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ARTS TO TAKE CENTER STAGE IN SILICON VALLEY NEW CAREFULLY CRAFTED BLUEPRINT MAKES WIDESPREAD CULTURE A COMMUNITY MUST

Author: PATRICK MAY, Mercury News Staff Writer

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The focus groups are done. The marketing strategy's set. The R&D is solid. And the countdown has begun on what could become Silicon Valley's biggest product rollout ever.

We're not talking chips here.

We're talking culture.

After 15 months of brainstorming and statistical spade work, local arts activists, tech-world chieftains and national consultants have come up with a plan they say will give Silicon Valley's quality of life an upgrade: new performance venues. New art galleries. Bigger bucks for arts education and neighborhood cultural centers. And a game plan to pull a modest cultural infrastructure out of San Francisco's shadow once and for all.

But the project entails a huge turnaround: Although the high-tech boom has pushed the combined per-capita income of San Jose and Santa Clara County to third among the 50 major metropolitan areas, the area ranks 39th in per-capita giving to all sorts of money-seeking groups, including the arts. That, along with competition from the rest of the Bay Area, has cursed San Jose with low attendance rates compared with national norms.

Architects of the plan hope that by adding venues and spreading them throughout the area, they can get more people to show up more often, even though people surveyed said it's time, money and family obligations -- rather than a lack of interest -- that keep them away.

In quintessential Silicon Valley style, they fast-tracked the project, tied it together with reams of e-mail and "virtual meetings," and wrapped it up into what is basically a three-volume marketing manual. It's code-named "20/21-A Regional Cultural Plan for the New Millennium." But they may as well call it, "The Selling of a Cultural Renaissance."

"When Procter & Gamble launch a new detergent, they'll first do focus groups, and that's exactly what we did," said Bruce Davis, executive director of the Arts Council of Santa Clara County. "We talked to people about their needs and desires as far as the arts are concerned in this area. In other words, what color should the detergent be? And do you need something more powerful to clean those stains?"

"We ended up with what's essentially a business plan," said Davis. "And the product is arts and culture."

Intensive research

The plan, approved last week by the San Jose City Council, cost \$235,000 and was underwritten by the city, the county, the National Endowment for the Arts, and several foundations. It involved 1,000 participants, hundreds of meetings, numerous task forces and a slew of public hearings. There were also 200 one-on-one

interviews of local community string-pullers, including Robert Caret, president of San Jose State University, Lew Platt, CEO of Hewlett-Packard, and Jay Harris, chairman and publisher of the San Jose Mercury News.

In sheer scope, say consultants, 20/21 pushed the envelope on community planning for the arts in this country. It also drew out corporate leaders who spoke about their visions and concerns of Silicon Valley's quality of life.

"The real story here is that this was the first time there's been any extensive interviews with CEOs where they really talked about local arts and culture as essential to their long-term business strategies," said project leader Tom Wolf, a consultant who has worked on cultural plans for 200 cities.

Simply put: If employers expect to maintain the Valley's talent magnet, they'd better start making investments in bagpipe concerts, Vietnamese folk dance, Latino festivals, avant-garde photography and children's theater.

"The quality of life in Silicon Valley must be consistent with the technology, innovation and economic growth that's been going on here," said Mike Hackworth, CEO of Cirrus Logic and a participant in 20/21. "Without that, there's a risk that at some point we could hit a plateau and not be able to attract new employees and their families anymore. For me, investing in the arts is definitely a business investment."

Some are skeptical

Not everyone is so gung-ho. Josi Callan, executive director of the San Jose Museum of Art, broke out laughing when asked about 20/21.

"Oh, is that what they're calling it now?" she said. "It would be wonderful if this indeed could come to fruition. However, I think it needs to become focused, and priorities need to be set. We have to be very mindful of what groups out there are already doing, especially in schools and outreach programs, so that we don't end up just creating another layer of bureaucracy."

Others say the program should piggyback on what's already been done, specifically a similar arts-boosting plan called 20/20 that the city of San Jose undertook in 1988.

"I see 20/21 more as a continuation," said Stephanie Schiro, executive director of the San Jose Cleveland Ballet. "There's still a lot of work to do. And once we start setting dollar values, it's going to get a lot more political. Rather than just looking at the common good of the community, people will think, 'How will this affect my institution or me as an artist?' Then things could really get dicey."

The project began in 1995 when the San Jose Office of Cultural Affairs and the non-profit Arts Council co-hosted a national conference on the arts. That collaboration convinced them to forge a joint cultural plan. They raised seed money and hired Wolf.

First, a work time-line was drawn up. Then meetings were held all over town in several languages to build consensus among various ethnic groups. And San Jose Mayor Susan Hammer used her connections to pull in corporate leaders.

"Their views," said Wolf, "were some of the most important components of the whole plan." He said with business on board, the 20/21 process took on a decidedly local flair. "We used the Web to make this a virtual planning process. We set up an electronic bulletin board so people working with us around the country could share ideas. We developed situation papers, which underwent multiple rewrites, often over the Internet."

Intensifying focus

Next came three studies: A detailed look at arts education in San Jose schools that produced per-pupil expenditure figures, which no one had ever bothered to calculate. A top-to-bottom inventory of local cultural

facilities that revealed a glaring need for at least one or two new midsize theaters with 750-1,500 seats. And the hundreds of interviews and two public surveys.

A few messages came through: We need and want more cultural life here. But it's got to involve our families, and especially our children. It's got to be close to home, down the street, in our classrooms and churches and parks. It's got to be ethnically diverse. And if it's all those things, sign us up.

"What's important is that this plan is not about the arts; it's about community development," said Wolf. "The focus is on education, neighborhood development, multiculturalism, links to technology. The reason this plan is doable is because it's not the 'Louis XIV approach.' We have to have fine arts, but we also need much more. Arts and culture are simply the vehicles to bring what's needed into the community."

During their 15-month examination, consultants turned over some interesting rocks in the cultural landscape:

* The corporate barons of Silicon Valley are hardly acting like modern-day Medicis. "Between 1990 and 1995," the report says, "\$50 billion of new personal wealth was created among the top five officers/executives of those corporations that went public in Silicon Valley." (That wealth is based largely on the value of shares those officials hold in their own companies.) Meanwhile, local arts groups have a \$60 million operating shortfall.

Convincing those with money to donate to the arts will take some doing. But arts fundraisers have their own tools of the trade -- like tax-sheltered charitable trusts, which allow wealth to pass from stock shares to art groups.

* Many South Bay residents have been getting their arts fix outside the county. They call it "leakage" in the arts-consulting business. And with locals leaving town for cultural events up to 50 percent of the time, Silicon Valley is a cultural sieve.

* More than 95 percent of those surveyed said public schools need to offer arts education. Planners want to raise per-pupil spending on arts education from its current level of 2 percent to 5 percent of what the county spends on its students. About two-thirds of respondents said they'd pay additional taxes to make that happen.

The success of the plan, said Wolf, depends on its breadth, its ability to improve the way residents of all economic strata see themselves, and its effectiveness in reaching into every corner of the community.

Nancy Wiener, a longtime local arts advocate and executive director of the New Children's Shelter Fund, said 20/21 must "go beyond art as entertainment and make it an integral part of everyone's life."

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