



THE PLAIN DEALER

ARTS AND THE ECONOMY

Conference to explore how to capitalize on arts districts

Sunday, March 02, 2008

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Even the most exuberant Cleveland booster would have to agree that this city is no Paducah, Ky.

Over the last eight years, the modest little town some 500 miles away has attracted 70 new residents -- artists who have responded to incentives to buy and improve homes and convert buildings into galleries and work spaces. Paducah has become an unlikely tourist mecca.

How to translate such activity to Cleveland and similar cities will lie at the heart of "From Rust Belt to Artist Belt," a daylong conference here for developers, real estate professionals, lenders and community development corporations.

The conference will be presented from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday, May 14, by the Community Partnership for Arts and Culture, a nonprofit agency that provides research and educational programs to strengthen the local arts community. The conference will be at the Levin College of Urban Affairs.

Topics will include the marketing and branding of artist districts, finances and legal matters, and how to engage artists in the development of the districts. Although the conference is being advertised to those on the "supply side" of housing and development, it is open to anyone, said CPAC President Thomas B. Schorgl. Organizers hope to draw about 100 people from Northeast Ohio and another 100 from other states.

"From Rust Belt to Artist Belt" grew out of the organization's Creative Compass project, which aims to link artists to affordable real estate, both as a way to increase home ownership among artists and to take advantage of the arts as an economic development tool.

Despite being more than two hours from bigger cities like Nashville, Tenn., and St. Louis, Mo., Paducah's award-winning Artist Relocation Program has lured artists to transform its once-blighted Lowertown neighborhood.

The area thrives with galleries and retail shops and has become an international model for such development. Artists have moved there from other states because of attractive housing deals and the opportunity to live near other artists.

Similar activity is percolating in some Cleveland neighborhoods. Tremont, the Gordon Square Arts District in the Detroit-Shoreway neighborhood and the Waterloo Road district in North Collinwood all have benefited from artists who have been buying and improving older, sometimes dilapidated buildings, forming creative enclaves along the way.

But there's still much to teach about establishing a critical creative mass, said Seth Beattie, program manager at CPAC.

Certain neighborhoods and types of real estate work better for artist districts, and different types of artists have different housing and work needs.

Schorgl notes that Cleveland has about 32 community development corporations, each with its own characteristics. The districts work best, he says, when they capitalize on what they have and develop their own identity. A neighborhood with a vacant theater as a hub might draw more dancers or performing artists, for instance.

"We're not talking about creating 32 Tremonts," he said.

Beattie said the organization hopes to attract people from as far as Missouri, Wisconsin and Illinois, as well as

Kentucky, Pennsylvania and New York.

Visitors also will be encouraged to attend the Pop Up Arts District, a program that will bring artists to vacant storefronts along two blocks of the Gordon Square Arts District for exhibitions and performances running from 6 to 10 p.m. the night of the summit. The purpose is to demonstrate the vitality artists bring to a neighborhood.

CPAC also plans a two-day Creative Compass summit later this year that will include a housing fair and information on topics such as credit and mortgage options.

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