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Madison attempts a cultural plan

Unclear how recommendations will be funded

by Jay Rath

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The old saying in arts administration circles is that attempting to organize artists is like trying to herd cats. The city of Madison is going to try, however, with its first-ever cultural plan.

The 18-month process will be vetted by the Madison Arts Commission, part of the Department of Planning and Community and Economic Development. According to the commission, the plan is expected to present recommendations for advancing participation, cultural facility development, and funding priorities based on information that emerges from a broad research effort with many options for the public to participate."

The plan's cost will be just under \$64,000, a significant amount, especially compared to the \$67,000 Madison annually allots for Arts Commission grants to artists and arts groups. The impetus for cultural planning came from Mayor Dave Cieslewicz, says Patty Elson, Arts Commission vice chair.

"The mayor put out his Healthy City Plan in 2005, and part of that plan asked for a cultural plan to be drafted," she says.

Mary Berryman-Agard and Associates, a Madison-based consulting firm, was recently chosen to lead the process. Her team includes Vandewalle and Associates, which helped create Madison's Healthy City Plan, and Robert Bush, a national leader in cultural planning.

The plan will look at more than just art. Science and history — in museums, for example — will be included in its definition of "culture." The Overture Center will play a role, but it will not wait for plan recommendations to effect changes at its own facility.

Madison has never had a cultural plan, but there have been earlier area arts surveys. This time, says Elson, "It's not just going to sit on a shelf and get dusty. We are going to put seed money in place to start implementing the plan immediately."

Where will the additional funding come from?

"We have several different ideas of where we might obtain the seed money," Elson says. "We may have to go to the private sector to raise that money. We may be able to go to different places. Our budget is terribly small, as you know. We'll see how things go. We have 18 months to put that all in place."

For those interested in receiving information on how to participate, e-mail the Madison Arts Commission, madisonarts@cityofmadison.com, with "Request for Information: Madison Cultural Plan Updates" in the subject line.