



Tucson poised to be great arts town - if we follow plan

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Tucson is a minor league city, barely. Just check the status of the Sidewinders and you'll see Tucson's minor league baseball franchise will likely play in Reno, Nev., in 2009.

On the cultural front, though, Tucson fields opera, symphony, ballet and theater companies just like all the major cities.

The Czech Philharmonic just played at Centennial Hall this month. Superstar violinist Joshua Bell played with the Tucson Symphony Orchestra in January. In fall, superstar mezzo-soprano Stephanie Blythe sang with Arizona Opera. And the Carl Rosa Co. will be on tour here in May with the same "The Mikado" that played on London's West End in February.

And Tucson has cultural offerings no other city can offer, among them:

- Two American Indian tribes, the Tohono O'odham and Pascua Yaqui, just outside town
- Hispanics constituting one-third of the population
- 18 organized European organizations
- Distinct Asian and African communities
- Dazzling desert landscape barely beyond city limits

Nobody argues the bountiful cultural riches that fall between the Catalina, Rincon, Santa Rita and Tucson mountain ranges.

Equally, though, the past year has made abundantly clear that Tucson falls woefully short in nurturing the many arts and culture entities that call the region home.

That is, we give minor league regard, or less, to our major league assets.

The poster child for this are the abysmal major performance halls we have to rely on for big shows.

These realizations resulted in the crafting of a Pima Cultural Plan with the input of pretty much every organization involved in nature, arts, culture or heritage (indeed, executive directors meet regularly under the NACHO banner).

The plan differs significantly from the volumes of shelved documents that seem to get rewritten every decade and shelved again. The cultural plan has a specific to-do list with clearly identified players to implement them.

Many of those players - about 165 people in all - showed up at 7:30 a.m Wednesday at the Tucson Association of Realtors office for a Tucson Community Conversation on Arts & Culture, put on by the Southern Arizona Leadership Council as an outgrowth of last year's Tucson Regional Town Hall.

The conversation involved people from nearly every major - and even minor - arts organization, as well as most of the natural attractions and leaders from Tucson Regional Economic Opportunities, Downtown Tucson Partnership, Tucson Electric Power and the Community Foundation for Southern Arizona.

The core of that three-hour gathering involved breaking into 10-person tables to discuss three questions:

- Dealing with building the region's reputation as an arts and culture center

- Finding ways to raise awareness of the cultural offerings and their value to the community
- Creating new funding sources to support arts and culture

The conversations largely reached the same conclusions spelled out in the Pima Cultural Plan, which was released in recent weeks.

The most repeated desire from table to table was a need for centralized information about all the arts and culture offerings.

The Tucson Pima Arts Council - the cultural plan's custodian - is in active talks with a couple of organizations to host an Internet directory that would include a comprehensive list of performances, museums, restaurants and accommodations.

"Our goal is a visitor or resident can make their own itinerary," said Nancy Lutz, chair to the Pima Cultural Plan and also the Tucson Pima Arts Council. "We need a substantial success to build on. Our goal is to kick off an online directory within six months."

A lot of the cultural plan objectives revolve around a central theme: The arts and culture community needs to get its arms around all the diverse and individual arts efforts ("build an inventory"), and then find a way to make the million people who live here aware of the vast, but largely unknown, offerings in the Tucson region.

"We have to teach people to be a tourist in their own town," said Anne-Marie Russell, executive director of the Museum of Contemporary Art. "I was totally reminded (at the table conversations) that this is one of the most culturally rich and diverse communities possible."

The overarching question is how to implement the cultural plan's to-do list. This is Tucson's biggest bugaboo: taking the next step after a meeting.

The arts, culture and economic development organizations have dozens of boards of directors and advisory committees and whatnot among them.

The way to carry out the to-do list is assign a task to each director. I would think each director has a circle of friends that can be assembled as a team to accomplish a task.

In other words, the mechanism is in place to achieve grand tasks. Civic leaders who like to sit on boards can't just go home or back to work after leaving a meeting. They must roll up sleeves and carry out a cultural plan task.

Manpower can achieve a lot, but there's no way around the money question. The plan details how awful public and private support for arts and culture is here.

George Hanson, Tucson Symphony's music director, told his table group about people in Tucson from Chicago who donate tens of thousands of dollars to the Chicago Symphony but aren't even aware of the Tucson Symphony until someone takes them to a concert.

"I had no idea" Tucson has such a good orchestra is a refrain Hanson hears repeatedly.

"Philanthropists have no idea what impact we have," Hanson said. "They say, 'I'd like to give you more, but what's in it for me?' We need to show economic impact."

Randy Campbell, a Tucson-based agent for the bluegrass group The Dillards, described how Nashville Symphony Chief Executive Alan Valentine overcame a deep divide between classical and country music supporters to win over country performers, who were among the early investors to build a \$120 million symphony hall in that Tennessee city. Country support allowed Valentine to ask developers to dedicate a small percentage of development costs for the arts.

"Tucson is a developers' town," Campbell said. "You can't make them do it. You have to convince them" and

he believes Tucson's developers would be willing to play along.

Tucson has all the ingredients to become a major league arts center. All it takes is dashing the minor league attitudes of the region's leaders, as well as the million people who live here.

Otherwise, we strike out like we probably will with minor league baseball with the expected 2009 departure to Reno of the Tucson Sidewinders.

Downtown reporter Teya Vitu just returned from London, where he absorbed 11 performances in the realms of opera, symphony, Gilbert & Sullivan and Shakespeare.

Pima Cultural Plan To-Do List

The plan lists precise items to accomplish in identity, creative economy, facilities, public art, business development, education, government policy and resources. Each item also identifies lead players for implementation.

Near-term objectives include:

- Create an online cultural directory with comprehensive listings of performances, museums, restaurants, accommodations so people can build an entire itinerary at one Web site
- Establish a cultural facilities committee to assess the competing needs and opportunities in terms of performance space
- Build an inventory of all the performance and rehearsal space
- Create an arts consortium for health care, legal service, business development, financial planning and marketing
- Build a relationship between the arts and the economic development communities
- Create identifiable arts districts
- Explore ways to build private cultural philanthropy
- Find ways to increase public funding and support for arts and culture
- Better align artists with schools
- Improve collaborations among arts organizations
- For more information about the Pima Cultural Plan, click on this story at www.tucsoncitizen.com.

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