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A CULTURAL PLAN FOR NEW YORK CITY

Testimony to the New York City Council

Thank you, Councilman Van Bramer and other members of the City Council, for the opportunity to speak about the importance of the current project of developing the city's first comprehensive cultural plan. This is a very important undertaking with the potential to develop an effective approach to diversifying and extending cultural programs to every community, by strengthening the nonprofit cultural organizations which provide services to the public. I commend the Council for its leadership in developing the idea of the Cultural Plan, and also the Mayor and the Cultural Affairs Department for committing to make it real.

As a former Deputy Commissioner of Cultural Affairs and Chairman of the Cultural Affairs Commission, and the former President of the Alliance for the Arts, I have had many opportunities to testify at Council hearings. But this is probably the most important subject I have had the privilege of speaking about.

Today you will hear many good ideas for the Plan, so I will concentrate on just a few.

First, the city has a great model for developing cultural institutions which present programs of the highest quality, which embody the wide range of cultures that make New York such a vibrant city, and which are both educational resources for our people, especially school-age children, and a powerful attraction to tourists and the wealth they bring. This model is built on the principle of public-private partnership – with the city providing the buildings and operating support and the private nonprofit institutions acting as independent centers of cultural activity. This model can be built on by expanding the number of cultural organizations enjoying the same fundamental relationship with the city.

Second, the city has developed a robust system of funding a wide range of cultural programs through its Cultural Development Fund, based on an open and fair application system and the advice of peer review panels. In partnership with the City Council, the Programs budget has grown significantly, but it must continue to grow, and its uses must continue to diversify.

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Third, the city can go farther in treating its cultural community both as an educational resource and an economic sector. We can create job development programs which open the ranks of cultural activity to young people. We can build more affordable housing and studio space for artists and other creative individuals. We can expand city support for commercial businesses such as technology and design which often hire artists. We must also do more to support commercial cultural enterprises, such as private galleries and the theater on and off-Broadway, which provide showcases and jobs for the individual artists they present. The city has done an excellent job of promoting cultural tourism; it can extend that approach to more elements of the cultural world.

Fourth, we have seen an extraordinary growth in the city's capital budget for cultural buildings. Investing in our cultural infrastructure is essential to maintaining the quality and diversity of cultural programs. We must continue to extend this capital funding to more neighborhoods throughout the city – but we must also be prepared to assist growing arts organizations with the increased operating costs of their expanded facilities.

We have every reason to be optimistic as we think about the new Cultural Plan. People from all over the world look to New York for cultural richness and millions come each year to experience it. We have the largest government cultural budget in the nation – and yet, it is barely one-fifth of one percent of the city's total budget. We can afford to do more and we must. Providing more funding to cultural programs and institutions will pay rich rewards in terms of the quality of life for New Yorkers and continue to attract both visitors and businesses and the jobs they support. Finally, expanding cultural opportunities is a powerful way of welcoming new people to our city, especially immigrants, so that they can stay in touch with the cultural traditions they were born to, and at the same time discover other cultural expressions that are new to them.

Thank you.