

# Executive Summary

## *Introduction*

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In early 2002, a broad coalition of individuals from the Greater Birmingham region initiated a cultural plan. **The purpose of the plan is to develop an overall vision for arts and cultural development and to outline the implementation of that vision.** This Summary and the report that follows are designed to share what was learned and describe goals and strategies to strengthen and enhance the region's cultural assets.

## *Themes and Highlights*

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The key theme underlying this plan is **enhancing the cultural life of Greater Birmingham through a celebration of the region's rich heritage and diversity.** It is this celebration that can bring together people of all backgrounds, races, and walks of life in meaningful ways.

Another important theme is **integrating the past, present, and future.** As various communities in the region grow and renew themselves, the past still plays an important role in the richness of the region's cultural life. What makes this region unique *is* its history.

Among the most significant highlights of this plan are:

1. Using Greater Birmingham's cultural and ethnic diversity to **strengthen communities**
2. **Building on the full range of the region's existing cultural assets** for residents and visitors alike

3. **Expanding cultural educational opportunities**
4. **Strengthening infrastructure (facilities and support organizations)** to assist the cultural sector
5. **Providing adequate financial resources** for a full range of cultural organizations and activities.

### ***How the Plan Was Carried Out***

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**Over 600 people have been directly engaged** in this process, which has included:

- **Meetings, interviews and working group sessions** throughout the region on such topics as diversity, education, facilities, funding, cultural economic development, working artists, cultural organizations, neighborhood and community cultural development, cultural tourism, and cultural economic development.
- **Public meetings**, held at the Birmingham Museum of Art, Boutwell Municipal Auditorium, Work/Play Theatre, and the Alabama School of Fine Arts that engaged over 300 people in critical conversations.
- **Research** that included an analysis of the financial activity of the cultural sector in the region and a regional market survey designed to provide information about people's attitudes and participation patterns relative to arts and culture.
- **Inventories** of cultural programs, facilities, and cultural education activities, as well as data collection about the City of Birmingham's community centers
- Regular **media coverage** and various forms of communication with the community.

### ***Context and Findings***

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**What do we mean by culture?** This plan envisions a broad understanding of culture and is designed to meet the interests and anticipate the priorities of the entire community. Culture includes painting and sculpture, classical music, theatre and dance; it also encompasses natural history and science, and cultural expressions like folk music, jazz, gospel, craft, folk art, and others. In addition, the historic sites within Greater Birmingham comprise

part of its cultural richness, as does the broad range of racially and ethnically oriented cultural offerings.

**How do we define the region?** The region included in this plan is the twelve county region served by Region 2020 - Jefferson, Shelby, Cullman, Walker, Talladega, Calhoun, Etowah, St. Clair, Chilton, Bibb, Tuscaloosa, and Blount counties. Regionalism as a preferred way of working is slowly taking hold in Greater Birmingham and many leaders expressed an interest in a regional approach to arts and culture. There are dozens of distinct governmental entities functioning in the Greater Birmingham region. While Birmingham is a cultural hub, it is no longer the only one. There is much activity that can and should happen outside its boundaries. As communities grow and mature, many want to develop their own cultural resources. As long as duplication and ineffective competition is avoided, this is healthy.

**Why the inclusion of race and diversity?** For Greater Birmingham diversity is both a strength and a challenge. The subject of race pervades most conversations about the future of culture in the region, which is understandable given the region's history. Reframing traditional conversations about race seems to be a priority for many who believe that diversity must be redefined as a significant and positive strength for the region. Indeed, the diversity of Greater Birmingham is increasing beyond the traditional important place held by the African American population as the number of Hispanics and other ethnic groups increases.

**What is the make-up of the cultural audience in the region?** Contrary to what many people believe, research indicates that the **interest in arts and culture in the region compares favorably with national norms**. About 31 percent of Jefferson and Shelby County respondents and 23 percent of the respondents from the ten outlying counties were extremely or very interested in arts and cultural activities – compared with 27 percent of the national sample.

The research also shows that there is a large, **untapped market for cultural attendance among African Americans** and that survey respondents with children are more interested in attending live cultural events than those without children (by a margin of 80 percent to 59 percent).

Perhaps most interesting, the research indicates that the appetite for attendance does not diminish – in fact *increases* – as people attend more frequently. This suggests that some long-standing beliefs about the cultural audience deserve serious reconsideration. The issue is not lack of interest but rather the need to capture this demand and channel it into attendance. An important corollary of this is that as people become familiar with cultural activities, their level of interest and attendance increases. In other words, increased supply can, with proper marketing and education, build demand!

**What is the community’s perception of the arts?** While there is a strong perception that basic concerns in Greater Birmingham – such as food and shelter – eclipse art and culture, the consultants’ market research indicates a stronger role for culture than might otherwise be assumed. For example, fully 80 percent of the respondents, across the entire twelve-county region, agreed that “children should have early exposure to arts activities.”

In general, **support for cultural education is quite strong**, especially among African Americans, and there is interest in increased classroom arts experiences as well as the use of arts and culture as a strategy to reduce crime among youth. While the majority of respondents do not view arts and culture as solely of interest to wealthy and educated people, there is a relatively large group of people who did perceive the arts as “elitist.” This is more common in the outlying counties than in Shelby and Jefferson Counties (38 percent vs. 28 percent).

There is general agreement that there is a **lack of cultural programming for people of color**. Fully nine out of ten African American respondents agree that “my community needs more cultural programs for people of color” compared to seven out of ten Whites. This finding goes a long way to explaining why African American interest in arts and culture is high but participation levels are not.

**How strong is the cultural sector?** Greater Birmingham’s cultural sector is artistically vibrant and it represents a sizeable regional industry. **The cultural sector generates at least \$170 million annually in economic activity**. However, it is facing difficult times given the state of the economy.

While in aggregate, it earns about 40 percent of its revenues, it still must rely on public and private sector donations for the remainder of its income.

**Cultural organizations in Greater Birmingham are significantly under capitalized.** Birmingham organizations are well below national standards for cash reserves and endowment. For example, the aggregate cash reserves of \$4.8 million represent 11 percent of total organizational expenditures of \$42.8 million. The national standard of 25 percent would require an additional \$6 million in reserves. In addition, only two organizations meet the minimal standard of holding 200 percent to 500 percent of their annual operating budget in endowment, and 18 organizations (62 percent) report no endowments at all. This situation creates important difficulties for cultural groups, making it virtually impossible for them to contribute to the community as effectively and efficiently as they otherwise could.

For the most part, **staff and board members of cultural organizations operate without much interaction with their peers.** It is difficult to find the time to develop collaborations and cooperative programming. The lack of these opportunities is an additional and significant shortcoming for the cultural sector.

**What is the state of cultural education?** The importance of arts and cultural education for the future of the Greater Birmingham region is based on myriad research findings, studies, and reports generated both locally through this cultural plan and nationally over the last decade. **Currently in Birmingham, the situation of in-school cultural education is dire.**

While some districts are able to offer an impressive array of participatory cultural experience to their students, the distribution of opportunity through the region is uneven, with students in many areas losing out.

Cultural education, as a major priority for all citizens, faces many challenges. Both schools and outreach providers cite poor communication as a frustrating impediment to progress. There is a shortage of qualified Arts Specialists to teach in the public schools, and local teacher training programs have been severely cut back or ceased to operate. In urban areas, those children most in need of cultural offerings cannot afford even to pay transportation fees to travel to free or subsidized cultural offerings. As in other areas, **the delivery of cultural education is fragmented:** individuals

and organizations provide outreach to schools independently, often resulting in duplication of services and an uneven distribution of cultural opportunity.

**What is the role of culture in economic development?** Currently, the region's cultural assets are not consistently woven into the thinking of those responsible for economic development. The notion of a "Birmingham Heritage Trail" has been put forward, and represents an important step in raising the visibility of cultural assets more consistently. Unfortunately, in attempting to use these assets more effectively, a pattern of fragmentation and partial solutions has been perpetuated. Initiatives are begun that address one component of the need without the benefit of the full context. These attempts can serve as the starting point, but **comprehensive, inclusive action agendas are critical to addressing the role of culture in economic development.** It is increasingly important to make sure that those knowledgeable about arts and culture and the roles it can play in fostering the economic development of the region are fully engaged in the planning of these initiatives. Culture can be useful in fostering tourism, as well as assisting in business and senior executive recruitment and retention – but only if representatives of the cultural sector are engaged.

**What is the role of arts and culture in neighborhoods and communities?** Cultural development ought not be limited to downtowns. There is strong interest in **providing increased opportunities for people (including families and children) to experience arts and culture closer to home**, within their own neighborhoods and communities. This is critical: building audiences starts with children and children have their earliest cultural experiences in venues that are close to where they live. Interviewees agreed that offering more comprehensive arts and cultural programming would provide a way to engage those young people who are not interested in sports, which is currently the primary focus of these facilities. Some stumbling blocks, such as access to instructors and equipment, may be relatively easily resolved; however the shortage of space is a significant problem, and will require a longer timeline to develop a solution. What is important is to start with realistically scaled efforts that lead to more comprehensive approaches further down the road.

**What is the state of cultural facilities in the region?** Spaces in which to perform or exhibit arts and culture represent the biggest investment and most difficult challenge to the cultural sector. The region can boast of many excellent spaces – ranging from the Alys Stephens Center for the Performing Arts and the Virginia Samford Theatre in Birmingham to the Bama Theatre in Tuscaloosa and the Ritz Theatre in Talladega. The reality is that arts and culture tends to thrive when there are excellent – or at least adequate – facilities available.

A careful review of the inventory of cultural facilities shows a patchwork of spaces with varying rental fees and availability. While there is some room for additional usage, it is clear that **new facilities are needed**. However, the cost of building and maintaining cultural facilities is so high – and the risk of miscalculating their configuration so grave – that careful thought must be given to issues of location, event mix, size of spaces, and other elements of new venues. In addition, **it is critical to provide a realistic level of subsidy for user groups to insure that these spaces contribute to the overall growth of the cultural sector.**

Specifically, **the Lyric Theatre should be renovated (with additional renovations to the Carver) and Boutwell Municipal Auditorium should be replaced with a community cultural center.** It is important to **establish joint management arrangements between the Alabama, the Lyric, and the Carver theatres.**

**What is the condition of service organizations?** Many of the concerns articulated by interviewees have referred to matters that could be addressed through an effective regional umbrella agency providing services to the cultural community. Currently in Greater Birmingham there is no agency that is responsible for the well-being of the cultural sector on a regional basis – for facilitating partnerships, assisting with funding, providing liaison with government officials and civic leaders, or convening groups of individuals to work on marketing, board development, technical assistance, audience building, or any of dozens of other such efforts.

The Metropolitan Arts Commission has served its community well and its renovation and on-going management of the Virginia Samford Theatre is a significant service to the community. As the cultural sector grows in size

and complexity, it is increasingly important to look beyond “metropolitan” to “regional” and beyond “arts” to “culture.” **There is a critical need for an agency with a broad mandate and broad regional support.**

**What is the state of public and private sector funding of arts and culture?** Cultural funding must include a mix of earned income, public sector support, and support from corporations, foundations, and individuals. All these components must be strong for the cultural sector to thrive. **Public sector support is limited to two major sources – the City of Birmingham and the State of Alabama.** Beyond these two sources, there is little in predictable and on-going operating support for cultural organizations. While some counties and municipalities contribute, the amounts are generally small and distribution is haphazard.

Private sector support as a percentage of contributed income in FY 2001 breaks out in the following way:

- Individuals      10 percent
- Corporations    6 percent
- Foundations      6 percent

This represents a total of \$9.3 million in FY 2001 (out of a total of about \$26 million contributed revenue) and is projected to remain essentially constant through FY 2004, totaling \$10.1 million in that year (in non-inflation-adjusted dollars). **The general impression is that the private sector carries the bulk of support for arts and culture, but this is by no means the case.**

It is clear that for the goals and strategies articulated below to be implemented, significant new sources of dollars must be identified. The contributions from all sectors must increase. Earned income, funding from cities and counties, as well as private sector donations must all rise to address important needs.

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## ***Goal and Strategies***

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Based on the research, public input, and significant discussion with the Steering Committee and other bodies, the consultants propose the following eight goals and strategies.

### **Cultural Organizations and Working Artists**

**Goal 1:** A strengthened cultural “eco-system” that sustains large organizations, builds the capacity of small and mid-sized organizations, and provides a supportive environment for artists.

- 1.1 Establish a “cultural trust” that raises endowment funds in partnership with cultural organizations of all sizes.
- 1.2 Develop a comprehensive and on-going program of technical assistance for cultural organizations and working artists.
- 1.3 Develop a coordinated calendaring system that tracks cultural events and support activities.
- 1.4 Nurture the local professional arts scene by connecting local artist organizations and individual artists with local, regional, and national resources.
- 1.5 Develop coordinated and cooperative mechanisms to simplify back-office tasks of cultural nonprofits.

### **Cultural Education**

**Goal 2:** An enlarged and enriched mix of opportunities for children and adults in Greater Birmingham and the region to engage in and appreciate arts and cultural experiences.

- 2.1 Establish a region-wide clearinghouse to facilitate the coordination of educational resources.
- 2.2 Maximize existing educational resources through a coordinated, privatized series of cultural educational offerings.
- 2.3 Establish mechanisms to bring supporters of cultural education together in a more effective advocacy role.

## **Cultural Diversity**

**Goal 3:** Active engagement of all residents in cultural activities, events, and organizations regardless of race or ethnicity.

- 3.1 Coordinate a festival of performances, exhibitions, and lectures, building on the resources of Greater Birmingham's cultural sector, that focuses on racial reconciliation and unity, and is targeted at local, regional, and national audiences.
- 3.2 Create a centralized database of African-American and Hispanic business people, civic and religious leaders, and others who have an interest in serving on the boards of nonprofit cultural organizations.
- 3.3 Develop programs that assist larger cultural organizations to establish partnerships and mentoring relationships with small and emerging ethnically-specific groups.

## **Cultural Economic Development**

**Goal 4:** An enhanced role for arts and culture in fostering the economic development of the region.

- 4.1 Develop and coordinate mechanisms to promote cultural attractions of all sizes and ethnicities locally, regionally, and nationally.
- 4.2 Give priority to completing visitor-related projects that highlight Birmingham's unique cultural environment.
- 4.3 Establish formal public art programs throughout the region to strengthen the role and presence of art and design in all communities.
- 4.4 Include arts and culture as an integral component of long-range revitalization strategies using outlying cultural attractions as well as those in downtown Birmingham.

## **Neighborhood and Community Cultural Development**

**Goal 5:** Equitable access to arts and cultural experiences in neighborhoods and communities throughout the Greater Birmingham region.

- 5.1 As a first step, integrate the delivery of arts and cultural programming into existing public facilities.

- 5.2 Enhance the mix of cultural programming available in neighborhoods and communities throughout the Greater Birmingham region.
- 5.3 Long-term, develop a network of neighborhood-based community centers that focus on arts and culture.
- 5.4 As an initial focus for additional neighborhood facilities, examine potential sites for renovation (such as the McCoy Center and the Shields School) to house neighborhood-based programs (such as the West End Community and Youth Cultural Arts Center) or others.
- 5.5 Provide incentives to cultural organizations to develop neighborhood-oriented programming in partnership with social service organizations.

### **Cultural Facilities**

**Goal 6:** A diversified inventory of high-quality cultural spaces accessible to everyone.

- 6.1 Coordinate planning for new and restored cultural venues within Greater Birmingham.
- 6.2 Develop a Community Cultural Center on the site of Boutwell Municipal Auditorium that provides opportunities for residents to encounter a range of cultural experiences.
- 6.3 Renovate the Lyric Theatre; coordinate development and management of the Alabama, the Carver, and a renovated Lyric; and foster the development of an educationally oriented performance space for the Alabama School of Fine Arts.
- 6.4 Develop “niche” performance venues in regions around downtown Birmingham, based on market demand.
- 6.5 Develop a cultural facility rental subsidy fund to help organizations and artists use professional-level spaces while building their capacity over a period of five to seven years.
- 6.6 Use vacant downtown spaces throughout the region for a range of culturally-oriented purposes, both temporary and permanent.

### **Cultural Infrastructure**

**Goal 7:** A new entity to provide consistent and high-level coordination and leadership for the cultural sector in Greater Birmingham and the region.

- 7.1 Create a new nonprofit organization called the Regional Cultural Alliance (RCA) to serve as the regional umbrella organization for arts and culture, working with other local arts agencies in the region.
- 7.2 Develop consistent re-granting guidelines and programs for both public and private sector cultural funding.
- 7.3 Develop a coordinated approach to empower RCA, working with the City of Birmingham Arts and Culture Commission (BACC).

### **Public and Private Sector Funding**

**Goal 8:** Meaningful increases in public and private sector support for arts and cultural activities, events, facilities, and organizations.

- 8.1 Set priority funding requirements, indicate where existing monies can be redirected, identify key prospects, and begin to lay the groundwork for funding.
- 8.2 Create incentives to increase public sector support.
- 8.3 Develop a dedicated revenue source to provide on-going operating support for cultural organizations in Jefferson County.
- 8.4 Create mechanisms for local private support to be increased.
- 8.5 Increase the earned income potential of cultural organizations.