



Sunday, October 14, 2007 - Page updated at 02:00 AM

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The arts-funding balancing act

By Melinda Bargreen

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How should a city spend its arts dollars?

It's an eternal question, followed by plenty more: Should the Office of Arts & Cultural Affairs give a few big grants to some causes that appear most important? Do they parcel out a little bit to a very large number of groups, in the interests of fairness, but dilute the grants' impact? Should they fund major groups that are the city's arts cornerstones? Or do they take aim at the grassroots community efforts, which may have less artistic merit but good outreach effects? And what about arts education, a subject that is foundering in many of our schools?

Mayor Greg Nickels' proposed 2008 budget, beefing up arts/cultural support by \$1 million, takes aim somewhere in the middle of all this. And while Michael Killoren, director of the city's Office of Arts Cultural Affairs, is quite right in calling the larger budget "a step in the right direction," any of these expenditures could cause controversy.

What is art, anyway?

First of all, the city's definition of "arts and culture" may not mirror what some local arts watchers would expect to find under that title. Except for some relatively small grants (more about those later), the budget people are not talking about major arts organizations like the Seattle Repertory Theatre, Pacific Northwest Ballet or Seattle Art Museum. Of the total \$4.2 million in the proposed budget, the lion's share — \$3.2 million — will fund parks projects, a few of which would appear to stretch some definitions of "arts and culture."

The biggest single chunk of the arts/culture budget, \$2.7 million, would go to remodel the west wing of Building 30 at Warren G. Magnuson Park to create a multi-arts facility, including studios, exhibition and office space for arts organizations. According to Joelle Ligon, communications strategic adviser for Seattle Parks and Recreation, the remodeled building would create 30 to 40 spaces for visual and performing artists. "Arts and parks are natural bedfellows," says Ligon. "We're getting two for one here, a benefit for both arts and parks."

Ligon's colleague Eric Friedli further observes that the Magnuson Park building would also host programs by the Sand Point Arts and Cultural Exchange (SPACE), the nonprofit organization that successfully lobbied for the Arts and Culture dollars to be spent there.

The proposed remodel "will benefit artists, who also will pay rent," says Friedli, enterprise division director

for parks and recreation. "Right now it is an empty building that doesn't benefit anyone."

Big vs. little

But does spending so much money rehabbing an old building for studios really provide the most bang for those 2.7 million bucks? "Arts are not about the big institutions exclusively," Friedli states.

"We have a number of communities that need to be able to experience different kinds of arts without the level of expense and sophistication of the big institutions. This project gets the common person engaged in enjoying arts and culture — people who won't go to ballet and opera but will enjoy free art in the parks."

It was the big arts organizations, however, that provided most of the fodder for the study that both Killoren and public-relations manager Lori Patrick say was an important influence on Nickels' decision to beef up the arts and culture budget. That report, "Arts & Economic Prosperity III," was released in June as part of a national survey conducted by the advocacy group Americans for the Arts, and it showed that local nonprofit arts organizations generate \$330 million in direct spending every year in Seattle.

"The city has been a good partner for the bigger arts groups," Killoren says, referring to city funding of the region's major halls and museums.

"The smaller and midsize groups often rent their space, and are at the mercy of the marketplace."

The rest of the funds

If the city council approves the mayor's budget proposal next month, the construction of the Magnuson Park building renovation should be completed near the end of 2009.

Those who prize arts education may be dismayed to see that there's only \$100,000 in the proposed budget for arts in the schools. That money (matched by the school district) will be used to build a five-person leadership team to integrate arts into the Seattle schools' curriculum, according to Carri Campbell, Seattle Public Schools' new (as of July) District Program Manager of Visual & Performing Arts.

"Research shows this is the best way to support the development of arts in the schools," Campbell explains. She will direct the leadership team as they work to increase the equity of arts opportunities in the schools, and to ensure that the arts are a part of district strategies for bettering academic achievement.

"I believe all the [school] principals want to see the arts infused back into the curriculum," Campbell says. She is currently working to establish an arts baseline in the schools ("Where are we now? Where should we be in five or ten years?"), and then will work to put arts programs in schools that don't have them. This work will begin with the elementary schools as a foundation for further study.

The mayor's proposed budget also funds one more area of the arts and culture: an added \$300,000, or a 23 percent increase, to the Office of Arts & Cultural Affairs' Civic Partners program, described as "the most far-reaching" of the funding programs. This year, the program awarded \$1.3 million to 119 arts and cultural organizations of all sizes.

Lori Patrick observes, however, that even with the proposed increases, the arts/culture budget is "just now catching up to 2001 levels of grants to the Civic Partners program."

What's next? The proposed budget is before the City Council for review, with a decision expected by Thanksgiving. If it passes, several sectors of the arts community — particularly the Magnuson Park advocates — should have reason for giving thanks.

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