

## **Minutes – March 28, 2022 -- Portsmouth Arts and Nonprofits Committee**

Russ called the meeting to order at 12:10 PM.

Members in attendance: Russ Grazier, Renee Giffroy, Jason Goodrich, Councilor Kate Cook, Genevieve Aichele, Nihco Gallo Remotely: Barb Massar, Robin Albert, Tina Sawtelle, Ben Van Camp. Not present: Beth Falconer, Larry Yerdon, Martha Fuller Clark, Courtney Perkins

Non-members in attendance: Nancy Carmer, Sean Clancy, Stephanie Seacord (recording secretary)

Guests: Former Cultural Plan Chairs: Chris Dwyer, Ellen Fineberg

Purpose of the meeting: To learn about the creation of the first Cultural Plan in 2002, the process, the early stages and what the next steps in creating a new Cultural Plan might be.

Chris Dwyer provided the pre-history:

The start up occurred during Mayor Sirrell's tenure when Portsmouth participated in the Art Builds Community project with a grant from the Greater Piscataqua Community Foundation. Three sites in NH were involved: Newport, Manchester and Portsmouth. Both Manchester and Portsmouth ultimately developed Cultural Plans. Portsmouth's was the most extensive, with the most robust process.

The process received a Wallace Reader's Digest grant, thanks to the evidence of the Shipyard Project, with Chris Dwyer, who administered the Wallace grants nationally, shepherding the successful application.

In March 1998, 8 focus groups convened with 80 participants. Each meeting of 8-10 group members lasted an hour, asking the group specific questions to determine "What would you like to see – what is your vision for Portsmouth?"

Ellen Fineberg coordinated the project to create the Cultural Plan, with a committee of artists, Portsmouth Public School administrators, High School students, business people, nonprofits and City staff.

Initially, Mayor Sirrell was not a supporter of arts & culture, believing the arena to be elitist, but through the process heard the value of arts and culture – that it is something woven into the fabric of Portsmouth schools and neighborhoods.

Originally, the idea was to incorporate Arts & Culture in the Master Plan 2000, but instead, to gain the broadest input, the Mayor determined time should be spent creating an Arts & Culture Plan and created a Blue Ribbon Committee to do it. That set the stage for other community involvement.

At first there was no budget. Councilor Grasso was tasked to be liaison. Chris Dwyer identified UMass Cultural Planning best practices and resources and brought them to the task, with staff assistance.

The resulting Cultural Plan recommended the creation of Art Speak as a stand-alone nonprofit instead of the City BRC and recognized that half of the people engaged in arts and culture were not Portsmouth residents but saw Portsmouth as their community.

Russ – That was a lot accomplished in one year. How did that happen?

Meetings every other week

Lots of trust in 15 different people who took on different challenges, eg Lars Trogden who did the writing, Chris/Elln brainstorming; someone to coordinate the art featured in the published Plan; someone to plan the publication reception.

Tina – Noticed there were no arts or cultural organizations in the process. Was the result not what the artists wanted?

Members of the committee did have arts involvement – architects, editor, marketing.

Tina – Was there anything in the plan that was not completed, objectives not met?

There were some specific ideas unrealized – zoning for artist live/workspace (though there was an encouraging example of MIT and Harvard building re-use. But some cultural spaces were achieved.

Also the “% for arts” concept was partially achieved – yes at the Fire Station, maybe at the Wastewater Treatment Facility; not yet at the Middle School (those funds as yet unspent – Barb M: maybe the funds can be redirected to Portsmouth NH 400?)

The Plan did reinvigorate arts and culture, giving the community agency that might not have happened without an arts plan. Perhaps a broader cultural plan with “% for arts, culture, history.”

Barb – It’s a different world now, 20 years later. Volunteers are different – would you use Portsmouth Listens (which didn’t exist then) for the focus groups?

CD: The cultural plan must be its own brand. You can hire out some things to be perceived as neutral (artists feared the Plan would result in their being told what to do by City government). Neutrality and brand distinction are key.

EF: It was vital to have City support (Nancy Carmer) and access to services and awareness. We weren’t “out there,” we were “in here.” Key for understanding how to fit the arts into City land use and planning processes.

Jason – For this plan process, we have strong arts organizations and opportunities in our collective social media for citizen engagement.

CD: Be careful about ‘initiative overload.’ Many of the ideas that came out of the original planning for Portsmouth NH 400 were the same – people don’t want to be asked the same questions again. The PNH400 focus group input and themes could be synthesized to plan for the next 5-10 years. Then a committee could select a group to take the plan on.

Russ – The 2002 plan selected 6 goals and 10 themes from the Arts Build Community survey. Most plans have lists of ‘wants’ – this has actionable, prioritized items. One example: public art was documented for the Smithsonian’s Save Our Sculpture national effort.

Nancy – It is still a challenge to get to individual artists.

CD: It’s important for people “not in the beltway” to participate – to engage in brainstorming with the committee on themes that led to actions. Some goals were aspirational; others were actionable, eg. the creation of an Arts Center which Discover Portsmouth came to be.

Another idea was to create neighborhood arts centers along with parks, that the city could use opportunistically.

Renee – Maybe the survey in the GoOut Portsmouth marketing could assist in developing themes?

Ben – The majority of those seeing the ads are outside Portsmouth.

CD: Recommend you start with the themes and add. What wasn’t accomplished? Why? What’s next? Half-day retreat could generate an internal report on the Plan.

Barb – Now with the Chamber and Portsmouth Listens we can take a different route. Tap the community at large but this group contribute to the content, too. The first broad call for data to a wider audience.

Russ – The 2002 Cultural Plan has had influence longer than the 10 years it was intended to last. Why has it lasted – how is it used?

CD: The goal was to create ArtSpeak to implement the plan and the timing was good. It had a broad base on support. When I first ran for City Council the plan was used to denigrate my candidacy. By the second time, every candidate had an arts component. Everyone wants this and wants to participate.

The AFTA survey was transformational – for the first time we had quantitative values. It remains so.

The Mayor did not at first believe the neighborhoods cared about arts, not you could involve the Citywide Neighborhood Committee, brainstorming community centers like the Plains School and Pontine – a different branding that connects them with the downtown arts institutions.

The Cultural Plan saw an important change from the “Od Portsmouth” to a way to help more people network and to realize this is “your Portsmouth.”

Timeline:

Rollout AFTA

Perceived that arts are for locals – not outsiders. How many of us take advantage of what’s here?

Blend Portsmouth NH 400 + AFTA survey + next Master Plan.

Barb – Leverage the PNH400 efforts, the upcoming Rec Needs Survey, use of the Community Campus to create art/gather space – the way the old Connie Bean Center once was, or Discover Portsmouth was intended as a cultural hub.

CD: Recreation and leisure are certainly part of the Cultural plan. The building re-use committee made Players Ring, Children’s Museum, Discover Portsmouth happen. During the Prescott Park Master Plan effort it was important to survey people using the park.

Russ – What would you have done differently? Unexpected things you learned?

CD: We probably had too many objectives. Would coalesce them into fewer ideas within the themes, with a clearer definition of who would accomplish them. And clearer timelines: 1-2 years vs. aspirational. Always get people to talk to each other.

NEXT MEETING: April 18, 2022 at 12 pm.

Meeting adjourned at 12:50 pm.