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## Art project

Madison officials hope a public art program can help "sell the city"

BY JAY RATH JUNE 1, 2017



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**The city is considering** an economic development tool with an unconventional goal: more art.

The measure, proposed by Mayor Paul Soglin, mandates that 1 percent of the city's capital projects that are \$5 million or more be set aside for public art projects.

"I'm optimistic that there will be support for adoption," says Madison Arts Commission coordinator Karin Wolf, who has long fought for such a program. "I'm not sure if it will be adjusted here and there throughout the process, but this has been planned for a long time."

Such programs, known as "Percent for the Arts," are not uncommon nationally. "It is a part of the economic landscape," says Anne Katz, executive director of Arts Wisconsin, a Madison-based advocacy non-profit. "It enhances ways that people can 'sell the city.'"

George Tzougros, executive director of the Wisconsin Arts Board, says funding arts is a

competitive endeavor. “Madison is in a global competition to retain and attract the talented entrepreneurs and workforce needed to compete in the creative economy.”

In 2002 University of Toronto economist Richard Florida identified a “creative class” made up of populations highly sought by cities, such as young people working in technology. They tend to prefer living in the center of cities that offer cultural opportunities.

“These people evaluate communities by asking, ‘What’s here? Who’s here? And what’s going on here?’” says Tzougros. “They look for creatives of all types, and diversity by every measure. They generally choose places with a vibrant arts scene that includes public art.”

The city of Minneapolis found that 80 percent of Forbes magazine’s most livable cities have Percent for the Arts programs, as do 100 percent of the magazine’s fastest-growing cities. Percent for the Arts is rooted in economic stimulus. It goes back to the era of federal works projects during the Great Depression. Starting in 1934, the U.S. Department of the Treasury required 1 percent of the cost of federal building projects be spent on art and decoration. The program continues today as the federal Art in Architecture program. “Public art programs are important because they guarantee that art is planned and paid for when a building is built, rather than as an afterthought,” argues Tzougros.

There are 29 states with percent for the arts programs. Wisconsin’s was “suspended” but not killed under Gov. Scott Walker’s 2011 budget.

“I’ve had a number of artists tell me that was a loss of work for them,” says Katz.

Wisconsin is one of the stingier states when it comes to arts funding. As Isthmus reported last year, the state ranks 48th in the nation for arts spending. Minnesota ranks first, spending \$6.36 per person, while our state spends just 13 cents. However, arts clearly have an economic impact. According to the 2012 study “Arts and Economic Prosperity IV,” published by Americans for the Arts, the arts generated more than \$535 million for Wisconsin’s economy in 2010.

Philadelphia was the first to adopt Percent for the Arts at the municipal level, in 1959. At the time, it was seen as a vital tool in revitalizing underused downtown areas, and also as a way of combating modernist, “sterile” architecture.

“It’s another tool in the tool box,” Katz says. “Madison already has so many cool things happening, this is another way we can show off our creativity and imagination.”

Right now both Milwaukee and Eau Claire are bringing in art for temporary sculpture tours, Tzougros notes. “Why? They are tourism draws, but it is more than that. These tours also communicate that each community values creativity, which is important to the talent we need.”

The proposal is now going through various city committees. Wolf anticipates a vote by the Common Council on July 18.