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Vitality of arts essential to Tucson's prosperity

Opinion by Michael McNulty

No one who knows Tucson well can deny the cultural vitality of this valley. The city's efforts to champion economic development, tourism and sports are laudable. However, we overlook the real jewels of our community: arts and culture.

Civic pride is a precondition of economic vitality and there is little our community has more to be proud of than its artists.

Yet Tucson and Pima County rank low in per-capita public and private financial support for the arts. Of the 50 largest U.S. cities, the Tucson region's annual public funding ranks near the bottom at \$0.94 per capita per year, compared with the national average of \$6.13, according to the United States Urban Arts Federation. Many cities give more than \$10 per capita per year.

Closer to home, Yuma contributed \$868,130 to arts and culture in fiscal 2006-07. Yuma has a regional population of 190,000, putting its per-capita arts support at approximately \$4.57.

On Wednesday, the combined forces of the Tucson Pima Arts Council, the Southern Arizona Leadership Council, Tucson Regional Economic Opportunities Inc., the Downtown Tucson Partnership and the Arizona Town Hall will convene for an event called the Tucson Community Conversation on Arts and Culture. This rather astonishing display of concern and commitment is driven by a collective desire to support the creative side of our community.

There is an entire constellation of reasons why it's critical to step forward in support of the artistic and creative sides of our community. Among them:

- TREO's Economic Blueprint and the Tucson Regional Town Hall both recognized the need for a vibrant arts scene if the community hopes to lure the best talent in the country to live and work here.
- Downtown revitalization has been a mantra of city officials for decades. But if we look to cities that have been successful at downtown revitalization, we find that they embraced their arts and cultural communities at the beginning as a central galvanizing force that enabled the residential and commercial successes we see there today. Tucson has failed to understand this.
- In the competitive economic environment, a vital arts and cultural scene is a cornerstone in attracting the "creative class," which will drive our future economy.

There are many resources in our community that we can build upon. While we are the 32nd largest city in America, we are 30th in terms of arts employees per 1,000 residents and 26th in terms of arts businesses, according to a July report by Americans for the Arts.

But we are failing to protect our standing. Last year, we saw a decrease of 4 percent in the number of creative businesses located in Tucson, putting us 47th among the 50 largest cities in the United States for arts retention, according to Americans for the Arts. This drop was three times as bad as that affecting the state of Arizona as a whole.

The needs are many. You need only think of your favorite arts group to appreciate how underfunded, if not underappreciated, our cultural organizations find themselves. At this community conversation, we will roll up our sleeves and tackle these questions:

- What are your ideas for new revenue streams to support the arts and culture in Tucson and Pima County?
- How do we make Tucson the most exciting arts and culture destination in the Southwest?

- How can we organize more effectively to communicate how critical the arts and culture are to Tucson's prosperity and sustainability?
- How do we get the message across to our elected officials and our arts patrons that arts and culture are crucial to Tucson's future?

Maybe if we pull together, we can do as much to support the arts and culture in Tucson as Yuma does for its constituents.

To register for the Tucson Community Conversation on Arts and Culture, please contact Rebecca Springer at 624-0595, Ext. 10, or rspringer@TucsonPimaArtsCouncil.org.

Write to Michael McNulty at michaelsmcnulty@cox.net.

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