



Arts

Arts groups feel new strength from unity

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Many arts and cultural organizations are breathing a sigh of relief after the electoral ousting of County Executive Chris Collins, who during his tenure reduced and eliminated their funding.

Now they're looking to move forward, more unified after organizing against Collins' cuts, and with a stronger support system with the creation of the Arts Services Initiative. It's intended to serve as a central hub for the various organizations that all too often have had to operate in reactive mode.

"I think the county executive understands the deeper context of what arts and culture mean to a people, and it's such an uplifting and positive thing for us to know we have an ally," said Robert Brun Schmid, president of the Theatre Alliance of Buffalo.

"We're in a good position in 2012, starting with a new leader in county hall and with a new organization that's going to continue the momentum. It's looking like there is a bright road ahead of us."

After winning the election in which reduced support for cultural groups was a campaign issue, Mark Poloncarz, Collins' successor, called on the Legislature to restore \$931,841 in the 2012 budget to groups that lost out on funding. That quickly demonstrated his commitment to fund a broad array of cultural groups.

“We’re certainly not putting the entire economic focus on cultural tourism, but it has become a large component of what Buffalo and Erie County will be known for in the future,” Polancarz said.

As a sign of the sea change, actress Lisa Ludwig, who is also managing director of Shakespeare in Delaware Park, and Cindy Abbott Letro, chairwoman of Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, served on Polancarz’s main transition team. They and a handful of others from the arts community were also named to a subcommittee.

“The fact there are representatives of the cultural community on his transition team is, I think a huge shift in how Erie County is viewing the culturals and our place in the community and in economic development,” said Tod Kniazuk, the executive director of the Arts Services Initiative, who was also tapped to be on the subcommittee.

“Polancarz is bringing us to the table to take part in these discussions, both on issues to the culturals and the county as a whole. That’s a quantum leap forward.”

The Arts Services Initiative was created last year to serve other arts organizations by helping them meet their missions better, promote collaboration and educate the public on the value of the arts.

It was developed with the support of the New York Council on the Arts, and provided with seed funding of \$360,000 by the Fund for the Arts through July 1, 2014.

The new group brings together the work of the Greater Buffalo Cultural Alliance, Advancing Arts and Culture and Young Audiences of WNY’s Arts Partners for Learning under a single umbrella. It also promises to partially fulfill the roles once performed by the now-defunct Arts Council in Buffalo and Erie County and the Arts Council in Niagara County.

The group also plans to reach out to Niagara County. “On the Niagara County side, we want to use 2012 to reintroduce county and cultural leaders to each other, and build a dialogue,” Kniazuk said.

Give for Greatness, the cultural fundraising campaign initiated last year by Artvoice Publisher Jamie Moses, raised \$84,000 that went into the coffers of 47 arts groups in 2011. This year, actress Megan Callahan, the group’s executive director, will lead another fundraising drive from Feb. 21 to May 5. It, too, will include outreach to Niagara County, and support from arts groups there.

The Arts Services Initiative plans to send out emails later this month to more than 300 not-for-profits in Erie and Niagara counties, asking the organizations what their needs are.

Already Kniazuk said he has been hearing about the need for health insurance, which the Arts Council in Buffalo and Erie County provided before being disbanded.

Yet to be determined is the cultural review committee that will become the successor to the Erie County Cultural Resources Advisory Board Collins abolished. Polancarz said he wants to meet first with former board members before making any decisions.

With the start of a new year, Kniazuk said he's glad issues for cultural groups can now move beyond simple dollars and cents.

"It's not about getting every dime we possibly can. It's about being at the table and being part of the conversations, and having a merit-based, fair and equitable process for determining cultural funding. And we're already having those conversations," Kniazuk said.

Another goal of the Arts Services Initiative is offering the skills of cultural leaders to the broader community.

"We have a lot of smart, talented, skilled folks. We're a resource that can be used by other leaders in the community, and we want to be sure that is offered up and help is provided both ways," Kniazuk said.

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