

Hamilton Chamber Of Commerce Recommendation Regarding Hamilton's Arts Sector Recognition of Hamilton's Arts Community: Leveraging our Opportunity for Change

Issue:

The Hamilton Chamber of Commerce believes the development of a strong "creative culture" is an integral part of a healthy city and is also a component to assist the City in achieving its economic development objectives. One of the challenges has been to develop an awareness of this connection. We must move quickly to leverage the power of our burgeoning arts community as an opportunity for positive economic change throughout our entire city.

Background:

There is growing awareness of the power of the arts and culture sector to go beyond offering positive quality of life experiences and to work as a catalyst to stimulate economic growth opportunities. The literature is growing with names like Richard Florida leading the charge. His message was brought to Hamilton at last year's Economic Summit where he highlighted these concepts to 120 key business leaders.

The arts are disciplines currently defined by the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council, but not limited to the current definitions. Arts activities include, but are not limited to: expositions, performances, rehearsals, displays, conferences, workshops, seminars, screenings, education, festivals and events.

Cities recognizing and fostering the creative economy appreciate a healthy arts and culture sector brings great cultural diversity, high percentages of adults with post-secondary education and high proportions of economic activity in the knowledge industries. Concurrently, this promotes the growth of arts and educational institutions, vibrant street life, ethno-cultural and intellectual diversity¹. Hamilton's proximity to significant cities in the Canadian Golden Horseshoe and the United States affords us a great population base to pull from and provides opportunities for direct business partnerships in areas such as, but not limited to, film, music, literature, dance, theatre, crafts and visual arts. Growth in these sectors also stimulates activity in our tourism sector and increases our appeal as a liveable city.

Perhaps most importantly, a strong arts and cultural community will allow this city the opportunity to regenerate and redefine Hamilton to Hamiltonians and the outside world. Successful examples are obvious in cities such as Winnipeg, Pittsburgh, Kingston and Rochester. When Glen Murray, former Mayor of Winnipeg, visited our city last year he pointed out "Hamilton must determine the kinds of businesses it wants to attract and must nurture an action plan to do so."² He explained the Winnipeg experience, "...the city discovered a fledgling group of animation and special-effects companies, helped co-ordinate the relocation of a college program to that neighbourhood and gave incentives for businesses to convert vacant space into live/work units. Within five years, it grew into a \$380-million industry."³

Hamilton's stock of underutilized and vacant buildings presents a chance for economic initiatives where currently, businesses and people are hesitant to tread. If City staff were able to assist in identifying such buildings to artist entrepreneurs while allowing the grandfathering of building requirements (where there is no compromise to the safety of the building's occupants), it would create a culture of acceptance and allow the reclaiming of "dead" space.

To capitalize on the availability of these buildings, we believe some sort of assistance, or encouragement is needed to allow artistic endeavours to take place as typical funding sources are not often available to those looking to invest in the "less desirable areas" that dot our city. This will help to meet the challenge posed by major lending institutions that are currently timid about providing mortgage assistance for such investment in many areas of our city. The arts sector should have access to capital that other sectors currently enjoy.

We need City council and staff to join the community and creative industry by taking ownership of this opportunity, to understand we have to invest in our cultural, economic and civic future. It has been noted that "culture and heritage will help to attract the educated, mobile newcomers we want, keep our best and brightest at home and make our economy among the strongest anywhere."⁴ We need to leverage the affordability of this city that is attracting more and more artists to Hamilton. As Richard Florida posits, cities offering a high quality of living and that accommodate diversity enjoy the greatest success in attracting talent and holding on to it, as well as seeing the greatest growth of their technology sectors⁵. Artists move into areas based on the affordability and utility of the property, as well as the affordability of the work to be done to that property. Knowledge of available buildings, grandfathered building requirements, permission of a range artistic uses for various land use designations and more open minded application of by-laws (such as less stringent parking requirements in this city which is encouraging less automobile dependence in favour of pedestrian and public transportation) will provide direct evidence of the City's focusing on Arts and Culture as part of our economic renewal strategy.

We believe an arts sector facilitator position within the City would be a true asset. The individual would report directly to the City's Executive staff to ensure the person has the needed support to get things done in a timely manner. The facilitator will work on behalf of the arts cluster to be a liaison between the artistic community and the City to keep council and staff abreast of issues relating to the promotion of our creative sector (ex: James St. N. Art Crawl, the Pearl Company, the Art Walk, events on Locke St and Ottawa St. etc...) and individual challenges which artists may experience. They will be responsible for helping artists to navigate through any municipal approval or regulatory processes and will support various City departments on projects such as public art installations, festivals and other public art happenings. It is noted that recently positions have been created for such efforts. The facilitator would support their activities. We believe the facilitator should somehow be involved with a more powerful Arts Advisory Commission. Consistent representation by executive staff, the Mayor, councillors, community members, and individual artists is essential to the efficacy of this citizen Commission. A focal point for arts in our City could allow us to better coordinate activities and take advantage of everything happening in Hamilton's Arts community.

The recommendations put forth in this document are meant to highlight opportunities for substantive support for the arts in Hamilton. We believe such support will lead to a more attractive economic environment, which will attract small business investment throughout Hamilton.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Hamilton Chamber of Commerce urges the City of Hamilton to create a city wide Community Improvement Plan for the Arts & Culture Sector that encompasses the following:

1. Encourage the adaptive reuse of former industrial, institutional and commercial buildings throughout our city and allow a combination of the following uses; artistic, cultural, commercial, residential and institutional. This should be attractive to “for profit” and “not-for profit” entrepreneurs whose activities are part of the arts sector.
2. A range of artistic uses should be permitted in as many land use designations as possible in the new City of Hamilton Official Plan and in the upcoming City of Hamilton Zoning By-Law. By allowing these uses in a broad variety of land use designations, this would support, nurture and promote activities defined and recognized for the development, creation and promotion of the arts by artists.

¹ City of Toronto, Culture Division “Culture Plan for the Creative City”, City of Toronto, 2003, p. 4.

² Skyscraper forum, posted by markbarbera, <http://forum.skyscraperpage.com/archive/index.php/t-153850.html>

³ Ibid.

⁴ City of Toronto, Culture Division “Culture Plan for the Creative City”, City of Toronto, 2003, p. 7.

⁵ Richard Florida, “The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It’s Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life,” New York, Basic Books.