

Remarks by Carolyn Bye

Executive director of the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council

Keynote Speaker at Prince William County: Cultural Policy at the Grassroots

It is a pleasure to be a part of this day and a part of your initiative, Cultural Policy at the Grassroots. My remarks are based on a report I authored for The McKnight Foundation, [A New Angle – Arts Development in the Suburbs](#). The report looks at suburban arts in a metropolitan context and has many parallels for the work that you are doing here in Prince William County.

The intended audience for [A New Angle](#) was urban policymakers, funders and arts organizations that needed to better understand art in the suburbs and its relationship to the artistic health of our state - so it is a pleasure to be speaking to part of the suburban choir looking to either solidify or provoke new thinking in your county about the value of the arts.

Before I begin, I need to tell you the "filter" through which I view the information I am presenting; I am a "public" funder. Almost all of the money with which my organization, the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council, operates comes from the Minnesota legislature. So we operate in a very open manner and our mission is to serve all residents/taxpayers.

I know that many of you dislike the word "suburbs" being linked in the same sentence with your communities for the same reasons that I do – "suburbs" is a word that is loaded with stereotypes. But whether we call them towns, cities, communities, edge cities or greater metro areas – and I use all of these words interchangeably - sometimes there is just no better word than the inflammatory – suburbs. I also think that as community planners it isn't always what WE call ourselves that is important – we need to know what others call us.

Before I joined the staff of the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council ten years ago I had lived in a suburb for 20 years – and I embraced almost all the suburban myths and stereotypes as real.

And myths get in the way of insuring that arts opportunities are maximized in every community, and myths can get in the way of community planners and economic development people when they examine what the role of arts in their "suburban" communities could be. I will focus on five particularly pervasive myths that need to be debunked before good planning can be done:

- People commute from the suburbs to the core for their work
- People of color increasingly populate the cities and suburbs are increasingly populated by Caucasians
- Everyone goes to the city for their art
- There are no arts organizations with artistic quality in the suburbs
- People in the suburbs are rich and can afford to build their own facilities and pay for their own organizations

While acknowledging that all myths have kernels of truth – let’s look at them one at a time.

People commute from the suburbs to the core for their work. This statement might have been true in the late 60’s when more than 50% of the US population lived in the ‘burbs and the majority of jobs were in central cities, but by the 80’s office space in the suburbs surpassed that of central cities as corporations built where their employees lived, where land was cheaper, where freeways were accessible and free parking was abundant. Beginning in the 80’s the majority of people lived in the suburbs and the majority of jobs were in the suburbs – and the dominant pattern of commuting became and continues to be – suburb to suburb. Today, people commute everywhere for their work – suburbs to core, core to suburbs, suburb to suburb - people commute. When it comes to commuting, we may hate it, complain about it, blame it for pollution, sprawl, highway taxes, road construction and a host of other ills – but I know that residents of Prince William County will affirm “*commuters R us!*”

So why does any of this matter to your planning? Americans have increased their miles driven daily in every category, except leisure (read arts events.) The average suburban family makes

13 car trips a day – so this helps put into perspective why people are unlikely to jump back in their cars and head “downtown” for arts events, or, for that matter, head to a cultural center in a suburban community on the other side of the county.

People want opportunities to engage in the arts as a regular part of their lives, not just on Saturday nights, and parents particularly want these regular opportunities for children "close to home." So as communities do cultural planning it is important to ask, “what is close to home for our residents?” Cultural planning for Prince William County needs to keep in mind that the trend is moving away from increased leisure travel.

The arts are an important part of a healthy community beyond the economic benefits from arts attendance and their ticket revenue and the ancillary businesses near arts complexes – and it is an area that is just beginning to come on community planner’s radar. I am referring to the economic impact of nurturing individual artists. Ann Markusen and David King in their recent report, “The Artistic Dividend: The Arts Hidden Contributions to Regional Development” make a convincing case for the importance of economic development plans including strategies for attracting and retaining artists as part of the mix of business and industry. Our current public policy and economic development models focus on acquiring businesses first and then attracting workers, and it doesn’t fit the current environment where workers look first for “place” and then build their jobs and lives around it.

Next - people of color increasingly populate the cities and the suburbs are populated by Caucasians. This myth in particular has always been the most painful to me personally for its underlying assumption of racism and the popular suburb-bashing term “white flight.” I regularly apologized for living in a suburb – or when asked where I lived I would say, “Minneapolis.” Prince William’s demographics are reflective of national trends with an increasing number of people of color in its communities.

Prince William County also demonstrates another demographic trend; an increasing number of foreign-born residents. Historically, our central cities, were the “gateways” for new immigrants with some of them eventually relocating to the suburbs after getting stabilized. However, the old “urban-core-as-gateway “ model of immigration is no longer the norm. Prince William County is a case in point with a growing population of new immigrants bringing a cultural richness to your communities.

Another myth: **Everyone drives to the city for their art** (and by default, if people in the suburbs DON'T drive to the city it's because they don't like art.) If everyone drove to the city for their art in my region it would mean that the ratio for arts audiences at core city events would be 24% core residents to 76% suburban. Most core organizations would be thrilled to have even have 24% suburban participation. Not EVERYONE is driving to the city for his or her art, but some are. Your arts organizations are serving community residents as well as audiences from surrounding counties. Given leisure travel trends we will see more people expecting to participate in the arts where they live. In a new study by the Fordham Institute, “Arts, Culture and the Social Health of the Nation, ”

- Respondents noted that the arts were important to them and a whopping 85% said that they want their children to have regular access to the arts
- 80% of respondents said they are participating in the arts with some attending work of for-profit and non-profit groups, but the majority participating in what I call “under the radar” activities. This sector is now gaining recognition and referred to as the *InformalArts* sector, a sector that is described by Richard Florida in his book The Rise of the Creative Class as a critical ingredient in a culturally vital or creative community most attractive to the New Economy workforce.

The informal arts are popular creative activities that fall outside traditional non-profit and commercial arts experiences and yet draw millions of amateurs and professionals alike. A distinguishing characteristic of informal arts is that they engage people in “hands-on” activities that tap creative capacities and deeply affect individuals and communities – for

example, garage bands, the brass ensemble that rehearses in somebody's basement, the quilting circle, the watercolor class or the open-mike poetry readings at the local coffeehouse. Richard Florida would say that an economic development strategy that understands and nurtures its informal arts sector is helping to create an engaged community and one that is attractive to today's workforce. How much do you know about your county's informal arts sector?

There are no artists or arts organizations with artistic quality in the suburbs. There are lots of issues in this myth – one is the ongoing tension, particularly when funding resources are involved – where capital “A” art and lower-case “art,” usually the informal and community arts are pitted against each other. A healthy cultural community has the entire arts universe – artists, commercial, non-profit and informal sectors as well as an aesthetically pleasing built and natural environment.

My region has quality artists and arts organizations everywhere. And contrary to stereotypes, a growing number of artists are relocating to suburbs. In some cases it is for the same reasons that many core city residents move – they are mature/mid career artists, they have a clientele that does not require daily involvement in any specific community, they want affordable homes that offer expansion for studios, and they have families and want open space, schools and a perception of safety. In other cases it is because suburban communities have actively recruited artists through the development of living and studio spaces and worked to create a “critical mass” of artists as part of an economic development strategy.

Another economic development strategy I have observed, often with disappointing results is the decision to “jump start the arts” by planting a performing arts center in a community with kind of the “field of dreams” mentality – if we build it they will come. In recent years I have observed, locally and nationally, examples of art center construction as “economic development engine” with a range of very results.

An example in my region of a city-owned arts building that has done well and is also part of a trend that I am seeing in suburban cultural development, the multi-use building or campus is the Bloomington Art Center. It was built to house city administrative offices, the police station and a performing and visual arts center. A unique combination, but the response from community members is positive, particularly by those who have rarely viewed making a trip to pay a traffic fine so artistically satisfying! The city has created a strong community destination point through multi-use design. Critical to their success is the arts building was built primarily as a home to the city's eight largest arts organizations, and the city was clear from the beginning that these primary tenants were not going to be charged rent, nor would the city employee hired to manage and lease the space to outside groups be not expected to "pay her own way." The city recognized that the survival of its arts organizations was important to the cultural and economic health of the community and they did something about it. It's a strategy that worked - the eight local groups brought strong civic support and instant traffic - and since opening a few months ago the center has received many calls from arts organizations in Minneapolis and St. Paul wanting it as a second performing home.

Myth: People in the suburbs are rich and can afford to build their own facilities and finance their own activities. I return to my opening statement - I am a public funder. I am very concerned about insuring access to all and to taxpayer return on investment. So whether or not there are resources in Prince William County, its citizens are also taxpayers. And for the record, not everyone is wealthy. It's another one of those myths.

I was particularly pleased to see that you have linked arts and economics in your cultural exploration process. Hopefully it will become part of the county's vision statement as well, as you help policy makers understand that arts and culture can be a part of the solution - a tool in the economic development toolbox.

I look forward to learning the outcomes of your thoughtful and forward-thinking process and I thank you for inviting me to be involved in your examination of cultural policy at the

grassroots. I have appreciated being part of your important work in helping to strengthen the arts in your communities and to reaffirming that there are cultural “grassroots” in suburbs that need nurturing and audiences that need to be served.