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Arts groups collaborate on educational initiative

Premium content from Business First by Tracey Drury

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A new arts collaborative has formally begun operations, with a goal of providing a coordinated, regional approach to professional development for artists, teachers and arts organizations.

The Arts Services Initiative of WNY Inc. will focus on management and technical assistance, public education and engagement, and promoting arts education. Commitments for the initiative's first two years of operation will come from area foundations through the local Fund for the Arts, as well as the **New York State Council on the Arts**, with long-term funding expected to come from a variety of sources.

Paul Hogan, vice president of the John R. Oishei Foundation, said the organization will coordinate on a regional basis the way the public is engaged, how it values the arts and help determine the needs of the arts.

"The work we'll do will be mainly in providing technical assistance, but also doing the public engagement and education piece," he said.

The initiative brings together the work of some existing groups: Advancing Arts and Culture; and Arts Partners for Learning, a new network of the Greater Buffalo Cultural Alliance and Young Audiences of WNY. It will also incorporate some of the work of the Arts Council in Buffalo and Erie County and Arts Council in Niagara County, as well as the Institute for Arts in Education, all of which are now defunct.

Randy Kramer, acting board chairman, said arts and cultural groups have been grateful for an opportunity to create the organization from scratch and to have input along the way.

"You get a chance maybe once in a generation to take a look at a sector or industry and analyze what services are being done for it, or what could be done to make it stronger," says Kramer, executive director of MusicalFare Theatre. "It's such a healthy way to work."

He says another thing about the initiative is that it isn't trying to reinvent the entire arts

community: The Greater Buffalo Cultural Alliance will continue, but will serve as the advocacy arm of ASI.

Though the organization will initially work with arts groups in Erie and Niagara counties, ultimately the long-term goal calls for including all eight counties, which were all included in public meetings and outreach.

With guidance from an independent board, a search is under way for an executive director who will work from offices likely located in the downtown library.

Hogan says it would be ideal to have someone local fill the post, but someone from outside the region might work, too.

“We’re trying to build trust among all of the organizations as quickly as possible,” he says. “There could be somebody that could just blow me away and the committee and board.”

Planning for the initiative began in 2002, when Oishei Foundation leaders began discussions around the need for a regional cultural plan. Several studies about cultural tourism followed, resulting in the creation of the Buffalo Niagara Cultural Tourism Initiative. Participants later formed Advancing Arts and Culture to implement the initiative, with **Buffalo State College** serving as the fiscal manager.

This spring, plans picked up with the finalization of a business plan and formation of the corporation, which included merging Advancing Arts and Culture into the new group. The Oishei Foundation provided \$150,000 in funding through the Fund for the Arts to support startup costs.