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Arts, culture advocacy group sees potential in region's blight

President hoping to 'retain creative work force'

By **SHANNON MORTLAND**

4:30 am, May 5, 2008

What many see as detriments to Cleveland, Thomas Schorgl sees as opportunities.

Some might view Cleveland as a city laden with foreclosures and shuttered businesses, but Mr. Schorgl sees a city that could offer residential and work spaces at much lower prices than other culturally rich cities.

Artists, meet Cleveland.

As president and CEO of the Community Partnership for Arts and Culture, Mr. Schorgl is leading the push to make that introduction through efforts such as "From Rust Belt to Artist Belt." It's the name of a new initiative by the arts and culture group to teach people such as developers, Realtors, lenders and community leaders why artists are a valuable asset to the community and how to lure them to town.

"We want to retain the creative work force we have and (increase) the migration of a creative work force to Cleveland," Mr. Schorgl said.

From Rust Belt to Artist Belt is a one-day symposium set for May 14 at Cleveland State University. As of last Thursday, May 1, about 100 people from Northeast Ohio and nearby states had signed up to attend, Mr. Schorgl said. A second symposium is planned for next year, he said.

The symposium is part of his group's two-year Creative Compass program, which it's launching this month with \$60,000 from Leveraging Investments in Creativity, a nonprofit group in New York that has initiated a 10-year effort with 14 cities nationwide to improve artists' working environments.

The Creative Compass program aims to give Cleveland-area artists better access to residential and work spaces and to include them in revitalization efforts across the region, Mr. Schorgl said. Creative Compass also will help artists become more stable entrepreneurs and navigate government programs designed to assist them in their work and lives, he said.

In the fall of 2008 and 2009, Mr. Schorgl's group plans to host a housing and space exposition for artists to promote "affordable space in a city that has a tremendously diverse artist ecosystem," he said.

In a study commissioned last year, the group polled professional artists nationwide and found that, of the 316 artists from outside Ohio who responded, 21% said they'd be willing to move to Cleveland if ideal space was available. Another 11% said they'd be very willing to move to Northeast Ohio if they had access to low-cost space.

However, housing is only part of a larger artist support system that Mr. Schorgl's group is trying to establish under Creative Compass. He said the group is developing a web site that would be a "one-stop shopping center for artists" looking for information on things ranging from residential and work spaces to health insurance.

The site, which Mr. Schorgl said will be up and running by the end of 2009, will enable artists to search for artist-friendly housing and would list artist shows, jobs and commissioned projects available in Northeast Ohio. The site also will provide information about the COSE Arts Network, a partnership with the Council of Smaller Enterprises that gives artists access to health insurance and other small business resources.

Vote of confidence

The efforts by the Community Partnership for Arts and Culture so far have impressed Leveraging Investments in Creativity.

"CPAC has made terrific progress in its efforts to make Northeast Ohio a supportive and vibrant community for artists and to make visible the enormous benefits that artists create in places where they live and work," said Judilee Reed, executive director of Leveraging Investments in Creativity.

The Community Partnership for Arts and Culture began building a support network for artists five years ago with the creation of its

Artist as an Entrepreneur Institute, which teaches artists basic business principles such as marketing, accounting, fund raising and protecting their work legally.

About 400 artists already have gone through the program in Northeast Ohio, and the group has signed licensing agreements to offer the program in Charlotte, N.C., and Broward County, Fla., Mr. Schorgl said.

The group hopes its various efforts ultimately will make Cleveland and Northeast Ohio more attractive to artists.

"Artists are willing to put sweat equity into their neighborhood, and we think there's a lot of opportunity in Cleveland for that," Mr. Schorgl said.

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