

Can Arts and Culture Put Heads in Beds?

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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Don Wooten says the Quad Cities have a vibrant enough collection of cultural organizations to support a much larger population. “We have so many different arts and cultural organizations,” said Wooten, the primary artistic force behind the Genesis Guild’s classic theatre and the chair of Quad Cities Presenters, Incorporated.

That wealth of culture is both a strength and a weakness; the number of cultural organizations creates diversity, but it also makes for a crowded marketplace, in which organizations end up competing for the time and money of local residents.

But what if cultural organizations – from heavy hitters such as the Figge Art Museum and the Putnam Museum & IMAX Theatre to smaller players such as Ghostlight Theatre and Junior Theatre – banded together for a regional joint-marketing effort, trying to draw audiences from places such as Rockford and Des Moines, but also major metro areas such as Chicago, Milwaukee, and Minneapolis?

That’s the idea behind a proposed Cultural Marketing Resource Center, which the Quad Cities Convention & Visitors Bureau (QCCVB) unveiled last week in the form of a draft report. The concept is hardly new; what’s different this time around is that it has the imprint of a major institutional player in the QCCVB and that it proposes significant financial investment as well as specific goals for growth. The challenges now are building consensus, finding a way to pay for the effort, and ensuring mechanisms are in place to measure results -- none of which are addressed in the report.

The goal is for the Cultural Marketing Resource Center (CMRC) to “become a marketing department for those [cultural] organizations,” according to Todd Gruen, a project manager with C.H. Johnson Consulting, which drafted the Quad Cities Arts, Heritage, & Cultural Tourism Plan. The scope of the company’s inquiry was wide, including roughly forty arts and cultural organizations and venues, along with representatives of local hotels and chambers of commerce.

“There’s a great story to tell here, but there hasn’t been a platform to tell it,” Gruen said of the

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local arts community. With tight budgets, organizations spend nearly all their resources on product, and very little on marketing. Ghostlight Theatre, he said, has an operations budget of \$120,000 in its first season with a full-time artistic director, but the marketing budget is \$10,000.

Gruen said a rule of thumb is that cultural organizations should spend half their operating budgets on marketing. With their current budgets, he added, most cultural organizations can only “attract a local audience. These entities don’t have the finances” to pursue aggressive regional marketing.

The CMRC would change that. “The goal is initially to promote the Quad Cities as a cultural tourism destination,” Gruen said.

A Concept Only

The Cultural Marketing Resource Center is of course an idea that many cultural organizations support.

“We just don’t have the resources to do this [marketing] ourselves,” said Melissa Coulter, Ghostlight’s artistic director. Pooling resources will give organizations access to knowledge and expertise they currently don’t have, she said. “Am I trained to do marketing?” she said. “No.” But the job falls to her because of the size of the organization.

She added that Ghostlight right now draws about 5 percent of its audience from the area surrounding the Quad Cities – places such as Muscatine and Galesburg – but would like to draw from Rockford, Iowa City, and Peoria within five years. That’s exactly the sort of thing that the CMRC hopes to accomplish.

LuAnn Haydon, manager of the John Deere Pavilion and Foundation facilities and also a QCCVB executive-board member, said she’s been advocating external marketing for Quad Cities arts and cultural organizations for years. She added that her venue does marketing in a 350-mile radius of the Quad Cities and fields 35,000 to 50,000 leads a year from that advertising. “We need to get our arms around it as a community,” she said of the study’s recommendations.

But the external-marketing initiative at this point exists “solely ... as a concept,” Gruen said.

Wooten said the goal of the initiative is admirable, but he immediately raised the money question. “How do you get sufficient funding to do an adequate job?” he asked. The Quad City Presenters for several years pooled money to buy full-page ads in one of the local daily papers, but the cost eventually killed the program, and the effort reached only local audiences.

Financing is a key question among many that need to be resolved before the CMRC can become reality: how to get and measure the buy-in of myriad arts and culture organizations, how to pay for it in the first few years, how to pay for it in the long run, how to measure results, and what the organizational structure would be.

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And the answers to those questions don't appear to be forthcoming anytime soon. Joe Taylor, president and CEO of the QCCVB, said there's no timetable for his organization to act on the report.

One challenge, he said, is that other groups need to step up and give their opinions and suggestions. "It will really be a community-wide decision," he said. "The Bureau cannot take this on unilaterally."

He conceded that with no endpoint, the idea could languish. But "it's gone on with no conclusion," he said. "At least we have a starting point. It's a springboard."

He said that he'd like to have some resolution within six months, so that the QCCVB can incorporate the initiative into the budget for its next fiscal year.

Still, the QCCVB has no formal process through which it can gather feedback on the plan, and the organization neglected to invite hoteliers to the study unveiling last Thursday – which Taylor acknowledged as a mistake. After all, hotels will reap the most direct benefits from increased tourism and will be looked to as part of measurement efforts.

The most obvious source of feedback will come from the Quad City Presenters group, a coalition of roughly thirty cultural and arts organizations. Wooten said the group will next meet in December, and the subject of the CMRC will probably be raised then.

The Tough Questions

The study released last week puts an ideal budget for the CMRC at \$300,000 for two years, with a more realistic figure of \$250,000. That includes one and a half employees, and 46 percent of resources going into marketing.

The QCCVB is clear that it won't fund the initiative at the expense of its existing programs. "We need to create new streams of revenue for this," Taylor said. The organization currently has a budget of \$1.2 million, roughly two-thirds of which comes from portions of hotel-motel taxes that local governments contribute. (See sidebar.)

Initially, Gruen and Taylor said, the goal is to fund the CMRC through grants and philanthropic organizations, such as local foundations and the Riverboat Development Authority and the Scott County Regional Authority, both of which contributed funding for the C.H. Johnson study. To date, no funding commitments have been secured.

Seeking philanthropic contributions for the CMRC makes sense, because it gives the initiative time to prove itself. The C.H. Johnson report predicts that with a two-year budget of \$300,000, the CMRC would have a direct economic impact of \$4.3 million for the Quad Cities. The draft report forecasts that about a third of this would be created by 8,108 "incremental room nights," with the remainder coming from "day trippers."

Matt Summy, who co-authored the study for C.H. Johnson Consulting, said that \$4.3-million

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impact should happen each year once the marketing is institutionalized. He said the figures were derived from local market characteristics as well as experience in other markets. They represent a 1.5-percent increase in weekend hotel occupancy, and a 0.4-percent increase in daily hotel occupancy. The numbers are based on the assumption that cultural and arts marketing will lengthen stays, resulting in more room nights and more visitor days.

If the CMRC can show that type of return on investment, it seems possible that long-term funding can be secured, such as an increased share of hotel-motel taxes. The C.H. Johnson report notes that among nine select communities in the area, the Quad Cities have the lowest per-hotel-room Convention & Visitors Bureau budget. The QCCVB budget amounts to just over \$259 per room, while at the other end of the spectrum, Peoria's and Rockford's tourism agencies have budgets of \$569 and \$480, respectively, for each room. Des Moines, Iowa City/Coralville, and Rochester, Minnesota, are within \$10 of the Quad Cities' per-room budgets. (See chart.)

But it's unlikely that hotel-motel taxes can provide anything close to full funding for the CMRC. To cover a \$125,000 annual budget for the initiative, local governments would need to increase their hotel-motel tax contributions roughly 15 percent. In other words, cities that now give 25 percent of their hotel-motel taxes for Quad Cities marketing would need to increase that to close to 29 percent.

And that hotel-motel money is currently being used for other things, such as the Family Museum of Arts & Science in Bettendorf and the RiverCenter and capital improvements in Davenport. Prying that money away from the cities might prove difficult, particularly with the budget crunches most cities are facing.

"I don't think there will be any one source," Taylor said. He suggested a combination of hotel-motel taxes and contributions from the hospitality community and arts and culture groups.

That's the main reason the startup funding is such a smart approach. If the CMRC can deliver what the report promises in the first two years, there will be less resistance to buy-in. Coulter said with that kind of return on investment, cultural organizations could chip in. "I don't think it would be unreasonable to ask for an additional fee" to participate in the CMRC, she said.

But that assumes the CMRC is able to show its impact. Gruen said that it *is* possible to measure how effective the marketing campaign is. The CMRC should produce an annual document, he said, proving its efficacy. "You can show an actual return on investment," he said.

But that requires work – on the part of hoteliers, asking visitors why they're here, how they found out about the Quad Cities, etc., and on the part of cultural organizations. Tracking, Taylor said, becomes important at all levels. "We will all have a critical role in research," he said.

Overlapping marketing efforts can make quantification difficult, though. The City of Bettendorf, for example, had agreed to gradually increase the percentage of its hotel-motel tax that it gave

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to the Quad Cities Convention & Visitors Bureau, from 20 to 25 percent over five years. But the city stopped at 22 percent because of concerns from the city council.

The challenge, City Administrator Decker Ploehn said, is measuring the effectiveness of the organization's efforts, because QCCVB marketing isn't done in a vacuum. It's easy to see that certain events – such as the John Deere Classic golf tournament and the Bix race and festivals – fill area hotel rooms, Ploehn said. If a person receives three marketing messages about the Quad Cities, how can anybody determine which one sold the region as a destination? “How do you determine how and why people got here?” he said. “It's very difficult to quantify.”

The other major lingering question is the CMRC's organizational structure. The report suggests putting it in the QCCVB, which is already doing regional marketing of the Quad Cities. “It seems a natural extension of what they do,” Coulter said. “I think there's good leadership there.”

The QCCVB has the added advantage of not being associated with any existing arts organization and therefore being impartial.

But it's difficult to vet the idea thoroughly when it's mostly a broad outline at this point. As Gruen said when asked whether the CMRC could be self-sustaining, “We haven't gotten that far.”

For a copy of the cultural-tourism study, visit (<http://www.chjc.com>) and click on “client login.” Use “Quad Cities” for both the user name and the password.

Annual Contributions of Hotel-Motel Taxes to the QCCVB

Bettendorf: 7-percent room tax generated \$815,000 in Fiscal Year 2004; 22 percent (\$179,300) given to QCCVB.

Davenport: 7-percent room tax generated \$1.45 million in Fiscal Year 2004; 25 percent (\$362,500) given to QCCVB.

Moline: 5-percent room tax generated \$646,000 in Fiscal Year 2003; 25 percent (\$161,500) given to QCCVB.

Scott County: \$70,000 given to QCCVB.

Rock Island: \$30,000 given to QCCVB.

Rock Island County: \$11,000 given to QCCVB.

LeClaire: \$5,000 given to QCCVB.

East Moline: \$3,000 given to QCCVB.

Silvis: \$1,000 given to QCCVB.