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Charlotte task force looks to current funding issues in discussing how to get more funding for the arts

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Charlotte arts and cultural institutions are facing budget shortfalls and more and more are considering significant program cuts, members of the Charlotte Cultural Life Task Force learned Monday.

Mecklenburg County arts spending decreased 58 percent between 1995 and 2013, while the population increased 65 percent, according to ASC research. Per-capita arts spending declined from \$4.36 per person to \$1.27.

“People have taken for granted so many of the unique and special arts offerings we have in this community,” said Valecia McDowell, the task force co-chair. “We’re in real danger of losing so much of what defines us, what helps attract business and people who come to Charlotte looking for those things, such as the arts which really help shape the community. We need to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

The group is studying how to maintain a vibrant community in Charlotte and will make recommendations, including funding models, early next year. Members learned about the current state of the arts in light of recent economic shortfalls, diminishing corporate and individual giving and increasing competition for municipal funding.

The group learned that the Cultural Facilities Endowment that pays for operating the buildings of the Levine Center for the Arts – Bechtler Museum of Modern Art, Mint Museum Uptown, Gantt Center for African American Arts + Culture and Knight Theater – has less money than planned. Lower than expected rates of return from investments, shortfalls in promised contributions and delayed cash contributions are contributing to the budget shortfall.

- Next meeting

The task force meets at 3 p.m. July 29 at the Arts and Science Council’s office. The meeting is open to the public. **Details:**

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Charlotte Deputy City Manager Ronald Kimble and Mecklenburg County Director of Management and Budget Hyong Yi were on a panel that answered questions from task force members that ranged from how the governments allocate money for cultural projects and where responsibilities lie, to paying bond debt, to funding operating and programming expenses for cultural facilities.

“Much of the county’s budget is predetermined by statute,” Yi said. “It’s not that the county doesn’t support the arts, it is there is so little discretionary funding available and the funds are competing with allocations to areas such as health, mental health and children’s services. When approaching the county for arts funding, it is critical to make a very specific case on the return on investment in terms of jobs and economic impact.”

The task force also heard from several members who accompanied the Charlotte Chamber on its visit to Houston. The annual trips allow for city leaders to meet with business and community leaders in cities across the country in an effort to learn from each other and exchange ideas.

Houston has a significant number of wealthy donors with a close relationship with the institutions they support. “Giving is a large part of their culture and galas are very popular in fundraising,” said McDowell, who was part of the Charlotte visitors’ group, “There is a long tradition and a mature base of donors that have a dramatic impact.”

Pat Riley, the other task force co-chair, said Houston, like Charlotte, considered a workplace-giving model for the arts but did not go in that direction. Instead the Houston Arts Alliance, a united arts fund similar to Charlotte’s Arts & Science Council, gets money from a hotel revenue tax. He estimated that 20 percent of those tax revenues or about \$15 million, went directly to arts funding.

Another factor helping forge strong relationships between the Houston Arts Alliance and their community is grass-roots programming that highlights what’s important to various ethnic and demographic groups and targeting unique programming to meet those interests.



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