

County Arts Councils are the Way to Go

Bob Butera 16 May 2012

Despair. Panic. Frustration. Such was the mental state within the cultural community a few years ago when a state tax on cultural tickets and other admissions appeared about to become a reality. The community was caught by surprise.

The cultural community spoke in unison: "How can they do this to us!" "We work so hard and they want to take it away!" "Contributions are down, and they want to tax us!" "It makes you want to quit!"

Why did this happen? The community doesn't know, and doesn't have sufficient relationships with the "THEY" that they complained of. And—worse—the politicians responsible had little or no contact before the proposed tax with those to be affected; they took them for granted.

So chaos set in. The Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance and others filled the void, killed the tax, and everybody gave a sigh of relief. But nothing changed. It may happen again.

One could characterize the current model of arts

advocacy for this region as "too little, too late." Too little because it does not involve the large, diverse and potentially powerful arts constituency: audience members, major donors, educators, board members, practicing artists. "Too late" because the groups only seem to work together when there is a crisis, and a crisis is usually too late to negotiate solutions to most problems.

The model does not work; it must be changed to avoid the wasted energy, the unnecessary stress and anxiety that episodes like this create.

I suggest the new model: a region-wide Arts Council. I suggest that each of the five southeastern Pennsylvania county governments appoint Arts Councils with representation of the various constituents within the cultural community, the business and other constituencies and the public at large. Further, these Arts Councils must be appointed from the "bottom up" with plenty of input from all concerned.

The five resulting Councils would meet regularly individually and as a group. The result would be a force for good that no politician would dare to violate. The Councils would convene regular "Summits" wherein people could be heard, common problems and successes would be aired and shared and a feeling of trust in each other would develop which doesn't now exist.

And, most importantly, the Councils would gather strength and become a part of our community fabric—the politicians would know them and wouldn't dare "spring" a surprise on them. And our beloved cultural institutions could use their energies in continuing to serve all of us.

Community arts associations and arboretums may not be so obvious. The conventions should also determine the criteria for including public-at-large members who may not specifically represent arts and cultural groups.

I emphasize the need for citizen support from the outset, without which the effort is doomed to failure. While a "top-down" approach is much easier, whereby the elite among the cultural community and the political authorities simply appoint the Councils, this method falls short of generating the desired public support.

The five Arts Councils should meet together regularly. Their sessions should have appropriate public electronic coverage. They should discuss how the counties' arts and culture opportunities interrelate, as well as more specific topics such as the common issues that all five should be advocating for to enable them to become better "champions" of the arts and culture of the region.

What an unparalleled citizen force the combined Arts Councils will become! The range of their advocacy is endless. Among other things, it could include lobbying for public and private financial support for the arts and

defining and assisting marketing programs throughout the region. Their most important role would be to generate public awareness of arts and cultural opportunities that are available for all of our citizens. Their combined public-spirited efforts will grow to become the reliable source of information for those who appreciate the *soul* of the community.

And our soul needs nurturing. Truly representative, publicly supported Arts Councils will help make us the "complete" community we all strive to be.

A lawyer, Bob Butera enjoyed a political career as a young man, having served eight terms in the Pennsylvania Legislature, 1963-1977. Thereafter he was the President of both the Philadelphia Flyers and the New Jersey Devils National Hockey League franchises, executive partner in the law firm of Saul Ewing, and the president of the Pennsylvania Convention Center Authority. Bob has served on over 20 nonprofit boards and commissions including the Philadelphia Orchestra, Philadelphia Zoo, Philadelphia Cultural Fund, The National Constitution Center and the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance.