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Next Generation Theory of Change

The “Next Generation” initiative emerged as a result of conversations between the leadership and staff of the two founding partners, as they came to realize that the mission, collaborative partnerships, and credibility with which each operated in their respective areas of expertise were critical to those of the other, if both were to fully achieve their mission. This mutual recognition underscored their commitment that rural America’s most vexing challenge must drive this initiative. Our Theory of Change, while elemental, will result in transformational change in public, private, and philanthropic commitments to rural America, if successfully executed. This is succinctly stated below:

Despite massive investment in rural, community, and economic development over decades, if communities targeted for these efforts cannot attract and retain the “Next Generation” of citizens, and leaders, in an ongoing manner – not simply for the next cohort, but all those which follow, they will diminish over time, and eventually wither away. Today, rural communities and regions must offer the economic, social, cultural and environmental attributes necessary to attract “Next Generation” citizens to their places.

Fortunately, most rural places offer most of the necessary amenities and advantages which myriad surveys show are consistently valued by young people choosing a locale in which to raise their family, absent three: an economy sufficiently vibrant to provide the income necessary; a diverse, dynamic and inclusive culture; and a human ecosystem which offers opportunities for personal expression and active community engagement.

These last three indices of rural “quality of life” are equally critical to our urban communities, and drive almost all business site selection / attraction / retention strategies, as well as locale decisions by entrepreneurial class. In today’s economy, people will move to places, and jobs will follow them, not the reverse. Today, placemaking is absolutely essential to economic resilience.

Therefore, places which are able to align public, private, and philanthropic investments, to further enhance overall quality of life, will garner significant competitive advantage. This collective impact is what enables urban regions to create vibrant arts and cultural enterprise, writ large. However, it is important to note these successes are driven by massive and aligned funding resources. Since “Next Generation” practitioners are both attracted to, and build upon, these ecosystems, all sectors in urban communities now realize the importance of this mutually beneficial synergy.

Unfortunately, because of capacity, space and resource disadvantages, these synapses do not connect nearly as well in rural places. Although rural people and their communities are often blamed for this disadvantage, it is, in fact often the unintended result of massive funding flow inequities under which rural America struggles. Because the preponderance of national foundation investments go to urban recipients, and because multi-year Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) “Place Entitlements” are only received by Metropolitan Statistical Areas, these resources enable enhanced urban capacity.

Rural areas lack these immense advantages and therefore, public policy decision makers often view rural arts and culture investments solely for their tourist attraction / direct economic benefit, at best; or even worse, as a resource drain with minimal return on public investment. Therefore, many rural arts and culture organizations and advocates believe the public sector only responds to the direct economic benefit argument, or that it has no relevance whatsoever to their work. These forces often converge to disadvantage efforts to bridge these perceptual dissonances.

Nonetheless, many rural regions have been successful in creating a more enlightened alignment between these sectors, to the benefit of both. However, these successes are usually local in nature, and the lessons learned, and benefits accrued, are not widely shared across rural practice. Additionally, where the public sector investments in this critical placemaking is occurring, its lessons are also not being broadly shared, either in associations of government, or in broader arts and culture communication.

The Next Generation initiative is designed to work collaboratively to address these challenges, and is solely designed to add value to the work of all others, within the rural arts and culture sector. Three critical capacities must be built, over time, to address this challenge, and fully optimize the rural creative placemaking potential:

- Each region or state needs a dynamic backbone intermediary, whose sole purpose is to connect and communicate with all rural arts and culture organizations in that geography. This should be designed to enhance peer communication, learning / mentoring, and outreach, building a stronger rural advocacy base for all the above.
- Regional, state, and national convenings must be established to lift up great work, connect great practitioners and makers, and build public awareness / presence for the importance of this sector in broader community and economic sustainability.
- Finally, across all this work, a key focus must be upon support for and linkages across next generation leaders, to create the “Next Generation” cadre necessary to advance this movement and drive this work forward, not only in arts and culture, but in all other rural sectors, and most specifically, in the public sector. Rural creative placemaking must become a central component of rural economic and community development in our nation.

