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## Striving to build a 'sustainable' arts sector

### Dire numbers from the Rhode Island State Council On the Arts

By **MARION DAVIS** | March 18, 2009

The numbers from the Rhode Island State Council On the Arts (RISCA) were pretty dire: 78 percent of nonprofit arts organizations reporting a downturn in contributions; 32 percent seeing donors back out of their pledges; half facing a drop in ticket sales; and audiences statewide buying cheaper tickets and shopping for deals.

The arts community, RISCA executive director Randall Rosenbaum says, "is hurting," and a survey last month showed "things are getting worse." Nonprofits, businesses, and individuals are struggling. Jobs are being cut, frozen, or scaled down. Programs are being dropped.

And while some sectors, such as broadband technology and "green" energy, expect a big boost from the federal stimulus package, the arts got just \$50 million — 1/100th as much as weatherization programs. Of that, 40 percent is going directly to the states; Rhode Island's share is \$291,000.

Not surprisingly, local arts leaders are anxious. But they're also joining forces as never before to share resources and ideas, strategize, and become more aggressive about securing their economic future.

RISCA is helping where it can and, in the last two weeks, scores of artists, nonprofit leaders, and supporters have participated in discussions for "Creative Providence," an effort to craft a new city arts and culture plan.

This week, Rhode Island Citizens for the Arts, a small advocacy group that until this month had operated without a single paid employee, is unveiling its own five-year strategy to build a "sustainable" arts sector.

The plan is being unveiled on Friday, March 20 at a 10 am event at the Steel Yard in Providence that will include a talk with US Sen. Sheldon A. Whitehouse about the stimulus bill and its potential local impact. But more than practical issues, expect a focus on artists' value to Rhode Island.

For all the talk about the state's creative economy, says Lisa Carnevale, the nonprofit's new executive director, state funding for the arts is minimal — just \$1 million, or 0.074 percent of the budget. (That's actually high, by the way, compared with other states, Carnevale notes.)

Yet numerous studies have shown the creative sector's economic impact — most notably a 2007 study by Americans for the Arts that showed Providence's nonprofits arts and cultural organizations generate \$111.8 million in local economic activity, supporting 2759 full-time-equivalent jobs.

"The arts are a resource just like the ocean in Rhode Island," says Carnevale. And given the arts' importance to the economy, the strategy says, "the current amount of funding for the arts is simply not good enough."

In terms of RISCA, the group doesn't aim very high: just to boost the budget to \$1.5 million by 2014. But it also suggests other options,

such as a "scientific and cultural facilities" district in which a share of the sales tax goes to the arts; revolving loans for arts-based startups; or an arts-focused economic development fund.

Carnevale says she'd also like to see businesses invest more in the arts and look at them more as a resource, rather than as one of several possible causes they can support through their charitable funds.

In fact, much of the strategy focuses on changing how artists are perceived in Rhode Island. Art and design professionals, Carnevale notes, are "by nature trained to think and to solve problems, to be creative and investigative thinkers," and their skills should be put to use in economic development, on legislative commissions, in social services, in education, and beyond.

Rosenbaum, who was consulted in the development of the new strategy, says the arts are far more valued in Rhode Island today than a decade ago, but the community is going to have to make "compelling arguments" and really prove itself amid the economic crisis, locally and nationally.

And somehow, it has to keep its identity. In good times, he notes, it's easier to take risks; right now, many groups are cutting back on their seasons and pondering how edgy they can be and still attract audiences.

"What will that do for those organizations? Will they give up on the provocative, thought-provoking work that is the fundamental essence of the arts?" he says. "That is, frankly, the thing I'm most concerned about."

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