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Minnesota's Arts and Cultural Heritage Amendment Lessons of the First Two Years

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Minnesota's Arts and Cultural Heritage Amendment

Lessons of the First Two Years

Maxine Adams

"How did you get the amendment to pass?" Those of us who work in the arts in Minnesota are used to being asked this question whenever we talk to someone from another state. As a result of engaging in several of these conversations, I have come to understand that the outsider's perception of the landmark passage of Minnesota's Arts and Cultural Heritage Amendment in 2008

is often that we somehow had a magic formula, and if I can just tell them what the formula was, then they can do the same thing in their states. As the economic climate for state funding of the arts around the country continues to deteriorate, providing an overview of what happened in Minnesota, before and after the passage of the amendment, seems increasingly important.

For clarification, the legal name of the constitutional amendment is the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund, but in this article I will use what has become the common name: the Legacy Fund. I will also keep my focus on what pertains to the portion of the fund designated for the Minnesota State Arts Board (MSAB) and the eleven Regional Arts Councils.

First, let me introduce you to a few of the arts leaders in Minnesota who contributed to this article. I felt it was important to solicit the views of Sue Gens, executive director of the Minnesota State Arts Board; Sheila Smith, executive director of Minnesota Citizens for the Arts (MCA); Vickie Benson, arts program director for the McKnight Foundation and representing the eleven Regional Arts Councils of Minnesota; and Jeff Prauer, executive director of the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council. I thank these colleagues for adding their perspective on the Legacy Amendment, past, present, and future.

When asked what laid the groundwork for the passage of the Legacy Amendment, Sheila Smith said: "The search for dedicated funding for the arts began in 1991 when Senator Richard Cohen convened a working group to search for a dedicated source of funding for the arts. It wasn't until the early 2000s that the idea of dedicated revenue in a constitutional amendment was proposed by the hunters and anglers for land conservation, and in 2004 the arts were attached to the bill. Finally in 2008, after significant lobbying from [Minnesota Citizens for the Arts], the amendment passed the legislature on the same day as MCA brought over five hundred

people to the Capitol for Arts Advocacy Day. Our success at the legislative level came from three important ingredients: one, a longtime commitment to arts advocacy in Minnesota, which has created a great pool of grassroots activists who jump in when asked; second, our very brilliant lobbyist Larry Redmond, who outmaneuvered and outstrategized all opponents; and third, our great legislative champion Senator Dick Cohen, who as chair of the Finance Committee worked tirelessly to gain the support of his peers."

Jeff Prauer added: "Various previous initiatives, such as surtaxes on entertainment-related sales, had been explored for many years. The constitutional amendment idea was introduced by sportsmen to benefit wildlife habitat only, but was discussed in the legislature for nearly ten years with little advance-

ment. Other groups, such as environmental and wildlife protection advocates, wanted to get in on the 'action.' This was originally seen as competition, but over time the idea of coalescing rather than competing took hold. Some people in both camps thought that the other was a detriment to an amendment getting passed, but now even some of those people are convinced that it wouldn't have passed without the inclusion of both the arts and the environment."

Smith recalled, and Prauer agreed, that "there were two major advocacy hurdles: getting the legislature to pass a bill to get the amendment on the general election ballot, and then getting the electorate to vote for the amendment. Having finally passed in the legislature in early 2008, the amendment appeared on the November 2008 ballot and was passed by a substantial majority of 56 percent of the voters statewide, which was more votes than Obama got, in a heavily Democratic state!"

After the first step of getting the Legacy Amendment on the general election ballot, MCA, the MSAB, eleven Regional Arts Councils, and arts grassroots advocates, in coalition with conservation advocacy groups and constituents in Minnesota, faced a huge challenge of educating the voters of the state to "Vote Yes!" in November 2008.

We all agreed with Sheila Smith, one of the leaders of the "Vote Yes!" campaign, that the elements of success were as follows:

- Professional political campaign manager and structure. It was a highly organized real-world political campaign, with distinct, but well-coordinated, organizing arms to connect with likely voters in each of the four areas the funds would support (water, land, parks, arts);
- Polling, polling, polling. The campaign knew not only what causes would resonate with voters but also which specific words to use or not use;

- A laserlike focus on one key message in mass media and ads. The polling told us that clean water was the most popular element in the amendment; and
- A broad coalition of causes and organizations that were committed to passing the amendment. Hundreds of organizations could see how they might benefit from the dedicated funds and therefore were inclined to motivate their members, constituents, and participants to support it. Each brought different strengths and resources to the coalition.

When we heard the news on the morning of November 5 that the amendment had passed by a very respectable 56 percent, we were wildly elated. We all, the arts supporters, the environmentalists, hunters and anglers, had worked so long and so hard that we were pinching ourselves to be sure we weren't dreaming. I vividly remember the phone calls, the hugging, and the impromptu celebrations, all of us saying, "We did it, we really did it!" November 2008 was a heady time of big dreams, of what-ifs and a slow realization that there was a huge amount of work to be done.

By December the public grantmakers at the MSAB and the Regional Arts Councils knew that we were being charged with a huge and very serious responsibility. The voters of Minnesota had entrusted us with \$93.2 million over the next two years for arts and cultural heritage programs, which was 19.75 percent of the total Legacy Amendment funding. Of that \$93.2 million the Minnesota State Arts Board received \$43.3 million. In effect this tripled the amount of state funding to the MSAB and to the eleven Regional Arts Councils. The funds would be available beginning July 1, 2009. That left us eight months to build the infrastructure for administering and distributing triple the amount of funding we had been responsible for in 2008. Personally, I can remember many evenings and weekends spent working on new grant programs, budgets, organizing focus groups. I know I wasn't the only one who gave up trying to keep track of my overtime.

Looking back, I asked Jeff Prauer what he remembered from the time of November 2008 until July 2009. He said: "During the 'Vote Yes!' campaign, there was definitely a feeling of 'Let's get this thing passed, and then we'll deal with the mechanics of how the money gets allocated.' While the constitutional amendment was enacted by the vote of the electorate, directing the allocation of funds is the responsibility of the legislature. They basically had no idea how to implement an allocation system. Consequently, Minnesota Citizens for the Arts worked diligently with the chairs of the

House and Senate committees charged with overseeing the funding allocation to convince them that the Minnesota State Arts Board and Regional Arts Councils system was well established and had more than thirty years of experience in responsibly managing grants to arts organizations in all eighty-seven counties of the state, so that the legislature would not have to invent a new system. Nevertheless, the House committee held many public hearings in an effort to educate itself on arts funding issues, and ended up making recommendations that were more complex than what Minnesota Citizens for the Arts had proposed. In addition,

the legislation included a number of requirements for planning and reporting that the Arts Board and Regional Arts Councils had to undertake, which to some extent led to a bit of a departure from the original intent of the dedicated funding stream, which was to fortify and expand the arts ecology in

the state. As our lobbyist, Larry Redmond, said at one point during all of the post-amendment planning, when it seemed like there were ever more hoops to jump through, 'How many times do we have to secure this funding?' "

Showing her sense of humor, Sue Gens remembers it like this: "I've often said it was like flying the Space Shuttle and building it at the same time. Everyone — from the legislature, to the business enterprise of the state of Minnesota, to our board and staff, to Regional Arts Councils, to potential applicants and constituents — felt the time line was too compressed. But everyone had a common belief that it was vital to get the dollars out of the state treasury and into the hands of individuals and organizations that would put it to work in communities all across the state."

One of the most memorable experiences of the planning process was a combined meeting of the Minnesota State Arts Board and all eleven executive directors of the Regional Arts Councils at which we discussed our visions for the Legacy Amendment. Here is what the Minnesota State Arts Board and the Regional Arts Councils believe we will leave as our legacy after the twenty-five years of the amendment have been completed.

Our vision is that in twenty-five years, Minnesotans will have made a significant investment in the arts. As a result:

- In Minnesota, the arts define who we are. This is a place where people are transformed by quality arts experiences, and see the arts as essential to their communities. The arts in Minnesota connect people of all ages and cultures, fostering understanding and respect.
- Arts and culture are central to Minnesota's educational system and lifelong learning opportunities. The arts

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develop creative minds that maximize new opportunities and find solutions to life's challenges.

- In Minnesota, the arts are an integral part of the economy. Because of the arts, Minnesota communities are successful, dynamic, attractive places to live and work.
- Minnesota is a recognized national arts leader, a magnet for artists and arts enthusiasts, and a destination for tourists. Residents and visitors are assured a world-class quality arts experience.
- Minnesotans appreciate, create, attend, participate in, and invest in the arts. Minnesota's effective, innovative, vibrant, public-private support for the arts is the strongest in the country. Universal support and appreciation for the arts help ensure the state's exceptional quality of life.

By July 1, 2009, we had completed our planning work and were ready to begin awarding grants and providing services. Those first grant rounds were heady stuff. I remember a grant award ceremony at which a legislator, who was used to dealing with grant checks of a few hundred dollars, was handing a check for \$11,000 to an arts organization, and he said, "Wow, you can really do something with this!" He was so right; we were on our way to providing record-setting support to the arts in the next twelve months.

The effects of the Legacy Amendment were far reaching in the Minnesota arts community. We are blessed that Minnesota has several large private foundations that support the arts as part of their philanthropic mission. I was interested in hearing how the Legacy Amendment affected this segment of the state's arts community, so I asked Vickie Benson, arts program director for the McKnight Foundation, what their expectations of the fund had been and how the Legacy Fund had influenced their work. She replied: "Our expectations were that a good portion of the funds would be distributed by the Minnesota State Arts Board and the eleven Regional Arts Councils and that arts organizations and artists across the state would greatly benefit from the funds. Since the voters overwhelmingly chose the amendment we also saw this as a strong indication that Minnesotans want more arts and more access to art and to artists. We expected that great projects and support for the arts and artists would be a result of increased funds through the amendment."

Benson continued: "As a private foundation, it has been gratifying to talk with McKnight grantees who have received funding to accomplish great work. The funds have enhanced organizations' and artists' abilities to deliver great work across Minnesota. This also enhances the work that

McKnight hopes to do by supporting great organizations and great artists across the state."

Now that it is 2011 and we have had two years under our belts, what difference has the Legacy Amendment made to the arts in Minnesota?

Here are the thoughts of Jeff Prauer: "Perhaps the most significant differences are the addition of new arts learning and education projects through grants from the Arts Board and Regional Arts Councils. In addition, some of the Regional Arts Councils, each of which serves multiple counties, and

some of which have had minuscule resources to support arts activities in small towns and rural areas, are able to make some more substantial grants for projects that have lasting impact or that reach people who have long been underserved by the arts. Even in the Twin Cities metro-

politan area, the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council, which had never had enough funding to do arts education grants, implemented a new Arts Learning program, which has so far awarded nearly 150 grants for participatory arts activities led by professional artists in schools, parks and recreation centers, senior centers, and other venues in the seven-county Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area, in which about half of the state's population resides. While the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund cannot be used for new buildings or major building renovations, a number of grants for capital improvements have increased access for people with disabilities and allowed small organizations with limited financial resources to enhance their artistic offerings and educational programs through equipment and facility improvements."

To this question, Sue Gens replied: "The first grants the Arts Board made were supplemental operating support grants to 150+ of Minnesota's most important arts organizations. This happened in the winter of 2009-10; the recession was at one of its deepest points and the funds helped keep organizations alive; they prevented layoffs and helped those organizations weather the worst (we hope) of the storm. We also see new kinds of activities starting because there are new resources available to support them."

Looking back I asked everyone what they thought had worked well and what hadn't worked so well.

Sue Gens said, "A great many existing and new projects, programs, and organizations are being supported by the Legacy Fund. The dollars are getting into the hands of an amazingly broad array of recipients."

She continued: "It's not working as well as it needs to. We have a dynamic twenty-five-year vision for the arts in the

state of Minnesota; and we have some programs in place. What we need now is the strategic road map that gets us from the point we are today, to the point we need to be in 2034.

“We also need to be much better at articulating, measuring, and obtaining evidence of the impact of funding — not just be able to provide a long list of activities that are happening, but really be able to prove that they are making a difference and helping us get to that point we want to reach in twenty-five years.”

Jeff Prauer replied: “The grant programs by the Arts Board and Regional Arts Councils are generally going very well.

On some issues there is great uniformity in how grants are considered and awarded, but there are still some areas of overlap, which has

led, for example, to discussion on establishing caps on how much state funding any single organization can receive. In the absence of such caps, there is some feeling that some organizations are being awarded inordinate amounts of money, while others have little or no access to Arts and Cultural Heritage Funds. Also, there are different perspectives on whether there even should be uniformity in all regions and at the State Arts Board. Because we were intent on hitting the ground running, some programs got rolled out before some of these issues could be addressed, so we continue to discuss and explore.”

I also talked with Jeff Prauer about what work he felt lay ahead of us. “While the legislation is in effect for twenty-five years,” he said, “the method of allocating funds was not legislated for that time period, and so it is evident that the legislature will continue to explore ways to utilize these funds as broadly and effectively as possible, particularly with tight budgets such as the current \$5 billion gap between revenue and expenses anticipated for the 2012–13 biennium. When the amendment passed, some people thought that Minnesota Citizens for the Arts could fold up its tent and move on, but it has become obvious that we will continue to need their strategic direction in protecting this resource and in educating the legislature and the public on how the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund is meeting its goals and objectives.”

I asked everyone if they had any advice for other states that are thinking of a similar approach.

Sue Gens: “Start now. In Minnesota, the effort took ten to twenty years (depending on who’s telling the story) from the original idea to the point that the voters approved the constitutional amendment. Keep your eye on the prize. Be strategic and patient. There will be advances and setbacks,

there will be fights and compromises, but don’t let those divert you from the big goal.”

Jeff Prauer: “As they say on television, ‘Don’t try this at home.’ State Senator Richard Cohen, who has worked for many years on various strategies for dedicated funding streams for the arts and was one of the driving forces behind the coalition of legislators interested in arts and environmental issues, has said that any state can do this. While I’m sure that Senator Cohen is right, there is also a certain chemistry that is necessary to ensure that all the in-

gredients come together in just the right way at just the right time. The important point here is that this was the result of a lot of coalition building over a long period of time to get the amendment on the ballot, and then a professionally led political campaign com-

plete with fund-raising, polling, and advertising.”

Vickie Benson: “Know that the work doesn’t end just because citizens vote for such an amendment. Expect to have to keep watch over the voters’ wishes. Expect great things!”

Sheila Smith summed it up this way: “It was a battle all the way through, a very risky strategy, and we were never assured that all of our hard work would result in the passage of the amendment. But if we hadn’t taken those risks, taking advantage of opportunities as they presented themselves, we would be much worse off today.”

Smith continued: “There are literally dozens of heroes who helped make it happen. There were three different phases:

1. The lobbying and grassroots effort to pass it at the legislature;
2. The professional political work to pass it at the ballot box; and then
3. The hard work of grantmakers at the MSAB and the Regional Arts Councils to implement the new programs once the money was obtained.

Each phase had its own heroes and leaders.”

And finally, Smith said: “Ninety percent of arts ballot measures proposed to voters pass, according to statistics kept by Americans for the Arts. I believe the arts community does not go directly to the voters enough.”

In closing, I hope this report has provided some answers and guidance to those who want to know how we in Minnesota passed the Legacy Amendment. It truly has been an effort that succeeded because of the work of thousands of people and the vision of the voters of Minnesota.

Maxine Adams is executive director, Lake Region Arts Council, and Forum of Regional Arts Council, chair.