

NEEDED: THE ARTS

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WITH all the fanfare of grand opera, Mayor Susan Hammer has announced "20/21: A Regional Cultural Plan for the New Millennium" -- the latest blueprint for nurturing cultural institutions in Silicon Valley.

The plan is filled with good ideas, not only for building up major arts organizations but for making the arts a part of everyday life in neighborhoods and schools. Drawn up in cooperation with the Santa Clara County Arts Council, it recognizes that the market for the arts spans the region, and that cultural organizations need to work together to grow.

This regional strategy is a major strength of the plan. Another is its emphasis on private funding: While city governments need to increase their investment in the arts, this plan proposes that the private sector play a greatly expanded role in arts funding. To that end, Mayor Susan Hammer says she will convene a panel of top executives from Silicon Valley to oversee the plan and raise money. Early supporters are Mike Hackworth, CEO of Cirrus Logic, and Hewlett-Packard CEO Lew Platt -- a good start.

There's a growing conviction that arts and culture are not a frill in the valley, but a basic need. Employers know this. Prospective workers from other regions look beyond salary offers to the quality of life here. They can buy bigger houses in Austin, but cultural activities, parks and open space, and other less tangible factors help to keep this area competitive.

The plan at this point is very broad -- really a wish list. The next phase of planning has to include setting priorities.

A more urgent problem is the ambiguity on fundraising.

The report identifies \$250 million in needs for cultural programs, facilities and institutions. This includes \$60 million needed to fully endow the region's major arts organizations, based on standards set by the Ford Foundation.

Tom Wolf, the consultant for this project, says regions typically need to do some sort of major central fund drive to meet cultural needs. But many arts organizations are out in the community now, either raising money for programs or testing the waters for major campaigns, such as the

symphony's capital drive for a concert hall. Major donors may hold back on grants to individual groups until they know what the mayor is going to be asking for. This could hurt groups taking the initiative to do their own fundraising now, and ultimately that would harm the cause of the arts in the valley.

Mayor Hammer needs to quickly clarify what demands may be placed on donors to finance the overall arts plan. She needs to explain how money will be allocated, and how contributions to current fund drives on behalf of specific organizations will be counted toward the overall goal.

In addition, the goal for private fundraising must be set with care. We don't doubt that this wealthy region can support a rich cultural life, as Wolf's research suggests. But as CEO's of young companies grow more willing to accept civic responsibilities, the needs being placed at their doorsteps are many. Social service agencies, public schools and other groups already are lining up. If a major arts fund drive is in the offing, it has to take into account other community needs the same donors will be expected to meet.

Leaders of arts groups have different reactions to the cultural plan, ranging from enthusiastic to skeptical.

Some are worried that its administration will fall to some existing city or county agency instead of an independent board. If it did, they say overhead costs would eat up half the money, and groups would have to jump through bureaucratic hoops to get any of it.

Others worry that most of the money will go to large organizations and not enough to lean, culturally based groups that focus on neighborhood work.

We think those concerns can be met in the next planning phase, if a cross-section of arts groups is represented.

If nothing else, the plan shows that civic leaders understand the importance of the arts in the valley. At best, it will lead to broader participation in cultural activities, enriching our lives and increasing the arts' already substantial contribution to the local economy.