Paul Hogan, vice president of the John R. Oishei Foundation, says the Arts Service Initiative will fill a leadership gap that has existed for years. ""ASI is the ultimate coordinating body that has been desperately needed for a very long time," he said. Derek Gee / News File Photo

Arms of new arts initiative reach wide

By **Colin Dabkowski**

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Over the past 20 years, the theaters, art galleries and dance companies of Western New York have huddled together under any number of cultural umbrellas.

Now, they may be seeing the region's most powerful and broadly based cultural organization to date, the new Arts Services Initiative.

The agency's formation was announced this month after nearly a decade of groundwork, countless studies and millions of dollars invested. Its goal: to foster a single, unified vision for strengthening and promoting the arts and culture across the eight counties of Western New York.

The Arts Service Initiative will fill a leadership gap that has existed for years, according to Paul Hogan, vice president of the John R. Oishei Foundation, which is a major funder for the group.

"ASI is the ultimate coordinating body that has been desperately needed for a very long time," Hogan said. The project, he continued, "really is, finally, the ultimate realization of that desire to plan, desire to get ahead of the game. It's taken a long time, but I don't think that's unusual."

In 2002, then-Oishei Foundation President Tom Baker brought cultural leaders together to formulate a plan to promote culture in the region. Since then, a procession of consultants has been hired and report after report has been produced in the interest of creating such an organization.

The Initiative's formation and operation through at least 2013 have been financed by the Fund for the Arts, a group of local foundations, as well as by the New York State Council on the Arts.

Information from the Initiative says it will assist local arts groups with workshops, seminars and help with resources, foster public eduction about the arts and promote arts education.

Plans are to name an executive director by Oct. 1. And though details aren't final, Hogan said he expects the ASI will be headquartered on the now-vacant second floor of the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library's Central downtown branch.

This all comes at a time of rapid change and struggle for the arts scene, which saw Erie County eliminate funding for nearly two dozen small and midsized groups last year. That has only strengthened the bonds between the region's arts groups, and a long-simmering movement to turn the cultural industry into a major regional power is coming to a boil.

It also follows the demise of the Arts Council in Buffalo and Erie County on the heels of its former director, Celeste Lawson, being found guilty of embezzling money from it. The fate of some $48,000 in state funds the council was supposed to distribute locally remains up in the air as its dissolution plan winds its way through the New York State Supreme Court.

The new group, Hogan said, will likely assume and expand most of the duties of the disgraced Arts Council, which include advocacy for the arts at all levels of government, the administration of a joint health insurance plan for artists and the redistribution of funding from the New York State Council on the Arts to small arts groups and artists. That redistribution program is now being administered by the Carnegie Arts Center in Tonawanda.

But, he said, the Arts Services Initiative will go far beyond the Arts Council agenda.

The Initiative will subsume Advancing Arts and Culture, an organization that has been working since 2005 to assist local arts groups in strengthening their organizations. It also will incorporate the broad network of arts groups built by the grass-roots Greater Buffalo Cultural Alliance, which was born during last year's cultural funding crisis. Another new group, Arts Partners for Learning, which grew out of the long-operating organization Young Audiences of Western New York, will also fall under ASI's umbrella.

It is intended to harness the momentum of the cultural community and to foster a single vision for the arts across Western New York.

"This is a very different type of model than what has happened in the past in this community," said Randy Kramer, the artistic and executive director of MusicalFare Theatre and a leader of the Greater Buffalo Cultural Alliance who serves on the ASI's board. "It reflects a little bit more what's been going on in this community in the last three to five years. It's bottom-up, not top-down."

The ASI board of directors, which Hogan said may later be expanded, now includes Kramer and Hogan, along with M&T Bank Vice President JoAnne Schwartz; Castellani Art Museum Director Kate Koperski; Buffalo Expat Network founder E. Frits Abell; Paul Robeson Theatre Artistic Director Paulette D. Harris; television writer and producer Sarah JM Kolberg; artist and art collector Gerald Mead; and Lewiston Council on the Arts Executive Director Irene Rykaszewski.

Though the exact shape of the organization will not come into focus until after its executive director is hired, Kramer spoke of the ASI as a bellwether for the development of Western New York.

"There's a paradigm shift that's happening in this community. You see it down on Canalside. You don't just see it in the arts. There's starting to become an acknowledgment of the power of grass-roots efforts working with a bureaucratic organization that will offer resources and revenue and things that the grass roots don't necessarily have," he said. "But there's also a perspective and an experience that grass-roots organizations or people have that's very valuable. We're starting to see a certain amount of: 'Oh, this is how we do it.'"

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