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Photo Credit: C & H staff

Rotating group members summarize results of Charrette

survey, for the general public, professional artists and educators and cultural-history organizations).

Before the January summit, Stevens will analyze and synthesize the input received from the remaining focus groups, surveys and the existing draft, and bring it all together in order to present a more clearly defined plan at the summit, where participants will have a chance to review and react to the presentation. Stevens will use the feedback from the second summit to fine-tune the plan, which will be drawn up and finalized early next year.

In addition to the general public, the commission will invite artists, historians and nonprofit organizations to attend.

Hart said the new plan echoes some of the questions and topics raised in the first plan for the sake of continuity and to help draw conclusions about changes that have taken place. Hypothetically, if in the year 2000, 57 percent of Ocean County artists said their preferred medium was oil paint, and only 40 percent say that now, what might be causing or contributing to that change?

"We're also trying to make sure the questions fit the needs of our county," he continued, such as the large senior population.

At the summit, any and all feedback is welcome. For example, if the plan were found to be lacking in a given area – say, three-dimensional art – sculptors and ceramicists would have an opportunity to say, "Hey, what about us?" Or, "What about my Polish group and our ethnic dancing?" Or, "Your idea of accomplishing this goal in five years is unrealistic." Or, "We need that done sooner rather than later."

"I'm big on … just getting people to think about this," Hart said. Some suggestions that have been discussed include set-sharing among theaters within the county and obtaining hearing-impaired equipment to be made available or circulated among the different venues throughout the county. Sure, some brainstorming ideas are outlandish, he said, but that's brainstorming.

Dandeo pointed out the importance of having someone or some entity that leads the way and brings it all together.

When people think of Ocean County, they may think first about its proximity to the shore, she said; but its true beauty lies in the variation in its heritage, from the Barnegat Baymen and the art of decoy carving to the Methodist founders of Island Heights, and in the diversity of the art forms it has inspired. From a tourism standpoint, the cultural plan serves to show people Ocean County has so much more to offer than just the beach.

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The challenge, she said, is to bring all the differing entities together – schools, libraries, museums, all the different stakeholders – and get everybody on the same page. But that's the beauty of this whole process, Dandeo added: so many different priorities and possible directions to go.

One of the most exciting objectives identified in the plan, in her opinion, is the effort to brand Ocean County as a destination for cultural and heritage offerings with a "consistent, strong, multi-year image … that builds awareness, enthusiasm, and knowledge" of the county's wealth of resources.

"I think it could work," she said, describing the branding effort as "ultimately doable" and very appealing, the idea of designing some kind of logo that would make it all gel in people's minds.

One of the more challenging of the plan's goals (though it's one she is equally excited to tackle) is the education element – the question of how to reach and advocate for the schools – which is one topic the steering committee has talked about fortifying in the plan.

Another challenge is the widespread budgetary constraints related to the economy. The process of creating a plan is, itself, a very optimistic endeavor, she pointed out. In times of prosperity, planning is easy and fun; a plan offers renewed hope; from an organizational standpoint, planning means developing new strategies for a brighter future.

The whole purpose of a plan is to dream, she said. Still, you want to invest your money and energy in the areas that make the most sense, she concluded.

Ocean County has certain demographic realities that cannot be ignored, she pointed out – senior citizens and young families account for the largest segments of the population. One of the inherent challenges of planning for the future, then, is to keep the quality of life in Ocean County satisfying and enriching for those who already live here and, at the same time, make the area attractive to those who have not yet discovered it.

If there is a lesson to be taken from the plan, she suggested, it may be that, in order to stay current, people and agencies need to be willing to take risks and to see the value in pursuing experimental avenues. In the whole cultural plan exercise, Dandeo said, one of the most meaningful underlying purposes is to remove barriers.

For more information about attending the summit, call the Cultural and Heritage Commission at (732) 929-4779 or email culturalheritage@co.ocean.nj.us.



Photo Credit: Lindsay Dandeo

Summer staff members Nicholas Russo and Juliane Bilotta have been very helpful and productive. They are both sophomore history majors at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey.

OCEAN COUNTY WANTS YOU!

By Victoria Lassonde

This January, the Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission invites the public to lend their voices in shaping the future of the county by taking part in the second summit in the process of devising the 2011 Ocean County Cultural Development Plan. The summit will be held from 6 to 9 p.m. at Ocean County College, on the main stage inside the newly renovated Arts and Community Center.

"It's one of the few times when you have the opportunity, as a member of the public, to get actively involved," according to commission staffer Lindsay Dandeo. Each unique voice and perspective is truly important, she said, in that a broad-based cultural plan speaks to individuals' priorities, which, together, make up the community's collective "sense of place."



Photo Credit: C & H staff

Participants brainstorm during Charrette

The first summit, held in March at Mancini Hall inside the Toms River branch of the Ocean County Library, drew nearly 100 participants, according to the commission's Division Director Tim Hart.

As Hart summed up, the cultural plan's twofold objective is to determine, first, what the people of the county want and in what areas they need the most support and, second, what the commission can do to help.

The cultural plan project is funded in part by the New Jersey State Council on the Arts and through a trust fund set up by the Ocean County Board of Chosen Freeholders. He continued, Ocean County is fortunate to be able to conduct the planning process now (thanks to some financial forethought), at a time when many county governments are still feeling the pinch of the economic downturn.

Ocean County was not required but rather chose to conduct the entire cultural plan process again because the first plan, referred to as the 2002-2007 plan, has proven to be an extremely useful, oft-referenced tool over the course of the last decade, as a guide in the commission's decision-making and direction-taking to the

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Photo Credit: C & H staff

100 members of the public listen to guidelines for the day's creative process in Mancini Hall at the Toms River branch of the Ocean County library.

maximum benefit of the county. A well-defined cultural plan "really, truly does drive the way we spend money," Dandeo said. At the same time, ideally, it influences stakeholder organizations to examine their own long-range agency plans, she added.

Out of the first plan grew four cultural regional councils as a direct result of what people said they wanted. **Out & About** was a product of the Western Regional Council, and numerous arts-related activities have come about through the Northern Regional Council.

This second plan has been developed through the efforts of a steering committee, made up of 20 to 30 people representing a cross-section of the county geographically, artistically and organizationally; and with the help and expertise of professional planning consultant Louise Stevens, from a Montana-based firm called ArtsMarket. Stevens "actually wrote the book on how to do these cultural plans," Hart said. Stevens has, in fact, authored multiple books and articles on the topics of arts, cultural and economic development.

The second plan definitely builds on the first, though it is not exactly a seamless continuation, Dandeo said. In some ways it feels like starting from scratch because of new factors involved this time – working with Stevens, for example, which lends a fresh perspective to the project.

Having gathered preliminary information from initial focus groups, surveys and the first summit in March, Stevens has written a 15-page draft of the plan that summarizes the county's vision and outlines specific benchmarks, goals and strategies, namely: to raise awareness with an effective countywide branding effort; to build partnerships among stakeholders; to support and strengthen arts and heritage learning for all ages; to make arts and heritage relevant, fresh and engaging for everyone; to implement signage and a public art presence throughout the county; to improve access, involvement and volunteerism; and to ensure stability and excellence by strengthening the funding base for arts and heritage pursuits.



Photo Credit: C & H staff

Barbara Steele (l) and Michael Mangum (r) lead a charette station at the Summitt.

The four initial focus groups comprised individual artists; representatives of heritage groups; cultural tourism entities; and public service organizations. Then in April, three additional focus groups, made up of educators, funders and performing arts presenters were held. Additional surveys went out this summer (three versions of

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