



Cultural Planning Project

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BY KATHLEEN DRESSEN

The Napa Valley is rich when it comes to the arts. We've got active art groups, galleries, painters and sculptors, many of them world renown. Dance companies, performers and theater troupes come to Napa venues such as our gracious Opera House and stunning Lincoln Theater. Amateur thespians take to the stage at Dreamweavers, school auditoriums and the White Barn. Napa Valley plays host to a nationally known writers' conference and local authors often give their time reading from their works in bookstores.

So, why aren't the theaters packed to standing room every performance? Why have 12 galleries and theater groups closed since the fall of 2004? Why don't our 4.7 million annual visitors know what we have to offer in the arts? Can we create a long-range vision for the arts, a public arts policy and public funding for the arts?

The Arts Council of Napa Valley is going to find out. In partnership with other arts organizations, community members and civic leaders, they have embarked on a road map of sorts; a Culture Plan for Napa Valley. Cultural plans, and the cultural planning process, have been used successfully in communities all over America to create strong, vibrant, exciting arts sectors. The plan will be created by and for our community.

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"The arts have faced a lot of challenges in the last year," says Michelle Williams, executive director of the Arts Council Napa Valley. "We have world class venues, but locals are priced out. There's no funding or structure. We don't know what's wrong but we're willing to work together to fix it."

Williams says the various arts organizations and individuals want to come together as a group with a common voice. As a strong collective, the Arts Council was the logical fulcrum.

"The Community Foundation gave us a \$50,000 challenge grant. We raised the challenge money, moved into a new office and were able to hire a planning consultant to help us organize the cultural plan. We had a nationwide search for consultants and were delighted when the best candidate turned out to be Napa resident Morrie Warshawski, whom we hired in January. He has worked with other clients, such as the city of Flint, Michigan and the state of Mississippi, on their cultural planning processes. The Napa Valley provides challenges. We have five separate cities in a long valley. Each of them has their own character and Morrie understands that."

The process has begun. The Culture Plan group is now collecting and organizing a comprehensive database of cultural resources, facilities, individual artist and arts education opportunities available in Napa County.

The database will be followed by community input on local arts, which will be obtained by interviews, surveys, focus groups and town hall meetings throughout the county from American Canyon to Calistoga. When this information is complete, a team of community leaders from around the valley will analyze the data and create a series of recommendations.

Those recommendations will go back to the public for additional feedback. When completed, the recommendations will be formed into the cultural plan.

"There's never been anything like that here before," says Morrie Warshawski (who, coincidentally, is the husband of Evy Warshawski, executive director of the Napa Valley Opera House). "We have such incredibly fertile territories of possibility. There are so many potential resources here. Napa has unique challenges. Each community has different environments and cultures. There is a geographic and demographic divide. The great thing about this process is that it 'animates the community' and gets people buzzing, talking and excited about arts and culture and how it affects our lives."

"It's a totally open process; we want input from everyone. We're non-elitist and want to hear from all the arts. We're especially interested in pockets of art and artists that go under the radar, those who do informal art or folk art."

This process is being partially funded by individual donors and the Community Foundation of Napa Valley.

President of the Community Foundation, Terence Mulligan, explains why the foundation felt it was important to back the cultural plan.

"Infrastructure is important," says Mulligan. "With the closure of 12 nonprofit arts groups and galleries in the last two years, the arts sector is like a neighborhood where every other house is about to ignite. Making the Arts Council stronger, and putting them in a position to create a cultural plan, is like buying a new fire truck: an investment that will help everyone in the long run. We need to make decisions based on community input and hard data. That's exactly what the cultural plan is going to produce. That's also what's been missing for the last several years in the arts."

Pen and ink illustrator Nick Cann, who is an active volunteer in the Arts Council, says the process is going smoothly.

"We're tree-shaking and gathering names," says Cann. "Our survey questions are meeting a lot of success. My

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wife is also helping and we find that people we've contacted are very willing to go along and give us the information. I spent 30 years in Los Angeles and there the arts are not in a difficult situation. Here, we have a tremendously vibrant art community that is supportive and wonderful. Through this process, we're getting to know each other, but people from out of town or even here don't realize that they don't have to go to New York or San Francisco if they want a large, important piece of art.

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Williams says the process is inspiring.

"Artists are taking this opportunity to get together who might not otherwise," says Williams. "They're all smart, strategic and great thinkers. When we bring in the community leaders, we can create a comprehensive cultural plan. In my job, I'm steeped in art, yet through this process, I'm learning so much about art that I didn't know. We want to have the first draft by late summer. That's ambitious. Flint took a year to do what we hope to do in months. The cultural plan will be a living, breathing document. It needs to be an action plan for culture in the Napa Valley."

Arts Council of Napa Valley invites the public to get involved in this groundbreaking project for Napa County. Visit www.artscouncilnapavalley.org, which has a section about the process. Any and all creative people, arts collectives, arts instructors of any discipline and owners or operators of any venues that support the arts are encouraged to get in touch with the organization to make sure the needs of the entire creative community can be addressed in the planning process.

For more information on Arts Council, to donate, volunteer or become part of the cultural planning process, call (707) 257-2117 or email info@artscouncilnapavalley.org.