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Caveat Creator

Shepherding Artists Toward County Politics

By Michael Gill

Last Friday was the deadline for arts organizations to apply for general operating support from Cuyahoga Arts and Culture. By coincidence, last Saturday was the deadline for petitioners to turn in roughly 46,000 signatures that would have been necessary to bring to the ballot box the Cuyahoga County Commissioners' recent 2-1 vote to raise the county sales tax by one-fourth of one percent to pay for a proposed medical mart and convention center.

Those two events had nothing to do with each other, but caught between them is something new on the local arts and cultural scene: the entry of artists and their organizations into the broader political arena - and not just as citizens, but as an organized group.

Earlier this month Community Partnership for the Arts and Culture president Tom Schorgl called a meeting of the regional artistic community. For years prior to this, such meetings were about the case for public funding for the arts. This time, though, it wasn't about an arts issue at all, but whether artists should sign the petition to put the medical mart/convention center sales tax on the ballot.

County Commissioner Tim Hagan and attorney Fred Nance came with a Power Point presentation. Schorgl introduced them, and they put on their show for an audience of about 35. The occasion wasn't just to give background information, but to urge artists and organizations not to support the petition drive to let the voters have a say on the new sales tax.

Schorgl says the meeting was his idea.

"We looked at the potential of how a medical merchandise mart and convention center could benefit the arts and cultural community," he said, and decided it would be good for the arts community to hear from elected officials.

Schorgl based the decision on four factors, most of which can be summarized as "ripple effect." If the project happens and creates skilled jobs, that could "translate to more arts and culture consumers coming into the community over time." Some of those jobs would likely be for "creative class" types, especially product and exhibit designers. There is of course the possibility

that occasional trade shows and conventions bring more visitors who take in concerts, plays and art shows while in town. And finally, Schorgl says, public involvement in the project creates the possibility of public art being included in the building, or the use of the facilities as performance venues.

Make no mistake that this was advocacy for the proposal: Commissioner Peter Lawson Jones - a longtime friend of the arts, but also the dissenting vote on the sales tax - wasn't there to have his say. And representatives of the petition drive, which include Cleveland councilmen Zack Reed and Brian Cummins, and Lakewood Councilman Ryan Demro, were not invited.

And ultimately, whether the meeting had any impact or not, the petition drive came up short.

The arts community's entry into county politics came like the fulfillment of a prophecy. During the question-and-answer session at a post-cigarette tax victory meeting early this year, one arts groupie - feeling the oats of Democratic muscle just like the unions must have when they had their first ballot-box successes - asked a prescient question: Will the organizational structure built through the CPAC process hold together so that artists can continue to speak relevantly with one voice, perhaps in public discussions, perhaps at the ballot box?

Naturally the answer was yes, which implies an inebriating promise: Artists can change the world - or at least Cuyahoga County - and not only through their work, but by the strength of their voting and petition-signing numbers. But it also implies something else: Just like the unions, the arts community can be used to push other agendas. CPAC isn't actually pushing, but for better or for worse is opening the door.

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