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Cornerstones of culture

SILICON VALLEY RESIDENTS EMBRACE A WIDE VARIETY OF ARTS, AND THIS IS A FOUNDATION TO BUILD UPON

MY VIEW: By Brendan Rawson

In his July 12 column, Leigh Weimers expressed skepticism regarding the apparent gap between active cultural participation in the region and local residents' stated interest in the arts. His refrain: If 71 percent of residents interviewed consider themselves to be artistic or creative, how is that institutions such as the San Jose Symphony are in bankruptcy, our galleries are empty, and our theaters struggling to fill seats?

His coda: ``bullfeathers." Weimers dismisses residents' responses as self-serving bravado rather than taking the time to delve into the very interesting complexity of how local residents understand and engage in the arts.

A couple of factors need to be considered if we wish to better understand what residents want from the cultural sector in our region. First, YES, one person's cultural event IS another's tractor pull.

In research by Cultural Initiatives Silicon Valley, residents described in their own words the artistic or creative activities in which they engage. While many express themselves through music, writing, or painting (60 percent), many also talked about web design, gardening, collecting, and cooking (29 percent) as forms of creative expression that they enjoy.

Silicon Valley is home to a tremendously diverse community, and our multiplicity of interests is reflected in this mosaic of expression. Gauging the creative vitality of the region solely on the attendance figures of the established nonprofit arts sector does not begin to capture the rich mix of activity occurring in our midst.

Second, we found in our interviews that, while the breadth of participation in the region is quite dynamic, the depth of participation here is quite shallow. Eighty percent of residents attended a live cultural performance this past year, but less than half attended more than twice. Even fewer, 23 percent, visited a museum of any kind more than twice.

The arts here appear to be a far too infrequent indulgence rather than an integrated component of our community life.

This does not, however, mean that we should just throw up our hands, or worse, browbeat residents for not going to the symphony. In our research we found significant cornerstones for us to build upon. For example, one fact that strongly emerged from our research is that Silicon Valley residents LOVE festivals.

Of the two-thirds of residents who attended a free outdoor festival last year, 70 percent of them attended two or more times. This past weekend serves as a good case in point. The Japantown Obon Festival, the International Mariachi Festival, the Palo Alto Clay and Glass Festival, the Chinese Summer Festival, and the Los Altos Art and Wine Festival drew more than 80,000 visitors combined and involved more than 1,000 artists and performers.

In addition, there were also the Summer Solstice Cultural Festival, the Armenian Summer Festival, and the Stanford Jazz Festival. Beyond these, who knows how many churches, temples and synagogues held their annual summer festivals this past weekend?

Our cultural vitality and engagement can be strongly enhanced through our passion to get outside, enjoy the wonderful climate we are blessed with and participate in the arts.

Another cornerstone for us to build upon that emerged from our research is the dynamic relationship between amateur arts participation and support for professional arts organizations. Individuals who play an instrument, write poetry, draw, dance, paint or whatever artistic outlet they might have are far more likely to donate to the arts, attend performances and exhibits and become volunteers.

Rather than be disheartened by the current disconnect, we believe there exists a tremendous opportunity for the arts to contribute

to the civic and community health of Silicon Valley. In a region where half the residents under age 35 were born outside the United States and where most residents don't consider this home, the arts have an important role to play in building community and cultivating the sense of identity and inspiration that root people in a place.

It would be a shame if we overlooked the many opportunities for building community and identity by looking for the arts only in concert halls and museums. To this end, Cultural Initiatives, with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation and the Nathan Cummings Foundation, is launching an initiative to strategically support broad amateur participation in the arts.

At this stage we are seeking to identify grass-roots leaders engaged in amateur work in our community centers, senior centers, faith communities, recreation centers and wherever else the opportunity to inspire and connect through the arts might present itself.

Brendan Rawson directed Cultural Initiatives' research and resulting publication, Creative Community Index. Rawson is also president of Teatro Vision and served as interim director of MACLA from October 2001 to June 2002. To receive a copy of the Creative Community Index report, visit www.ci-sv.org or call 408-283-7000.