POLICY BRIEF

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Pittsburgh's Arts Attendees Not Getting Any Younger

Are there enough young people in Allegheny County going to performing arts and cultural events? If there are not, is that a problem? These questions were raised in a recent newspaper article. On the face of it, the signs are not encouraging.

Americans for the Arts studied the attendance at art and cultural events in 2005 and published their findings in *"Arts and Economic Prosperity III: The Economic Impact of Non-Profit Arts and Culture Organizations and their Audiences"*. They sampled 16 areas with populations of one million or more and found that 46.8 percent of Allegheny County residents who were audience members at a non-profit art or cultural event were aged 55 or older. The rate was higher than the sample average (40.9%) and was fifth highest in the sample. Allegheny County's share of 55 or older attendees was not as high as Palm Beach County, FL (61.7%) or Fairfax County, VA (56.7%), but it was higher than Chicago (39.8%) and Philadelphia (23.4%).

It should not come as much of a surprise that art and cultural patrons tend to be older than the population as a whole. Anecdotally, they tend to have higher disposable income and more free time. Statistically, the percentage of people in the national 18 to 34 age group have been in declining attendance at events like jazz or classical concerts, operas, musicals, or ballets. A 2002 longitudinal study by the *National Endowment of the Arts* found that in 1982, for instance, 12 percent of those surveyed in that age range attended a classical concert, whereas in 2002 the percentage fell to 8.5 percent.

The decline in population in Allegheny County from 1,336,449 in 1990 to 1,281,666 in 2000 has not helped, especially since many of the losses have come in the age groups the performance venues and groups wish to attract. In 1990, there were 313,000 Allegheny County residents in the 20 to 34 age cohort. Ten years later, there were 237,000 in that cohort, a stunning 25 percent decline. That rate of decline surpassed the same decade change for those aged 55 to 74, which fell 17 percent. So, when we combine the declining interest in cultural events in the younger age groups and the sharp drop in the number of young people in the County, it should come as no surprise that older folks account for a large share of attendance at cultural events.

While there are young people here, the problem, at least from the perspective of some of those in arts organizations, is connecting with them. "We can't just keep maintaining the same loyal fans, as extraordinary and important as they are…We need to keep reaching out to build a younger core, and get them in the door at a younger age, and then they will be our core in later years" were the words of one official.

A member of academia pointed out that the arts are in competition with other opportunities and thus are "just another leisure choice...To get somebody to say, 'Yeah I'll go to the exhibit rather than go to [a restaurant], you have to help them understand why that's a better choice."

Some of it may be non-interest in the arts and some of it is just competition for limited free time. On the other hand, there's a very big reason attendance in the County should be running against the national trends. Namely, there is significant public assistance to performing arts and cultural organizations through proceeds from the one percent Regional Asset District tax. This creates opportunities for exposure to arts and culture through free attendance days and by shoring up the assets through direct grants that make them more competitive and attractive.

From 1995 through 2007, cultural and arts organizations—dance, music, and theater— received $90 million in funds, about 10 percent of the total money available to all regional assets (libraries, parks, stadiums, museums, zoo, etc.), to make them more attractive, especially to the young demographic we are told the region is trying to bring and keep here. The District points out on its website that "on a per capita basis, the District is one of the most important local funders of arts and culture in the country". Even the legislative intent of the RAD statute mentions that part of the purpose of enacting an additional sales tax for regional assets was "vital to the economic growth and development of southwestern Pennsylvania, to the ability of the region to compete globally for visitors, residents, and investment in jobs…"

Despite already having world-class assets and amenities and then adding on dedicated funding to support them, is the region doing any better on economic growth or development or in attracting and keeping residents? The record says no. Total population has declined, job growth is anemic, and now some of the groups are wondering if there will be a next generation to support them beyond their tax receipts.

It is time to raise the question, "What was the opportunity cost of an additional tax which has produced $910 million in proceeds for regional assets since collection began in 1994?" Maybe it was infrastructure improvements that could have produced the type of private sector growth that would have improved the assets through patronage and donations. Even the tax reform made possible by the other half of the sales tax revenue (elimination of County and City personal property taxes, reduction of the City's amusement tax etc.) has lost its stimulative thrust with the passage of time and the recent creation of new tax levies. Certainly, the new County drink tax will not help cultural arts groups whose attendance depends in part on folks combining a night out including dinner with cocktails or wine.

Perhaps it would be better for the cultural organizations to focus on the coming crop of younger baby boomers—people 45 to 55—that will take up a rising share of Allegheny County's population and will bring discretionary income with them. After all, many of these folks will be the empty nesters who will fill up the condos coming on line in Downtown, close to many of the cultural and performing arts venues in the region.

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