



City budget proposes studies of Madison music's economics, equity problems

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The \$45k funding item would support the first empirical studies of the local music community's economic impact.

Photo: Calexico and Iron & Wine playing at the Sylvee in February 2020.

Among the arts funding items in Madison Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway's proposed 2021 city budget is a \$45,000 allocation to support two studies of Madison's music infrastructure. One study, conducted by the non-profit hip-hop advocacy group Urban Community Arts Network, would delve into the barriers to racial equity in Madison's music community. Another, by international consulting firm Sound Diplomacy, would examine the economic impact of music in Madison. Dane County also plans to provide funds and staff support for the project, giving it a county-wide scope.

You can read more about the proposed arts funding in Madison's 2021 city budget [in a companion story published alongside this one](#). The Madison Common Council will take up the proposed budget in a series of meetings on [November 10](#), [11](#), and [12](#).

These two studies would apparently be the first of their kind—in that they would look at the impact of music in Madison, as distinct from the arts in general, or from the alcohol business with which live music is so deeply intertwined. The funding line, from the city's [Room Tax Fund](#), is shorthanded as "Music Tourism Study." The overall aim is to study music from a tourism angle but also from a racial-equity angle. How those two elements fit together is tricky. But the fact is that for all the lip service Madison likes to give to local music, there isn't a whole lot of empirical data that helps local policymakers understand how to support it, or to help the public assess what policymakers are doing.

"I think the economic impact analysis is going to be a huge deal," says UCAN president Karen Reece. "We've never done that for our nightlife in Madison. We have no idea how many people are attending shows, what kind of revenue does it bring in? We have no objective data on that. Getting that information and understanding the landscape, I think, is a critical piece to provide incentive."

This effort also acknowledges that it's not easy to sum up the local music community. "Most people don't really understand the intricacies of this world if they're not directly involved," Reece says.

Previous studies of the economic impact of the arts in Madison, Reece says, "don't really get into the layers of our music scene. What does that mean for small venues, or bars, or a bowling alley, or a small restaurant with a stage? What does that mean when our music scene is going really well? Obviously, everybody knows it's a huge draw, but I don't think people really understand how that piece fits into whether or not someone's coming to a restaurant or coming to a small bar. They think, 'Oh, this place has great entertainment,' but they don't necessarily make the connection with the success of that business."

Reece also headed up the city's Task Force on Equity and Music and Entertainment, a long-in-the-works effort to understand why local businesses, police, and elected officials seem determined to shut out local hip-hop artists from opportunities to perform. The Task Force [issued 31 recommendations in 2018](#) that spanned not just music but also policing, housing, transit, and other areas of local policy that intersect with the arts.

A lot of the work of these two studies—which Reece estimates will cost \$300,000 overall, and will need support from other public and private sources—is slated to take place in early 2021, and include community outreach efforts that UCAN plans to lead.

"What this plan is going to look at is, what policies are preventing movement," says Karin Wolf, the City of Madison's Arts Program Administrator. "It's really going to have two things we've never had in Madison: A policy analysis of what, structurally, is preventing equity in our music infrastructure, and two, we've never looked at the economic impact in Madison of music... If you go to a Broadway play at Overture, is the economic impact the same as if you go to a concert at the Sylvee?"

The answer right now is that Wolf doesn't know, and that's a huge missing piece. In recent years, the city has given Wolf enough resources to help fund some local music initiatives, including the Make Music Madison summer solstice celebration and Between The Waves, a combination local-music festival and music-business conference. But it hasn't coughed up the resources to actually study the needs in the local music community, nor to meaningfully assess the impact of city-funded programs. People and organizations who get city arts funding do have to report back to the city on their events' turnout, spending, and reception, but even these reports are pretty cursory and don't really offer a big-picture view of whether the city's programs are actually making Madison a better place for musicians to live and work.

Dane Arts has been involved in planning the project since the beginning, as was Overture Center CEO Sandra Gajic, [who died in December](#).

“Dane Arts hopes we can raise the funds to secure an administrator to help with the study—someone here who can build the community component needed to achieve an analysis that is inclusive and equitable across the greater Madison area,” says Dane Arts director Mark Fraire. “We think that will initially cost \$15,000 for some part-time management. Dane Arts is working on that now. And as we move forward, I don't know how much Dane Arts can continue with support, but Dane Arts will do what it can to help the music industry, both administratively and financially.”

Just about every musician and music fan in Madison can attest that we don't really have an infrastructure worthy of the talent and creativity in our local music community. Angela Puerta, a City of Madison planner who is now charged with using 20 percent of her work time to advance local music initiatives, understands this, because she's a musician herself. “If I wasn't a planner, I wouldn't be able to stay here,” Puerta says. “I would have to leave, because there is no place for me to perform and make a good living. I have to juggle two careers at the same time, and I know many musicians that do that.”

And as a planner, Puerta understands the value of hard data, even in a city that likes to both hire consultants to do studies and complain about hiring so many consultants and doing so many studies. “If we already know this anecdotally, why do we have to have the hard numbers? My response is, you need to convince policymakers,” Puerta says. “You need to go in with a clear idea of why the money needs to be invested in X, Y, or Z way. If we have clear numbers, we cannot only convince policymakers, but we can start recruiting more organizations, forming partnerships with people in the music industry, to really understand why the economy, why the impact that music is having on our economy, can benefit not only them—I'm sure not only restaurants benefit from concerts, but other sectors. And we don't know that yet. We want to first get a better understanding of how everything works so we can share the language, share the message.”

The long-term efforts following the studies would include forming an advisory committee on music in Madison, which would ideally include venue owners as well as musicians and fans of all stripes. Puerta admits that representing the sheer variety of local music will be a challenge, but that at the same time, local audiences and venues need to learn to support musicians from an even greater diversity of genres and backgrounds. Puerta would eventually like to see the city hire a full-time music liaison.

Much of the conversation about city-level music initiatives has centered around “professional development”—helping musicians learn skills, from basic finances to booking and promotion to sound engineering. That's a big part of the impetus behind *Between The Waves*. Puerta also hopes that by bringing different stakeholders in the music community to the table, the city will help local artists to get more opportunities to open for noteworthy touring artists. (As we've detailed in earlier coverage, [there are some limits to that idea](#), though talking about it and trying to change it couldn't hurt.)

It helps that Reece isn't just any consultant—as a PhD in Physiology, she understands how empirical research works, and she's also spent years booking hip-hop shows and doing the grueling work of music advocacy in a community that's often been very hostile to hip-hop artists. Hip-hop artists in Madison also range from young unknown artists who can't get booked to platinum producer DJ Pain

1. There are plenty of unappreciated pockets in local music, but none as unjustly undermined as hip-hop. Plenty of local musicians and fans know what it's like to be ignored by policymakers, philanthropists, and other bigwigs, but hip-hop artists probably know that feeling best.

There are musicians who bristle at programs like Between The Waves—either because it [doesn't quite resonate](#) with their aesthetic, or because plenty of musicians are already more resourceful and entrepreneurial than they get credit for. BTW's organizers [have made some good efforts to address the initial skepticism](#). The city's support for Make Music Madison has also [upset some local musicians](#), because performers at that event don't get paid. As artists and performance venues of all stripes call out for direct financial relief during the pandemic, they might reasonably wonder why the city can't, well, just give them money, and quickly at that. The answer is that because of the way city funding works, there are a lot more strings attached and a lot of barriers and limitations baked in, rules that tie money to the grant-application process, or budgeting methods that require arts advocates to convince the Room Tax Commission that their efforts have something to do with tourism.

"I don't think it would be funding that would directly get to artists for relief anyway," Wolf says. "I wouldn't take money that I thought could directly get into the hands of artists and use it for a study at this point, with what's going on."

The worlds of media and arts these days are niche worlds, which means success looks very different for different people. Sure, some people want to make it big; others would like to be able to scratch out a decent living playing small local and regional shows, and others still just want the chance to express themselves without necessarily pursuing a music "career" at all. Not everyone wants a manager, a licensing deal, or even a full-time living from their music. Just looking at venues in Madison, there are so many different economic realities at work, from Live Nation-consolidated powerhouses like The Sylvee to the essential no-cover local shows at Mickey's Tavern.

However, Puerta points out that the idea of professional development in music also has an important equity component. "Let's think about it in a more holistic way...the main thing that comes to my mind is white folks making money off music, but what about Latinx musicians or hip-hop performers?" Puerta asks. "Do they have the same advantages, do they have the same access to our economy? Do they have the same open doors that white folks and white music have? I don't know."

On that same front, though, Puerta, Reece, Wolf all understand that the city's approach to these studies cannot simply be top-down and prescriptive. "When you do neighborhood plans, which is something that I'm more familiar with, and you really want to reach out to vulnerable populations, you don't expect them to come to you," Puerta says. "You have to go to them, for multiple reasons, right? Because they don't trust the city. We have to build that trust. We have to let them know that the things that we are doing are for the benefit of their community and we really want to listen. The way we let them know that we are listening is by putting into action the things they told us to do."

Reece says that in carrying out the study, UCAN plans to pay local musicians and organizers to make sure people in different areas of Madison's ever-fragmented music community feel like they have a stake in these efforts. Plenty of local musicians feel like city-funded grants and programs just aren't for them, but that can change if the people leading city efforts do some serious listening and outreach. As the work on the study gets going in earnest this January, UCAN and Sound Diplomacy plan to hold events where people from across the music community can share their perspectives and hopefully inform the process in a meaningful way.

"Probably the most important part of this project is the community engagement piece," Reece says. "The only way we overcome that [skepticism] is by grassroots organizing... being able to set up town-hall meetings or set up meetings with different groups of musicians or individuals who are interested, and just being really open to having that conversation. And to not only share what our plans are, and the context, but to get that feedback and that input. What do people want to see? What would it take to make someone feel like an event or an initiative is for them? In Madison, my experience has been that people just want to be included in the conversation. Once they're included in the conversation, that opens up a lot. It doesn't necessarily mean they're completely bought-in and that point, but it means that, 'OK, I'm in the know here, I've been part of the process,' so that might make it more likely that they'll participate."

Plus, while professional-development training put some onus on the individual to achieve success, these studies also take a broader systemic perspective of the music industry and the local economy.

"That's the root of racism right there, is having systems and structures that exclude people because of the way they've been historically designed," Reece says. "We're gonna need to think about that in a similar way to benefit the whole music scene."

Tone: https://www.tonemadison.com/articles/city-budget-proposes-studies-of-madison-musics-economics-equity-problems?fbclid=IwAR2LpRjBhGJJpOvLOohmFMFCzIphiU2UzZRpFwoW0xqm_sVt4CATJme7bao