an online cultural directory, he said. Such a resource was recommended by both the Town Hall and the TPAC studies.

Bedoya said the directory will almost certainly include a comprehensive calendar of regional events and shows, but more importantly, it will be a marketing device for local artists, a way for arts groups to network and a channel for those who want to buy art or retain artists' services — a place to find a skilled wrought iron artist, a tilemaker, a string quartet.

Research into how to mount the site, and what it might include, should be finished within six months, he said. Such a directory would be a terrific boon to local artists and arts groups.

We believe that thriving arts and culture are essential to our community's character and charm. We hope the conversation will lead to enhancing our community's arts presence.

The actions may not be large, sweeping changes, but the bit-by-bit, piece-by-piece cooperative actions and programs will eventually benefit the whole.

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