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Soglin's proposed 2019 budget would create new art installation program, stay the course on music funds

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The mayor also seeks to bump up the Overture Center's subsidy to \$2 million. (Photo by Jordan Richmond on Flickr.)

Madison Mayor Paul Soglin last week unveiled his proposed 2019 city budget—the last one he'll oversee before he leaves office—which means it's time for yet another look at where city leaders are planning to spend public funds on arts- and music-related programs.

As usual, arts funding makes up a very tiny portion of Soglin's \$332 million proposal, and it's rare to hear the mayor and Common Council argue much about these funding items during the annual city budget process, with the occasional exception of disagreements over subsidies for the Overture Center for the Arts. But even a few thousand dollars of city funding can go a long way for an event or program, helping organizers raise more funds from private sources and, ideally, saying something about what Madisonians value.

Much of the city's funding for arts programs comes from taxes on hotel rooms. As we reported in 2017, city officials have been debating just where the boundaries are for spending that money. State law requires local governments to spend most of their room tax money on "tourism promotion and tourism development," and there's a legitimate argument to be had over whether funding an art

installation or a music program actually counts as tourism development. For City of Madison Arts Administration Karin Wolf, the answer is yes, because a richer investment in arts and music can make Madison a more attractive place to visit. Other officials, like the members of Madison's Room Tax Commission, want to see more of a direct correlation between city-funded culture programs and, as Wolf summed it up last year, "butts in beds."

In the proposed Room Tax Fund budget for 2019, which supports a lot of the city's arts and music programs, there's a new \$20,000 funding item for temporary art installations in downtown Madison. It's a bit like the Madison Arts Commission's BLINK project, which gives artists small grants to create temporary installations all over the city. But whereas BLINK (which will receive funding this year from the city's arts grants fund and its Planning Division) is spread out around town, this new initiative will be concentrated downtown, with the idea of making a splash by having a bunch of installations in a small area.

Part of the inspiration for the downtown installation project, Wolf says, came from the Bucky on Parade program that ran from May to September. Most of the 85 Bucky Badger sculptures created for that program were placed downtown or on the UW-Madison campus, and that geographic concentration was a big part of why the Buckys prompted such strong reactions, both positive and negative.

"We thought, how can we capitalize on people's enthusiasm with these concentrated art projects but actually have it be artist-driven?" Wolf said. "The artists get the same amount, ironically that they get for the Buckys—\$1,500 if they ask for that much—but they get to determine the scope of the project." Wolf also points to the installation-centered Makeshift Festival, which took place in 2017 in Olbrich Park and in 2018 in Tenney Park, as another possible example to follow.

In large part, though, this city budget very much stays the course when it comes to arts and music, and even bumps up funding for some of the usual arts-funding suspects. Soglin's proposal would give the Overture Center \$2 million in subsidies, up from \$1.9 million in 2018. The Between The Waves music conference and festival stands to receive \$25,000 in 2019, just as it did in both 2017 and 2018 for its first two iterations. Make Music Madison, a Summer Solstice event that brings free live music to dozens of locations around the city over the course of one day, launched in 2013 and has received city funding since its inception, largely for administrative and promotional costs. This year, the mayor's budget proposes giving it \$30,000, up from \$25,000 last year. Wolf says she sees events like Between The Waves, which have a targeted focus, eventually weaning themselves off city funds, but argues that the city should keep supporting Make Music Madison because of its broader focus.

Back this year is a \$15,000 funding item for fairs and festivals, which first appeared in the city budget for 2018. People organizing events that they believe will draw in attendees from out of town can apply for these funds through the Arts Commission, and Wolf says that in its first year the initiative helped fund events including the annual Disability Pride Festival and the Central Park Sessions. This will be an interesting aspect of the budget to watch in the future, because it could potentially support a whole variety of things during Madison's ever-busy outdoor music season.

We'll be checking in on public arts funding a bit more this fall. If you've got any questions you'd like us to try and answer with this reporting, or any comments on how the city distributes arts funding, please email me or come say hi in the Tone Madison's Surly Notebook Facebook group.