

Part I

Introduction

Background on the Project

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 implementation of that vision. Funding was assembled from many public and private sources, and Wolf, Keens & Company of Cambridge, Massachusetts was engaged to assist with the planning process. Management of the planning process has been carried out by Region 2020, a citizen-based regional planning organization whose scope includes the twelve counties in Central Alabama (Jefferson, Shelby, Cullman, Walker, Talladega, Calhoun, Etowah, St. Clair, Chilton, Bibb, Tuscaloosa, and Blount). A leadership group acting in the role of a Steering Committee has provided guidance to the process (cf. Appendix A for membership of the committee).

The process has included:

- interviews and small group meetings with more than 275 people (names and affiliations of these people are listed in Appendix A of this report)
- a series of task force working group sessions in targeted subject areas, including diversity, education, facilities, funding, working artists, cultural organizations, neighborhood and community cultural development, cultural tourism, and cultural economic development
- meetings with representatives of local arts councils from throughout the region
- 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
- an analysis of the financial activity of the cultural sector in the region

- inventories of cultural programs, facilities, and cultural education activities, as well as data collection about the City of Birmingham's community centers
- a regional market survey designed to provide information about people's attitudes and participation patterns relative to arts and culture
- regular media coverage and various forms of communication with the community.

The success of this project has depended in large part on the engagement of residents of Greater Birmingham. The strong interest shown provides optimism about the plan's future. Engagement has been enthusiastic and positive. Members of the Steering Committee, the staff of Region 2020, and consultants from Wolf, Keens & Company want to take this opportunity to thank all the participants for giving so generously of their time to this planning process.

Highlights and Contents

This preliminary cultural planning report has a number of themes and recommendations. Among the most important are the following:

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 the infrastructure in support of arts and culture, including physical facilities and organizational support
5. Providing adequate financial resources for a full range of cultural organizations and activities.

There are four major sections, including Part I (Introduction) that provide background and context for the planning process.

- **Part II** provides important context by describing Greater Birmingham and specific findings related to the cultural sector.
- **Part III** details the preliminary goals and strategies for areas that include:
 - o Cultural Organizations and Working Artists
 - o Cultural Education
 - o Cultural Diversity
 - o Cultural Economic Development
 - o Neighborhood and Community Cultural Development
 - o Cultural Facilities

- Cultural Infrastructure
 - Support for Arts and Culture
- **Part IV**, Next Steps, covers the early stages of implementation, including the process by which this report is to be revised and accepted by the community.

Appendices to the report include details of participants and specific research components. Appendix A, a list of participants, is bound in with this report. The remaining appendices are bound as a separate volume. They include:

- Appendix B: Audience and General Public Survey research
- Appendix C: Cultural Budget Research
- Appendix D: Inventory of Cultural Organizations: Mission, Program, and Educational Activities
- Appendix E: Inventory of Birmingham Community Centers
- Appendix F: Cultural Facilities Inventory

Key Theme

The cultural planning process has touched on many aspects of the lives of residents of the Greater Birmingham region. As various communities in the region continue to grow and renew themselves, it is clear that the past inevitably plays an important role in the region's cultural life. What makes this region unique *is* that history, including the positive as well as the negative.

The key theme underlying this plan is ***enhancing the cultural life of Greater Birmingham through recognition and celebration of the region's rich heritage and diversity***. This can bring people of all races together in meaningful ways and continue the process of reconciliation that has been kindled over the past forty years.

Vision for the Future

The following statement is a vision for the future of arts and culture in Greater Birmingham. It is a synthesis of comments made in individual interviews, group meetings, and public sessions during the fact-finding for this plan.

In 2020, the residents of the Greater Birmingham region share a common view of the importance of culture that has been enriched over the years by the contributions of people of all backgrounds. With the richness of cultural programming and the improved coordination and marketing of the various cultural offerings, everyone participates at some level in culture and takes pride in supporting the region's cultural organizations.

Young children in neighborhoods and communities experience the arts and culture of many different peoples in their classrooms and in venues across the region. There is an on-going dialogue taking place each year in Birmingham based on the positive role that culture plays in promoting community development and understanding between the races. It is fostered by conversations that grow out of an annual festival that focuses on artistic and cultural expressions of Birmingham's racial history. The number of national and international visitors to the region has increased significantly as a result of this and other cultural events.

Arts and culture in the cities of the region thrives because the cities and counties work together to create synergies, building and supporting facilities and programs that serve the region and are located strategically throughout the region. The role of arts and culture in attracting investment to the region is growing annually.

Elected officials and civic leaders have seen the value of the arts and the immense return on their investment. Funding is stable and growing, with contributions flowing from cities, towns, and counties throughout the region – as well as corporations, individuals, and foundations – and is dispersed to cultural groups of all sizes, disciplines, ethnicities, and locations.

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