

**MINUTES OF THE COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE WORK SESSION
OF FEBRUARY 24, 2015**

Mayor Strazdas called the meeting to order at 6:03 p.m. The following Councilmembers were present: Councilmembers Nasim Ansari, Richard Ford, Patricia M. Randall and Claudette Reid, Mayor Pro Tem Jim Pearson and Mayor Peter Strazdas. Councilmember Terry Urban arrived at 6:27 p.m. Also present were Executive Director of the Arts Council of Greater Kalamazoo Neil Bremer, City Manager Larry Shaffer, Deputy City Manager Rob Boulis and City Clerk James Hudson.

Mayor Strazdas reviewed the past COW Meetings and confirmed that the topic, "Study of the City Retail Profile to guide City Council efforts," was deferred to the March 10, 2015 COW Meeting. He announced that there would be a presentation by Neil Bremer, Executive Director of the Arts Council of Greater Kalamazoo (Arts Council), and asked for input from City Council regarding concerns about art in the community from the Council Retreat.

Councilmember Randall indicated that with a \$65 million budget that the City of Portage should provide funds for art and culture in order to identify Portage as "a community of arts and culture." She was not advocating building a museum, and mentioned that there is \$9 million available through the State to use for an art hop, outdoor displays, kids events, etc., plus the Federal Government has another \$750 million for art and culture. She felt Portage should look beyond the great trail system and good schools in Portage and also bring in art and culture to keep and retain people who care about the community. She explained her involvement with the Arts Council and proposed an Arts & Recreation position and an Arts & Culture position for Portage. She also asked for a communications position for a person who could get the Portage brand known in the community in order to define ourselves in a way that we can control. Discussion followed.

Councilmember Ansari indicated that he has a broad view of art and mentioned concerts and the performing arts as options to bring art and culture to the community. Councilmember Ford concurred with Councilmembers Randall and Ansari.

Councilmember Reid indicated that in the past, Portage had Parks Department Staff to provide the Summer Entertainment Series, including advertising, but this was cut because of financial reasons and the large number of hours that were taken away from staff to do other things. She mentioned some of the other cultural activities that have taken place in Portage since the elimination of the Summer Entertainment Series such as, the Recycled Art Project that was a collaboration between the Environmental Board and the Parks Department, the Portage District Library display space for artists, the private entity that has been running the summer drama school for children, and Shakespeare in the Park that utilized grant money with the City providing the venue (the stage) and administrative assistance. In order to expand the Portage art offerings, she stressed the need for volunteers who will be working with the arts and looking for alternative outside funding as promoting the arts is not considered a core function of the City, and this is the first thing that will be pulled back again should "push-come-to-shove" with the Budget, so a sustainable funding source other than tax dollars is necessary.

Mayor Pro Tem Pearson thanked Councilmember Randall for "spear-heading this" and noted that along with great parks and trails, Portage has the largest tax base in the

County, has the highest number of cable subscribers according to a recent Public Media Network Board report and has historically been considered an island, but is now taking a more co-leadership role in the County. He stressed how important it is for Portage to be involved in the County, and expressed his opinion that a small investment should be considered to take a look at state funding for the arts. He emphasized that Portage is serious about this issue; Portage is wise about its budget; and Portage wants State funds that are available for the arts. He mentioned the gentrification process currently being experienced in Portage and emphasized that arts and culture are important to Portage as it enters into its next phase of development.

From his perspective, Mayor Strazdas revealed that his wife and daughter are heavily into the arts. He said that there is art and culture in Portage and pointed out that the communication piece is needed to help people know the many art offerings of Portage and the Region. He said that the perspective of art can differ and needs to be defined depending upon the tastes of the various generations of people and explained. He discussed his preference for a conservative approach to art and culture in Portage with not only tax dollars, but private funding that can be leveraged and for volunteers to step up and provide the services. He discussed his search with City Manager Shaffer for someone who was broad-based in the arts, and introduced Neil Bremer, Executive Director of the Arts Council of Greater Kalamazoo, as that person who will present the structure that exists for the arts and culture in the community, and discuss trends and opportunities. Councilmember Ansari interjected that he sees the need for a City Council Arts Commission in Portage and Mayor Strazdas concurred.

Mr. Bremer expressed his respect for the work required of City Council and his appreciation for City Council addressing this issue at this meeting. He provided his history from his education at Western Michigan University, his work in Chicago at the Chicago Institute of Art and three Chicago Dinner Theatres, his move to Louisville, then his move back to Kalamazoo. He discussed the attachment which the arts create for a City, the history and structure of the Arts Commission (City of Kalamazoo, City of Portage and County of Kalamazoo) and some of the activities and funding of the Arts Commission in Portage and the Region, all of which are without the benefit of a hotel/motel tax revenue stream. Discussion followed.

Mr. Bremer indicated that the City could obtain his professional advice for any procurement of art or a grant for art. He reviewed some of the grants for which the Arts Commission applies and some of the arts activities that result. He discussed various funding options, KPAC, the success of Art Hop, and the high cool factor and highly participatory factor necessary for place-making. He cited some of the successes for the businesses that participate in Art Hop, the importance of participation by generations to come, and his frustration with coverage by *MLive*.

Mr. Bremer discussed change and how quickly it is now happening which makes trends very difficult to detect. He said in order for the art and culture to flourish, it is important to plan and design with future generations in mind. He noted that it took television 35 years to get widely accepted; it took computers six years to get wide use; and it took the cell phone only six months. He emphasized that Generation Z refers to the cell phone as “personal,” and indicated that traditional art forms like museums, gallery walks and classical music concerts have been on the decline since 1992.

Mr. Bremer disclosed that one area that has seen an increase in participation from 2008 to 2012 has been the outdoor concert, and explained why Jazz as a genre of music is experiencing an uptick. He stressed that trends are important because Portage could be spending time, money and resources only to find itself chasing dropping audiences. He cited the Kalamazoo Symphony and symphonies across the country as examples of an art form that is really struggling to keep participants interested. He indicated that the answer in Portage is to look at what is happening in Portage, what is cool, what is highly participatory, and use music, the visual arts, dance, etc. to achieve success.

Mayor Strazdas interjected at this point and asked Mr. Bremer to discuss a possible Art Hop in Portage, the opportunity for a Summer Entertainment Series in the Park, an Arts Council of Greater Kalamazoo partnership with Portage and anything else that would be cost effective and sustainable.

Mr. Bremer asked Portage to consider investigating the public/private partnership option owing to the struggles of the philanthropic sector, since more public involvement is needed because the public sector can successfully leverage in ways for more dollars. He gave the example of a sculpture walk (renting sculptures or trading sculptures) as an optional opportunity in the park, that still requires funds for transporting displaying and a memorial for the artist, but requires very little involvement.

Mr. Bremer said that if private money is interested in an art project, the Arts Council of Greater Kalamazoo can take a tax deductible charitable gift and provide the funds to make the project happen. He listed some of the groups taking advantage of this option. He said that if the Arts Council of Greater Kalamazoo were to help Portage celebrate Portage, they could figure out how that celebration fits into the funding structure, and he gave the Concert in the Park as an example where the Arts Council could help. He indicated that the Kalamazoo Concert in the Park on Sunday, July 12, 2015, was overbooked by the City of Kalamazoo. He said that concert could take place in Portage and be in the brochure that will be published in two weeks. He discussed marketing options and how to get the word out to the public and referenced the high quality of the arts in Portage Public Schools as potential beneficiaries. He also cited the Air Museum as a possible venue partner for a concert that is only limited by the imagination. Discussion followed.

Mr. Bremer noted that concerts cost between \$2,000 and \$4,000 depending upon the talent, which includes the sound and set up, and explained. Discussion followed.

In summary, Mayor Strazdas indicated that the various events and arts and culture opportunities in the community need to be bundled, advertised and shared through the Portager, hyperlinking with the City website, and through the Arts Council brochures. Also, he stressed the importance of looking at funding options and explained.

Mayor Pro Tem Pearson indicated that City Council should decide whether Portage needs a Place Making Commission and suggested it be comprised of citizens and Councilmembers. Councilmember Ansari concurred. Mr. Bremer offered his services in this regard in his capacity as Executive Director of the Arts Council of Greater Kalamazoo.

He referred City Council to his handout, "Why do people attend the Arts?" and the Art Hop Brochure for March 2015, and discussion followed.

Mayor Strazdas thanked Mr. Bremer for coming and summed up. He asked everyone to think about all of this and bring any thoughts for action to City Manager Shaffer for consideration at the next Regular City Council Meeting for a future recommendation. Discussion followed.

STATEMENTS OF CITIZENS: Martha Dahlinger, 2612 Chopin Avenue, expressed her appreciation for what City Council is doing and her opinion that Portage needs to think of the whole region and to collaborate, and not just copy what someone else is doing owing to the diversity within Portage as Portage is very capable of adding to what is already being done.

ADJOURN: Mayor Strazdas adjourned the meeting at 7:20 p.m.

James R. Hudson, City Clerk