

# Arts and culture funding is more than a blip on Poloncarz's radar

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On Thursday afternoon, about 30 minutes into my meeting with Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz, the first-term politician rose from his swivel chair and walked into a room near his office on the 16th floor of the Rath County Office Building.

The sound of rummaging could be briefly heard. I exchanged quizzical looks with the executive's press secretary, Peter Anderson, who wasn't quite sure what his boss was up to.

Poloncarz returned carrying three hefty accordion folders weighed down with documents, which he promptly dropped onto his hulking wooden desk. From one of the folders he drew three reams of paper containing the 2013 Erie County budget. From one of those reams he chose a single page, which he then picked up, allowing the rest of the hefty budget booklet to dangle in the air.

"That's arts and culture. That's it," Poloncarz said, referring to page he held precariously between his thumb and forefinger. "It literally is one page out of the 600 pages of the budget. And it's not to say it's sad, because it isn't, but it's just sort of the way it is. I wish we could do more. But I am limited in my means."

Poloncarz's improvised one-act play, a rare exhibition of theatricality for our normally mild-mannered and bookish chief budget officer, was prompted by a question about his predecessor's use of a similar argument. The difference was that former Erie County Executive Chris Collins, now representing New York's 27th district in Congress, cried poor in order to rip the page out. Poloncarz, in a welcome about-face from the past inhabitants of his office, actually wants to add to it. If only slightly.

He characterized Collins' slash-and-burn approach to culture as unfair, bad for the economy and for the region's quality of life. "We should fund these organizations," he said. "The question is, how much can we do on an annual basis?"

The answer, according to the Poloncarz administration's recently released economic development plan, is an annual increase of about \$60,000 to \$120,000. In the grand scheme of things, that's pocket change and doesn't even keep up with inflation. But given the all-too-recent anti-culture nightmare that was the Collins administration and today's tepid economic environment, it has to pass for progress.

The fact that Poloncarz's economic development plan, which was released in June with the sexy title of "Initiatives for a Smart Economy," includes any mention of arts funding at all is a positive step. He is listening to the growing chorus of culture and business advocates who see arts organizations as actual economic drivers rather than pesky constituents. Though only a little bigger than a blip, those groups are on his radar in a way they haven't been for any local politician in memory.

Arts and culture plays into the region's economic calculus, he said, "but in the grand scheme of somebody's mind, it may not be the most important thing they're thinking about at that one moment. ... But I understand it does have a tremendous impact in the long run, not only on the quality of life, but also on the growing of our economy."

Poloncarz deserves credit for reinstating the cultural funding board (imperfect though it remains) that Collins eliminated and for working with newly formed arts advocacy organizations like the Arts Services Initiative. Responding to the needs of a ballooning cultural community, keeping the parks in good shape and funding new business ventures all in the relatively tight space of about \$150 million is undoubtedly a tough job.

I give the county executive's performance so far a solid two and a half stars, with extra points for theatrical flare. Here's hoping his next act is even better.

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