

Community Observations: Supporting Economic Development

The following is a synthesis of a group process at a community meeting held at the Hayti Heritage Center on June 17, 2003 as part of the Durham Cultural Master Planning process. It was attended by over 110 people. Participants were able to comment on a series of seven issue areas that had been identified by the DCMP Steering Committee. We are eager to hear your reactions to these observations. In particular:

- 1. Do you agree with these observations?*
- 2. Do you feel that there are any inaccuracies?*
- 3. Is there anything missing that should be added?*

Please review this document and send any comments you may have to mdemott@durhamarts.org

Thank you.

There is a strong sense that arts and culture has a significant role to play in economic development, including revitalization of downtown, tourism, job retention, and business relocation. In order to use arts and culture to the greatest advantage, better working relationships need to be developed between cultural organizations and various organizations such as Chambers of Commerce, Convention and Visitors Bureaus, as well as City and County economic development staff and private sector developers. Culture must be seen as part of Durham's identity – and not just by people who are actively involved in arts and cultural pursuits.

Downtown development: The role of arts and culture in economic development is understood by some in the business community, especially in relation to Durham's downtown. Among the initiatives that were suggested included the following:

- Strengthen security in the downtown to make sure people can see that it is safe
- Develop programs to reuse empty buildings, perhaps with subsidies for arts usages
- Make more space available for artists in warehouse loft spaces with discounted rental in exchange for public service (public programs, tours of artist studios, etc.)
- Build the supply of downtown residential opportunities which will contribute to the feeling of constant activity.

- Develop specific programs that highlight the arts component of downtown – for example, walking tours of artists’ studios and rehearsal spaces, public art, etc.
- Support *all* small downtown businesses to foster a strong business climate for culturally-related operations.

Many participants commented on the importance of developing a “critical mass” of cultural activities and events – primarily downtown:

- Jazz clubs
- Coffee shops as informal gathering places with poetry readings, open mike evenings, etc.
- Special events and festivals
- Restaurants and other businesses that are open until well after midnight
- Skating rinks and other activities for young people
- Exhibitions, concerts, etc

Cultural economic development outside of downtown: There was a recognition that while the downtown was the hub of Durham’s cultural life, that there needed to be “feeder systems” to bring people from neighborhoods and communities to the downtown. So it was understood that arts and culture needed to be developed County-wide. It will be important to promote the cultural assets that already exist throughout the County.

Many people want festive, culturally alive parks and community spaces and it was felt that there was an existing base on which to build. For example, Durham’s Park & Recreation Department has a summer series that can be expanded. The role of Durham’s Central Park as a cultural resource (which is in downtown) was seen as something that could serve a broader, County-wide constituency. It was also suggested that Lowes Gove School could be developed as a cultural campus for South Durham.

Importance of marketing and improved access: Participants saw the need to market cultural events, no matter where they are located, more widely. In addition, there was a sense that transportation more directly linked to cultural activities would be very helpful. Mass transit is important (especially if art can be incorporated into the system) but so are such amenities as bike paths and sidewalks. Free parking was also seen as a priority. Establishing a late-night “feel” with many open and accessible cultural venues will help to develop the sense of a vibrant, exciting community.

Job creation: Opportunities for job training and internships with arts-related businesses should be explored. This might be a way to appeal to youth at risk who are not drawn to more conventional careers. It might also provide an opportunity for greater interactions between people of different cultures and socio-economic classes.

