



Developing an Arts, Entertainment and Education Cluster in Washington County, Maryland:

Executive Summary

Submitted by:
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Submitted to:
Washington County Arts Council, Inc.

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Purpose/Context

The Washington County Arts Council (the Arts Council), on behalf of the Arts, Entertainment & Education Taskforce, hired Sage Policy Group, Inc. (Sage) to provide analytical insight and associated recommendations related to the promotion of cultural richness in Washington County, MD. Goals of the community include economic development, income growth, increased demand for real estate, tax revenue expansion, elevation of the arts and culture, broad community participation in arts and entertainment experiences, and integration of the arts, entertainment and education for the community. In many similarly-situated communities, arts, entertainment and education revival have represented the cornerstones of successful economic development strategies.

Methodology

In conducting the research, Sage made an effort to consider the community's history, economic realities and the current arts, entertainment, and education marketplace. The study team spent a substantial amount of time researching community demographics, industry infrastructure and governance structures to understand Washington County's cultural environment. The study team also conducted three focus groups between mid-May and early June 2011, as well as other individual interview sessions with multiple key stakeholders. Participants included local merchants, bankers, business owners, professors, artists, government officials and member of their staffs.

Key Findings

Analysis of data, a SWOT analysis, the focus groups and other forms of investigation yielded several key findings. Among these were:

- Very few similarly-sized communities across the United States enjoy the concentration of cultural infrastructure that can be found in Washington County, particularly in downtown Hagerstown (e.g., Maryland Theatre, Museum of Fine Arts, Barbara Ingram School for the Arts, University of Maryland at Hagerstown, Washington County Free Library, Potomac Playmakers, Academy Theatre, Washington County Playhouse, and City Ballet School);
- There is an insufficient level of coordination between various cultural assets throughout the county and in Hagerstown, though several promising initiatives have emerged;
- The demographics of downtown Hagerstown are presently incompatible with the formation of a vibrant arts, entertainment and education cluster;
- Marketing effectiveness and coordination has been limited;
- The current supply of housing and studio space in downtown Hagerstown is not of the type necessary to attract a critical mass of artists to the community.

Recommendations & Implementation

In order to leverage the community's cultural assets and to reduce the impact of various threats and weaknesses, Sage developed the following recommendations:

1. *Art promotion should initially focus on downtown Hagerstown.* Because downtown Hagerstown possesses many of the artistic and cultural assets in the community, it is the most logical place within the county to create an industry cluster. Most focus group participants and interviewees also expressed a preference for a Hagerstown First strategy.
2. *Deconcentrate poverty in downtown Hagerstown.* Downtown Hagerstown is home to a high concentration of Section 8 housing. According to many stakeholders, the concentration of poverty downtown acts as a barrier to the formation of an arts, entertainment and education cluster in Hagerstown and Washington County. Sage recommends that the Hagerstown Housing Authority (HHA), a local non-profit organization, supply voucher recipients with better information regarding their housing options and actively participate in their housing searches. HHA should also encourage landlords outside of the central city to participate in the program by offering new or promoting existing incentives, as well as better informing them about the program. The HHA should also collaborate with the Housing Authority of Washington County (HAWC) to support the deconcentration of poverty.
3. *Create a Community Arts Commission /Downtown Partnership.* The issue of coordination, or the lack thereof, arose frequently during focus groups and during research. Sage recommends that the community create an Arts Commission (a non-governmental, non-profit organization) to develop strategies, funding, and implementation plans for community projects. The new Commission will connect arts, entertainment and educational efforts with local businesses and residents. For successful achievement, the City and County government should be supportive of the commission's actions.
4. *Create an arts incubator in downtown Hagerstown.* In its development of case studies, the study team found that arts incubators are often very successful at attracting and assisting artists. The presence of artists not only attracts visitors, but also leads to business formation, greater demand for real estate and a general sense of community vibrancy. Sage suggests that the city create an arts incubator that will be housed in a building with subsidized office supplies, studio space, and technical assistance, as well as low-cost apartments for artists. The study team identified two buildings located in the arts center that could be renovated and serve as a location for the incubator, including the building at 59 West Washington Street (old Susquehanna building), the building at 13-17 South Potomac Street (between the Barbara Ingram School for the Arts and the Maryland Theatre), and potentially the Massey building on East Baltimore Street. It should be noted that City government has acquired a building on 36/40 North Potomac Street and is planning to renovate the property into residential/co-op unit for artists. While this project will help expand the population of local artists, the property is 0.2 miles from the Maryland Theatre and therefore not as well suited for the location of an arts incubator. The two proposed sites are immediately proximate to the Maryland Theatre.

5. *Intensive Marketing of the County's Cultural Assets.* Community leaders suggested in the focus groups that the city needs to alter its image. Sage recommends that the City/County market itself as an arts and cultural tourist destination by promoting the community's artistic and cultural assets. Internet marketing in the form of a comprehensive website represents the simplest and most affordable way to do this. This website should serve as the central repository for information regarding events, dates/complete calendar, times, ticket availability, parking, directions, proximate shopping and restaurants, reviews, etc. Ideally, the website would also allow for tickets to be sold and for reservations at area restaurants and hotels to be made.

Concluding Comments

The ultimate goal is to create a county-wide cultural cluster that has as its hub and focal downtown Hagerstown. But this cluster should encompass all significant communities within the county from Williamsport and Boonsboro to Clear Spring and Smithsburg. The study team believes that images of and events within a vibrant downtown Hagerstown will ultimately translate into more opportunity to attract visitors throughout the county.

Experiences of other arts communities presented in the Appendix of this report, including Taneytown (Maryland) and Siler City (North Carolina) suggest that elected leaders must play an important, though not necessarily overwhelming role in the process of creating an artistic and cultural hub in Washington County. There are a number of key community leaders that have emerged in recent years and who have a demonstrated passion for the arts. In the final analysis, it is up to these citizens to forge Washington County's cultural future.