

## Reflections by Jane Hansberry

On her 10 Years of Experience as the District Administrator of the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District in Denver

Prepared by Dinah Zeiger

The following comments were captured in an interview with Jane Hansberry conducted by researcher Dinah Zeiger on December 18, 2007. Zeiger reports the interview as a series of key insights. Both the outline for this piece and the final written material have been approved by Jane Hansberry.

### The Regional Model is Smart

A regional approach to serving major institutions makes sense. The rapid suburbanization of the United States means many residents live far from major cultural institutions, historically located in urban core areas. Suburban communities have demonstrated an appetite for the construction and support of performing arts venues, yet they have been averse to founding and supporting major museum-type institutions. New taxes remain unpopular. However, implementing a tax system to support regional cultural institutions that benefit suburban populations can prove to be an efficient use of tax dollars, with two caveats. First, the institutions supported must provide a high level of service; second, efforts to establish high-cost institutions in multiple suburbs must be avoided.

### Regionalism has a Great Future

As we increasingly come under the influence of globalization, aggregating ourselves in a way that provides a meaningful counter-balance becomes a useful strategy. Regional efforts incorporate the ideas, attitudes and aspirations of multiple communities; local communities provide the social glue, infusing a regional effort with its particular texture and perspective. Towns are too small, and states are too large and diverse. Regions, on the other hand, can bring the mix of local communities together.

### The District's Footprint

The SCFD conforms to the footprint of three existing districts: the Regional Transportation District (RTD), the Urban Drainage Corridor, and the Stadium District (baseball and football). Plotting a new tax district within the boundaries of an existing voter-approved district allows organizers access to previous and newly generated polling, voting pattern, and organizational analyses from other efforts, thus lowering costs. However, the overlay, particularly within the RTD boundaries, greatly limited discussion about the SCFD's geographic borders and which areas should be served.

### Inclusion and Collaboration Fuel Long-Term Success

When developing a regional cultural tax district, the greater the effort to collaborate and include others, the greater the possibility of success. The SCFD's first effort at drafting legislation derailed when a group of cultural organizations and their leaders objected at being excluded from the decision-making. Lawmakers forced the warring factions to collaborate, thereby producing a much more effective—and politically palatable—piece of legislation. A more inclusive and collaborative process at the outset likely would have saved time and effort.

The lack of collaboration in the SCFD birthing process did more than add time to the project's timeline. The absence of these smaller cultural institutions hindered any discussion of the potential impact the SCFD might have on the region's cultural ecosystem. The originators of the District sought funding to backfill lost public revenues—but the SCFD did much more than that. It added significantly more money to the cultural funding pool, affecting the perceived need for a state arts agency to serve the metro area, and became a major factor in many cultural policy decisions over the next several years. While these intersections may have occurred anyway, more thoughtful advance community dialogue about them would have fostered a healthier cultural ecosystem long-term.

### The Issue of Excellence

Cultural funders are always interested in the impact their funding has on excellence in programming and excellence as expressed in the management of a cultural organization. Certainly the funding function of a large cultural tax district such as the SCFD inevitably affects these factors. Some of the tax district implications related to excellence are:

- Because cultural tax districts appear to reward stability over innovation, board and staff decisions may lean toward not rocking the boat. Indeed, retaining the regular receipt of a large check from a dependable source may trump taking risks that might impair the flow of such funds.
- The significant volume of money received may create a tendency toward self-censorship and more conservative programming. Anything that risks the loss of public support for the tax district and, thus, the flow of funds to an institution may be shunned.

One possible way to avoid these shortcomings is for the cultural tax district legislation to address its role in encouraging excellence and supporting groundbreaking work. Although many cultural tax district supporters abhor the inclusion of policy directives in legislation, it may actually ensure the district's long-term survivability by directing funding away from the most conservative, and possibly no-longer publicly supported, art forms.

### Culture and Science

Culture tends to get lost when a tax district emphasizes its science and nature components. Yet, a regional infrastructure needs public support across a range of community interests, and a cultural tax district may not be possible based on “cultural” alone. Salt Lake City organized its first cultural district campaign around the city’s arts institutions, and it failed at the polls. When a revised effort encompassed the zoo and recreation—for this read “Soccer Moms”—the effort succeeded. Cultural tax district organizers need to determine where culture is—or is not—on the public’s radar and be realistic about the ability of culture alone to carry a district.

Once arts-based cultural interests join with science and nature entities in a compact, they may find their ability to influence the conversation—let alone control it—greatly curtailed. This occurs partly because science-based cultural usually command large budgets and large audiences, enhancing their ability to influence the general public. If the cultural community wants a voice in the development of a cultural tax district and the policies that unfold through it once implemented, arts-based institutions must speak with a united voice and present a cohesive vision to the larger group of collaborators.

Including non-cultural organizations in a district also brings influential board members and funders necessary to support the effort. In fact, the arts component of cultural alone may not have sufficient breadth or depth in a community to advocate for a tax district, let alone get it passed.

### Conversations that Become Principles

When something is new and grows to be significant in terms of funding, the precedent established in even informal early discussions becomes consequential. Everything done at the beginning becomes “first principles,” which control all later choices and decisions. Thus, a full and formal discussion of the policies and core philosophies that will govern a cultural district should be an important first step. Without this level of discussion, informal, ad-hoc, and sometimes under-informed decisions become the guiding star, which may not always be in the best interest of the district or its constituents.

### Conclusion

The SCFD is a wonderful addition to the cultural ecosystem of Colorado. The district has created new cultural opportunities for many citizens and helped ensure that the largest cultural institutions receive support on a regional basis—as they should be. But the SCFD is not a perfect system, and I encourage those seeking to develop a cultural tax district to analyze its weaknesses along with its strengths before designing legislation. New legislation inspired by the success of the SCFD should seek to improve on the model. Doing so is a complement to our success, our learning, and our willingness to share information.

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