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## A new space for the arts? Local groups commission study to identify needs, opportunities

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A consortium of St. Croix Valley arts groups have hired a Minneapolis consulting firm to help determine what sort of new cultural facilities the greater Stillwater area needs and could support.

Local arts leaders view the study as an important step toward creating a new space for the arts here, and several said its recommendations will likely set the course for their future fundraising efforts.

The initiative is being spearheaded by the St. Croix Valley Community Foundation (SCVCF), which is working in collaboration with a number of local nonprofit cultural groups, including ArtReach Alliance, the Lake Elmo Regional Art Center, The Phipps Center for the Arts, Stillwater Area Public Schools Community Education, Trinity Lutheran Church, Theater Associates of Stillwater and the Valley Chamber Chorale.

"The idea is to come together to determine as a group what makes the most sense for the region in terms of our cultural needs and how we can best address them," said Jill Shannon, SCVCF director of community partnerships.

"Once we do that, hopefully we can talk about ways we can work together to pursue a shared vision," she continued. "But you never know what's going to happen when the results come out; there are many possible outcomes here."

The group has contracted Artspace, a Minneapolis-based nonprofit real estate developer, to conduct a cultural needs and use assessment for the greater Stillwater area. So far, local organizations have raised \$33,000 of the \$56,000 needed to complete the study, primarily from private sources.

The group is also asking local cities to pitch in, but Shannon said she expects recent state budget cuts will make that a tougher sell than previously thought. So far, only Oak Park Heights has contributed to the effort, committing \$1,071; the group has requests pending in Lake Elmo and Stillwater.

Perhaps more important than the study itself is the collaboration that has grown up around it, local arts leaders say.

Though several groups have long lamented the lack of dedicated space for arts activities in the greater Stillwater area, there has never been a unified vision for how to address the problem.

In recent years, both the Lake Elmo Regional Art Center (LERAC) and Stillwater-based ArtReach Alliance have independently tried to drum up support for new art centers in their respective communities, making it more difficult for either to secure large commitments from potential donors.

"There are a lot of organizations at the table, and I think it's really positive that the whole arts community is willing to look collectively at what's best for the region," said LERAC Board Chair Karen Johnston. "Part of (SCVCF's) motivation for convening these meetings is that they didn't want to see our donor community receiving multiple requests. They told us the donor community would like to have some direction."

ArtReach Alliance Executive Director Jessica Pack agreed.

"The point in gathering this committee together is that we all felt there was a need to have a coordinated effort, and the St. Croix Valley Community Foundation was able to serve as a catalyst in doing that," she said.

One of the questions Pack hopes the Artspace study will answer is how ArtReach could most effectively use the house it received from the estate of Dick Heulsmann last year.

In the short term, ArtReach plans to convert the Stillwater home, located at 224 Fourth St. N., into office space. Its long-term function is still very much up in the air, however.

Though several people have ideas of what they think the St. Croix Valley arts community needs, Shannon said the point of bringing an outside group in to conduct a thorough study is to put everything on the table.

"We're trying to put a wide variety of options out there and get everyone around the same table," she said. "Who knows where that will ultimately lead?"

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