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Valley residents crave culture, study shows

By David E. Early
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Silicon Valley residents crave more culture, but the civic and political support doesn't measure up, according to a survey released today.

For example, 95 percent of Silicon Valley residents believe artistic creativity is so vital that art should be taught in school at least an hour a week, and yet 38 percent of local parents say their children get no arts instruction at all.

And while 80 percent of residents have attended a live performance in the past year and 60 percent have visited a museum, 53 percent rated the area "poor" or "fair" as a place to attend concerts or museums.

"The difference here between the ambition and the reality regarding arts and culture is significant," said John Kriedler, executive director of Cultural Initiatives of Silicon Valley. The non-profit group highlights those and other findings today as it unveils a report on Silicon Valley's landscape of local artistic and cultural development.

"We attract very creative people from all over world here, many in technology and business. But once they get here, what is there to hold them and their children here?" Kriedler said. "If we want to maintain this kind of talent pool we have amassed, we need advancement in providing cultural experiences of all kinds, from childhood to adulthood."

Researchers interviewed 361 Silicon Valley residents in English, Spanish or Vietnamese and polled more than 100 non-profit arts and cultural organizations to develop "The Creative Community Index: Measuring Progress Toward a Vibrant Silicon Valley."

Commissioned by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, part of the study's aim was to measure local interest in individual artistic and cultural creativity.

(Established in 1950, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation makes national grants in journalism, education, and arts and culture. Its fourth program, community initiatives, is concentrated in 26 communities where the Knight brothers published newspapers, including the San Jose Mercury News, but the foundation is wholly separate from and independent of those newspapers.)

The study found that 71 percent of residents consider themselves artistic or say they have a creative hobby. Forty-four percent consider a close family member to be an artist, and 42 percent describe their jobs as requiring "a lot of creativity." Twelve percent have a technology-related personal creative outlet.

However, the report also demonstrates that civic and political backing doesn't always match the interest in arts and culture. Non-profit arts organizations are vital to the community but largely underfunded, the report found. Fifty-three percent of them have budgets less than \$100,000, and only 40 percent have a full-time paid director.

Even long-established organizations are not immune to problems. The 123-year-old San Jose Symphony played its farewell concert at the Center for Performing Arts on June 8. The orchestra shut down with about \$3.4 million in debts and left San Jose as the largest U.S. city without a symphony orchestra.

Kriedler said cultural life here needs to live up to the expertise and achievement of the technological and economic spheres.

"There are roots we have to pursue," said Kriedler, citing an increase in arts education in schools, and more places that teach and provide for individuals of all ages and groups to pursue everything, he said, from "singing and dancing to painting and poetry."

He also said Silicon Valley needs to provide better performance facilities and enough support to ensure major artistic institutions can thrive.

``Silicon Valley just lost the oldest symphony in the western United States," said Kriedler. ``How could something like that happen in a place like this? We need to make sure that technology and business are balanced by a robust cultural existence."

Contact David E. Early at dearly@sjmercury.com or (408) 920-5836.

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