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The play's the thing for business investing

Execs call role in aiding arts programs a way to boost corporate climate

By Beth Fitzgerald

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As arts organizations struggle with recession-driven funding cuts, they depend more than ever upon the volunteer leadership and financial support of business people who view the time and money they spend on the arts as neither luxury nor charity, but an investment in cultural vitality that makes business thrive.

William R. Hagaman Jr., partner in charge of the New Brunswick office of the accounting firm **Withum, Smith & Brown**, also is chairman of the New Brunswick Cultural Center, which oversees several downtown arts organizations and venues: the State Theater, George Street Playhouse, Crossroads Theatre Co. and the American Repertory Ballet.

Right now, during the toughest real estate climate in decades, Hagaman is leading a long-planned redevelopment that envisions three modern theaters, with a new commercial office tower rising in the air above them. The commercial office market and the general economy stumbled just as NBCC began reaching out for a tenant for the tower.

"You don't always get to pick your timing," Hagaman said. "I like the idea of a challenge. The economy falling apart has made it more of a challenge, but I've always viewed myself as being in the business of solving problems, so this just gave me a more interesting problem to work on. Hopefully I'll solve it."

Hagaman also wants to cut expenses by encouraging NBCC's arts organizations to share their box office, education, marketing, finance and development services, as efficiently run arts groups are more likely to win donors, he said.

But, Hagaman added, "as a business person, you want to help without influencing the art. What the artists do is very important, and you can't really try to rein them in. You've got to allow them to do what they do, but you've got to interject your business experience."

Cynthia Lambert, executive director of the South Jersey Cultural Alliance, said arts funding is down across the board for its 130 member nonprofits. But she said businesses still encourage their employees to volunteer their time with the arts — recognizing that this work broadens their perspective and makes them more creative business people.

Mark Salvacion, vice president and corporate counsel with **Prudential Financial**, in Newark, is on the board of Arts Unbound, in Orange, which promotes the art of people with disabilities — and is struggling with a 50 percent decline in grants and donations.

The Arts Unbound board members have agreed to increase their donations, and the board also decided to recruit several new members who would be able to contribute financially, including bankers, lawyers, doctors and insurance professionals, Salvacion said.

The New Jersey Performing Arts Center's creation in 2006 of its Business Partners affinity group came at "critical timing — it helped us to lock in and develop relations with a number of companies, most of whom have stayed with us during the recession," said **Peter Hansen**, vice president for development at the Newark theater. There are 72 businesses in the growing group, which several times a year holds the Business Partners Roundtable, a breakfast networking event that includes a speech by a senior corporate executive.

Hansen said while some big corporate donors have cut back during the recession, support from small and midsized firms has been relatively stable. "Even in this economy, we are seeing businesses come in at the \$5,000 to \$10,000 level," Hansen said. "Where we've seen the attrition has been at the upper end, unfortunately."

Hansen credits the success of Business Partners to the fact that NJPAC isn't just asking businesses for money, but also giving something of value in return. "It's give and take: We provide an educational benefit and networking

in exchange for their support, and it creates a deeper relationship.”

One of NJPAC’s newest Business Partners members is **Steven Elbaum**, chief executive of the **Alpine Group**, an East Rutherford-based investment group. He attended a Roundtable event last fall, then joined with a \$5,000 donation.

“We want to be involved with NJPAC out of respect for its presence in the Newark community and its impact on the community,” Elbaum said.

Attorneys for the arts

THE 200 ATTORNEYS in New Jersey Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts do pro-bono work for cash-strapped individual artists and nonprofit arts groups. As the recession slows the flow of business to law firms, “pro-bono work is an exceptional way to keep your skills sharp and expand into a new practice,” said **Tracey I. Batt**, executive director.

Matthew Savare, an intellectual

property and entertainment law attorney with **Lowenstein Sandler**, in Roseland, said he did about 100 hours of free legal work for **City Without Walls**, a Newark gallery that enlisted more than 20 youth volunteers to paint murals around the city — a project that required various agreements, contracts and permits. “You can get by with standard contracts and no lawyer, but that’s not the right way to do it,” Savare said.

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William R. Hagan Jr. is chairman of the New Brunswick Cultural Center that oversees arts organizations, including the George Street Playhouse, which is seen in the background. [Christina Mazza]