

City arts community needs a 'Marshall Plan'

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The field needs a new paradigm to super-charge the cultural recovery once this crisis has passed.

As a former, long-serving president of Brooklyn Academy of Music and member of the city's army of arts administrators, my heart goes out to those who now carry the responsibility for steering their battered institutions through this storm. Given my decades of experience guiding BAM through earlier, if less dire, crises, I would like to share my thoughts on viable tactics and a promising strategy to cope with the current situation and move beyond it.

As a first step, the field must convene a task force, appointed by the mayor, bringing together a dozen of our organizations' leaders and most important stakeholders: CEOs and board chairs of arts non-profits, both large and small; representatives from organized labor; individual artists; and community leaders.

The group should meet immediately (online) to devise a clear and focused response to the financial and human damage wrought by the crisis. Speaking in a unified voice with a clear set of recommendations will generate a larger payout for the field as a whole from both the government and the private sector.

The task force's first order of business should be to develop and distribute a simple but comprehensive questionnaire to all of the arts organizations in order to gather a detailed profile of each institution's exposures to the shutdown, including revenue shortfalls, staff layoffs, lost artists' income, deferred facility maintenance and, for some, dwindling cash reserves and endowments.

The collected data will yield indisputable facts on sector-wide trends, improving the field's ability to craft a rescue plan with more than the limited surveys and guesswork we have too often relied on. Equipped with conclusions supported by the data, the Task Force will then

be in a position to 1) design a more effective financial rescue plan from federal, state, and city sources; 2) increase funding from donors already participating; 3) identify a much larger base of funders willing to contribute to the cultural revival.

Government - The task force could set up an online "town hall" meeting with elected officials (federal, city and state), in order to make specific funding requests and maximize support from government stimulus packages.

Private Sector and Foundations - While some foundations have jumped in to help, there are many more on the sidelines. Hopefully, even the most generous donors will consider additional funding once they have analyzed the new data. The task force, acting on behalf of the entire field, would tailor a comprehensive solicitation plan and a communications strategy to amplify our most pressing needs. Individual arts organizations could then adopt these tools to solicit their own separate funders and audiences. For instance, the best course may be to shore up small and medium-sized organizations with direct grants while large ones are better served by providing loan packages and matching grant initiatives.

Investment - Culture is profitable for New York City. It is a powerful engine of the city's economy, generating millions of dollars from tourism, raising real estate values, enhancing the success of retail shops and restaurants, reviving derelict buildings, revitalizing neighborhoods, and creating strong communities. The task force will need to make a more convincing argument to local businesses and investors that direct funding of the arts will add to the economic value of their assets. In other words, impact investing in arts is an effective way to enhance the future worth of their capital.

Beyond private investment, there is an opportunity for government as well to rethink its perspective on how the arts fit into an overall economic development strategy. In addition to responding to individual institutions' operational and capital needs, the city could embrace arts and culture as a pillar of its neighborhood revitalization plans.

We must change our familiar narrative and start thinking and talking about investment—both public and private. Philanthropy alone, as essential as it is, cannot meet the ordinary demands of most arts organizations, let alone chart the course of recovery from the current extraordinary crisis.

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