

Petition Drive Aims To Put Cultural District On Ballot

Proponents of a scientific and cultural facilities district that would cover Fort Collins and Loveland are back to work after a yearlong intermission.

Supporters of the proposed district, which would fund nonprofit organizations that offer arts, scientific and cultural programming, have begun petition drives to place measures creating a district on the November ballot.

Last year, a similar effort fell short of collecting the needed number of petition signatures. This time, proponents have a few more weeks to work the streets for signatures and have separate drives taking place in Fort Collins and Loveland, said Mike Powers, a proponent of the district.

The idea is to have voters in each city decide whether they wish to be part of the district and pay its 0.1 percent sales tax, Powers said. The tax would be 1 cent on a \$10 purchase.

Based on 2008 city sales tax collections, the tax would reap an estimated \$1.9 million a year in Fort Collins alone. It is not clear how much the tax would net in Loveland.

In Fort Collins, petitioners need to collect 2,527 valid signatures of registered voters to put the measure to a vote. The Loveland drive needs 1,187 signatures to make the ballot.

Because so many petition signatures get rejected by the county clerk's office for a variety of reasons, organizers hope to collect twice the number that is required, Powers said. The deadline for turning in petitions to the Larimer County Clerk's Office is Aug. 3.

District supporters realize seeking a sales tax increase will be tough given the economy, Powers said, but they also want to help nonprofit organizations that are struggling because of the economy.

Revenue for arts and cultural groups is down sharply because of the recession, forcing some to cancel shows or shut down all together, he said.

With a stable source of funding, nonprofits and municipal cultural services, such as the Fort Collins Museum, could focus their efforts on programming rather than "scrambling to raise every penny they need to operate," Powers said.

"I see this as an investment in the future to keep these groups going," he said. "I think most people are sophisticated enough to see that, when a theater company closes, it takes more than a year for it to come back."

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At the Fort Collins Museum of Contemporary Art, revenue in 2009 is expected to be down \$100,000 from last year, said executive director Marianne Lorenz.

The organization "will get through this," she said, even though the gap represents about one third of its operating budget and has forced it to cut costs.

Funding from a district would help FCMOCA and other organizations

reach a level of sustainability that would allow them to dedicate more time to their work rather than organizing fund-raising events, she said.

"We spend a tremendous amount of time on non-mission-related things," she said. "It's very wasteful. This would help us get away from that and be very helpful."

If the proposal reaches both the Fort Collins and Loveland ballots and is approved, funding raised through the district's sales tax would stay in the community in which it was collected, Powers said.

State law limits scientific and cultural facilities districts to one per county.

If one city approves the district and the other does not, the other city would have to wait 10 years when the district is up for renewal to join, Powers said. The area covered by the district would match the cities' boundaries.

Large organizations, such as FCMOCA and the Lincoln Center, would receive funding based on attendance and revenue, Powers said. Smaller groups would apply for grants through a competitive process.



Phil and Laurie Harness of Boulder look at art Wednesday at the Fort Collins Museum of Contemporary Art .