



Survey: Madison arts should look beyond city limits for new audiences



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Madisonians have a wide range of artistic tastes, from jam bands at the Barrymore to experimental theater at the Bartell.

And while not every hall is packed for every show, a new in-progress survey of audiences suggests that most Madison-based performing arts groups should be getting a decent piece of the ticket sales pie.

The solution to bigger audiences may be going outside the city limits.

In 2012, [the city of Madison dedicated \\$125,000](#) to conduct a performing arts facility study. The goal, according to the resolution, was to discover "whether, and how, existing facilities meet current needs" and "provide a road map" for future improvements.

Working on the study, which is tentatively set to go before the public in mid-September, are arts consultants Carrie Blake and Duncan Webb of Webb Management Services and Alan Brown of WolfBrown.

The group sent out two surveys starting on June 19. So far, some 2,500 people have responded to [the survey of arts audiences](#) (open until July 8), answering questions about what kind of performances they attend (specifically theater, dance and classical music) and what prevents them from getting out more — costly tickets, lack of a babysitter, performance quality, inconvenient venue, etc. There are questions about artistic risks, and new works versus theatrical war horses.

Another survey went out to the organizations that rent and use the venues, like Overture's resident companies, participating theater groups at the Bartell Theatre and classical ensembles. That has yielded less than 30 responses so far, though [data collected for the city's cultural plan suggested](#) that many organizations are hurting for rehearsal space more than performance space. (A [county project called Make. Do.](#) is already trying to address this.)

"It does look like we're yielding a healthy demand," said Karin Wolf, Madison's arts program coordinator, noting that Madison audiences "go to a lot of things."

The consultants compare Madison to similar-sized markets in Eugene, Ore., Austin and Boise, Idaho. The best comparisons come from a city of similar size with that

combination of "town and gown," but there is no such thing as a perfect parallel. Wolf would also like the consultants to consider arts activity in Lincoln, Neb.

"We have a highly educated population, and the data shows that arts participation increases with education," Wolf said. Since Madison audiences are already going to the theater, the question becomes, "Where we can draw more audience regionally?"

What the study seems to indicate so far is that Madison may want to follow [American Players Theatre's](#) lead to draw a consistent, season-long regional audience. The city may want to encourage a festival, some signature event to draw tourists from outside of town.

"The consultant suggested we look at cultural tourism," Wolf said.

For example, Eugene draws a larger music audience because of the Oregon Bach Festival. Boise's theatergoing numbers are high because of three months of the [Idaho Shakespeare Festival](#), which has a strikingly similar style to APT. (APT was not originally listed on the survey for audience responders; Wolf subsequently asked the consultants to add it.)

Out of the study, Wolf wants to hear how free programming can remain a priority — free shows are never truly "free," she noted. If Madisonians want to keep such performances, they'll have to figure out how to sustain them.

She'll also look for feedback on another priority from the cultural plan: a permanent, outdoor festival space. Residents want one, but probably not in their backyard. It's a hard sell in neighborhoods because of parking and noise concerns.

"We want a picture of how our performing arts facilities are doing in Madison," Wolf said. "But facilities are dependent on resident organizations and audience. If you need a new roof, what's going to pay for that? One source is ticket sales. We have to look at how our arts groups are doing."

At the next meeting, which Wolf hopes to set in mid-September if she can get a quorum of the [Performing Arts Study Steering Committee](#) together, the consultants will present their findings and suggestions to the public.