

## **Summary**

### **A Report from Five Listening Sessions with Palm Beach County Artists November 2004**

#### **The Background**

This year three artists, Mark Gierok, Caren Hackman and Terre Rybovich, hosted meetings for artists—visual, performing, media and literary—to discuss creating a Palm Beach County artists' association. The top priority was to create an inclusive forum. A format called "The World Café" enabled randomly comprised small discussion groups, each with a host and a prepared set of discussion questions. One obstacle remained: reaching artists in this community without the benefit of a current or comprehensive list.

#### **Who Attended the Meetings?**

205 artists attended the meetings. 112 identified themselves as visual artists, 25 as performing artists, 18 as media artists and 21 as literary artists. It seems the majority at every meeting was white and middle-aged, yet there were always African-American and Latino/a artists. Up to a third was either under the age of 30 or over 60. And the ratio of women to men was at most 2 to 1.

#### **What Do Artists Want?**

The seriousness of the discussions was surprising and heartening. Artists are aware of the resources provided to those in other communities, as well as the benefits of associating with other artists both within and across disciplines. Every meeting was an eruption of enthusiasm, with artists eager to create an association "tomorrow."

Each artist completed a form that asked a range of questions. One listed 19 potential resources or services, and asked artists to select the five most important to them. The top ten selected were: (1) Events that bring artists together; (2) Public events that promote local artists; (3) Exhibition space; (4) Joint Marketing Strategies; (5) Health Insurance; (6) A building that houses many of these resources; (7) Juried competitions with marketing of winners; (8) Legal Advice; (9) Advocacy in Public Policy & Arts Issues; and (10) Access to Affordable Housing/Studio Space.

#### **1. Artists Want to Be a Visible Community**

Within the small group discussions, one lofty yet frequent ambition was to help the public acknowledge the transcendence of art—and welcome it into everyday activities. For many, the creation of artists' neighborhoods is the goal. One vision is to transform one neighborhood after another, creating "Bohemian hotbeds" with venues for performing, media, literary and visual art. Often the discussion centered on the importance of having a building—or better yet, a network of buildings across the county. Artists' community in the more ephemeral sense is as much a priority as the creation of a physical site or

neighborhood. Welcoming the public, with the aim of sharing and educating about contemporary art, is another intention. Often the importance of giving back to the community is emphasized. Advocacy that impacts local policy-making was a constant in the conversations. The role of the local media also came up regularly. And some suggested specifics like a job bank, travel and exchange programs, a yellow pages of services artists provide, etc.

## **2. Artists Want an Association That Is “By Artists and For Artists”**

The need for the association to be “by artists and for artists” was a nearly universal—and emphatic—theme in small group discussions. The possibility of affiliating with an existing organization (to avoid creating a new nonprofit organization) was raised, and there is a mix of opinion here. Whether or not it is a new nonprofit entity, there is broad agreement it would be a membership organization, with artist-members constituting the majority if not the total membership. Members would elect a Board of Directors, who would serve for a specified term and then rotate off. Repeatedly the notion of a “bottom-up” or democratic approach to decision-making was emphasized. The fundamental question of who is an artist (i.e., who is eligible to join) was raised but never answered decisively. Often the concept of a tiered membership was mentioned. Communication is widely seen as the key to success. Also figuring out how to balance the artist’s devotion to creating with his or her commitment to maintaining a thriving association.

## **3. Artists Are Willing to Sacrifice to Make It Happen**

At every meeting there was vocal and heartfelt insistence that this endeavor would demand commitment and sacrifice in order to succeed. Challenging the stereotype, artists often talked about putting egos aside for a greater good. They know one of their greatest gifts is in reaching out to fellow artists and imparting their enthusiasm for an association. There is also a willingness to bring to bear local political pressure to make it effective. Another contribution is to stay abreast of what other artists’ associations are doing. There is a rich body of experience on the roles artists can play in fundraisers. And artists gave their enthusiasm in the listening sessions, and they look forward to opportunities to provide more of this vital resource.

## **Conclusions/Next Steps**

There is enthusiastic support for an artists’ association in Palm Beach County. There are lots of things artists want; not all of them have to be provided by an artists’ association. Many artists—especially performing artists—already belong to associations that provide services. Ideally this association would develop mutually supportive relations with those associations. In addition, the Cultural Council is currently engaged in a strategic planning process and has proposed that a representative of the artists’ association participate.

The initiators suggest that a steering committee be formed to implement artists' shared vision of an association. They propose that its members be selected using a time-honored artists' tradition, the juried process. Artists are invited to submit brief statements of their interest and ability (see attached form). An impartial judge will select the most qualified applicants. The deadline for receiving artists' statements is December 15. The steering committee should meet in early January 2005.