

Arts Council Changes Course

Budget woes lead to staff layoffs, restructuring

The Lane Arts Council (LAC), the nonprofit umbrella group that runs the First Friday ARTWalk and helps distribute grants to arts groups in town, has laid off most of its staff and is in the process of altering its mission and structure.

Rumors swirled through the arts community last week when staff members Heidi Durden and Noemi Pena were given two weeks' notice. Combined with the scant mention of the LAC in a draft report from the consultants for the city's Cultural Policy Review (CPR), the layoffs contributed to the impression that the council might be in

day.

Brinkley, who was appointed acting executive director when former director Andrew Toney resigned just before the winter holidays, says that the council is changing direction because of budget problems and "the need to rebuild our funding sources." Not only is Brinkley new to the job, but the board membership has turned over rapidly in the past couple of years. The board has a new president in artist Carolyn Gates, who says, "We're going through a challenging transition right now."

Gates says that the board's finance committee and Brinkley have been meeting

its mission to serve the county, the council doesn't currently receive money from the county. In fiscal year 2007, the OAC, the state-run group that filters both state grants and National Endowment for the Arts monies from the federal level to Oregon communities, gave LAC two grants totalling \$21,000. That amount adds up to only 35 percent of the what the OAC gave the council in 2000. Christine D'Arcy, the OAC's executive director, explains that arts organizations across the state have seen their grant funding diminish drastically because the 2003 Legislature slashed funding for the arts.

First Friday ARTWalks will continue with board volunteers providing the structure and support, Brinkley says, but the council's general direction will shift more purely to arts education. Brinkley will continue to administer city-funded Eugene Community Arts grants. The council's SchoolARTS component will morph into the main focus. That program has helped place 30 artists into elementary schools around the county, providing 800 hours of arts education this school year alone, according to Brinkley.

The LAC formed as the Lane Regional Arts Council in 1976. Karen Johnson, associate dean at the UO's School of Architecture and the Allied Arts, served as director from 1978 to 1983 and remembers when the council worked as an arts advocacy organization, performing economic impact studies about the Hult Center, then in its planning stages. "The Lane Arts Council has played a significant role in the development of the arts in the county," she says, "and the need for it continues today."

Brinkley, whose organization soon may be partnering with Williams' integrated arts education initiative, remains excited about SchoolARTS and hopeful that the council will continue. "Without these programs, there would not be any art at Corridor School, Cesar Chavez, Crest Drive Elementary, River Road, Oak Ridge, Bohemia, Mt. Vernon, Mapleton ..." and his list goes on.

Gates says that the SchoolARTS programs are desperately necessary since school districts don't have money to pay for

Without SchoolARTS, many kids in Lane County wouldn't have art in their schools.

its last days. But the acting executive director says the council is in the midst of retrenchment and restructuring.

The mayor's CPR committee met Monday, March 19 to discuss the draft with the consultants from Wolf/Brown, and acting executive director Ben Brinkley attended parts of the meeting. Committee member Rick Williams, who's chair of the arts division at LCC, says he noticed that although the draft report called for umbrella organizations to deal with coordination among arts groups, it barely mentioned the LAC. Williams is working closely with Brinkley on a new arts initiative, so he was surprised by the omission. When he asked why the arts council wouldn't be an automatic choice to administer the new arts plan, he says, "It was clear to me from the looks I was getting that I needed to talk to Ben — that things were changing pretty fast." A couple of days later, Pena and Durden were told April 4 would be their last

every week for several months, "trying to make sense of the situation." Part of the problem is that the LAC has been largely grant funded, Gates says, and when recent grants hadn't taken operating expenses into account, those monies began to come out of reserves.

Douglas Beauchamp, who directed the council from the mid-1980s through 2003, worries that the LAC might have burned through the \$150,000 in reserves and en-

But she believes that some regional arts councils have responded more nimbly than others. "When some of the grants ran their course," D'Arcy says, "I'm not sure the Lane Arts Council was prepared to step in with a round of new funding or a way to support themselves."

Beauchamp agrees. He thinks that the board, which Gates says has not been a fundraising board, might not have been providing enough oversight in recent years.

'This is a time when we're really going to ask for help if we are to survive.' – board president Carolyn Gates

dowment it held when he left to direct another arts organization.

Funding sources include grants, memberships and private donations, Brinkley says. Despite the name of the nonprofit and

"Do you anticipate, do you look ahead? Grants are a small part of what you have to consider," he says, but "you're doing business in the real world in terms of revenue streams."

art teachers. "We're the last bastion for arts education for kids in Lane County," she says. "This is a time when we're really going to ask for help if we are to survive." **EW**



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