For the past 20 years, the National League of Cities has conducted an annual survey of civic officials across the country to determine what the most pressing concerns for their communities are. The economy, jobs, crime, and public safety regularly lead the list. The arts have never made the top ten.

“Everything on the list was very practical, starting with local economy,” says Robert Lynch, president and CEO of Americans for the Arts, of recent findings. His organization’s core membership is made up of local arts agencies. “What we realized was that the arts were not on that list, but the arts were a part of a solution to everything on that list—even if they didn’t know it.”

Orchestras, ballet and theatre companies, and museums all create jobs and boost local and national economies, fulfilling some of the basic needs in any community. But the consistent results of this study issue a tacit challenge to arts leaders nationwide: How can your arts organization raise its profile in the community and become a partner in advancing the civic agenda?

Tom McClimon, managing director of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, addressed the topic of civic engagement at the American Symphony Orchestra League’s Mid-Winter Managers’ Meeting this past January. Mayors and other civic leaders, he advised, should be seen as potential allies in support of the arts, not just distributors of public dollars. Rather than always approaching the government as the latter, McClimon suggested, orches-
tra leaders should take on a posture of civic engagement, asking what their organizations can do to further the mayor’s work. The most effective way to do this couldn’t be simpler: Meet with the mayor and listen. Listen for what he or she feels are the community’s biggest issues and priorities, and try to incorporate the orchestra into that vision.

“Be it education or economic development,” McClimon says, “any time an organization says they want to be supportive of the mayor, they will almost certainly get a good reception. Instead of focusing on what the mayor can do to help the orchestra, focus on what the orchestra can do to assist the mayor in meeting the challenges and opportunities that he or she sees for the community that also fit into the orchestra’s agenda.”

Government priorities inevitably change when shifting from a national perspective to a local level, but the most effective tactic in working with public officials is always the same: dialogue. Arts leaders may feel passionately about their work, but why the arts are important is only one side of the conversation. Talking about why the arts are essential to a community—and how the community will benefit from them—is a different discussion entirely, one that is ultimately more effective. It will not only reveal issues that the orchestra can potentially address through programming or community engagement initiatives, but also raise the orchestra’s status in the eyes of public-sector leaders. “True civic process is not something that happens only at budget time when you’re asking for...
something for yourself,” says Lynch. “It’s a year-round process, where you become a valued partner as opposed to simply a grant applicant.” As collaborators among community leaders, arts administrators are then better able to serve the needs of the city.

Matthew VanBesien, executive director and CEO of the Houston Symphony, joined with Houston Mayor Bill White last September to launch “Inspire the Future,” an education initiative that partnered city government with the orchestra’s major sponsor, Fidelity Investments. Shortly after signing on as a sponsor, Fidelity came to the orchestra’s management wanting to get involved in the greater Houston community, specifically with its youth. At the same time, the mayor’s office approached VanBesien about assisting a particular high school that needed instruments and resources for its music program. “Instantly the light turned on,” VanBesien said, and leaders from the orchestra, Fidelity, and city hall put their heads together to develop “Inspire the Future.”

“From our standpoint it’s absolutely the right direction, because it’s about partnership in the community,” says VanBesien. “Our whole organization has been kind of realigning its philosophy and its mission to really make sure that we’re here to serve our community first.”

With the Houston Symphony acting as a conduit, more than $60,000 worth of new instruments purchased by Fidelity were distributed to three area high schools last fall; VanBesien expects to make another presentation of instruments in the near future. Mayor White spoke at the kick-off ceremony on the importance of the arts in education and the orchestra’s vital role in the Houston community.

VanBesien feels fortunate that his local government recognizes the inherent value of the arts and supports them in meaningful, tangible ways. With an assistant for cultural affairs on his staff, Mayor White facilitates a constant dialogue between civic and arts leaders in town and promotes mutual awareness of what each group is working on. These open lines of communication position the orchestra to know when an opportunity for civic engagement might present itself.

A Touch Point

Lynne McCormack is director of Providence, Rhode Island’s Office of Art, Culture and Tourism, which serves an operation similar to Houston’s cultural affairs liaison. Although the purpose of her office is to reach out to arts organizations and foster effective civic-artistic partnerships, McCormack believes cultural leaders should be proactive in engaging local government. In 2000 the Rhode Island Philharmonic raised its community profile by merging with The.
Music School, a local nonprofit entity, to form the Music School of the Rhode Island Philharmonic. Its own educational goals intersect with those of Mayor David Cicilline, who began his second term last September by announcing educational initiatives—including the Providence After-School Alliance—as a major focus of his administration.

McCormack says the Philharmonic’s support for the mayor’s municipal priorities is “interesting, because we’re so used to doing it the other way around here. It’s really important that an organization looks to see what the interests of the political leaders are, and if they can find a touch point where the two missions align, then to really delve into that, drill down on that and try to figure out how to make the two work together. It’s about finding the connection.”

Once a connection is discovered, it has to be developed. Leni Boorstin, director of community affairs for the Los Angeles Philharmonic, works with the fifteen city council members and five supervisors of Los Angeles County to keep tabs on each district. When planning community engagement programs like neighborhood concerts, Boorstin doesn’t just draw up a performance schedule in her office; she talks with county supervisors to establish a common vision as to how the Philharmonic can fulfill their districts’ needs, linking those ideals with the orchestra’s goals in the community. In a nod to the significance of civic involvement, the first concert in the Frank Gehry-designed Walt Disney Concert Hall played to an audience of schoolchildren. “It was a statement of being a part of the fabric of the city,” Boorstin says.

Despite the obvious benefits of actively engaging in the community and forging partnerships with government leaders, arts organizations, and other nonprofits, many orchestras lack these networks of support. If an orchestra is struggling to become a positive presence in its community, it is not necessarily arts-averse public officials who are at fault; management should take a step back and examine how the organization is running. “What holds people back from civic engagement,” says Lynch, “is time allocation and the constant struggle for resources, which make people think less strategically and more immediately about asking for money and surviving. If they think more strategically and long-term, they’ll allocate more of that time for relationship building.”

Lynch has found that this “relationship building” is the most durable strategy for survival. It can lead to successful programming, which in turn results in revenue and resources to sustain artistic activity. Similar sentiments are voiced by Jonathan Katz, CEO of the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies. Katz says that conveying an orchestra’s worth in the community through either a shared concert experience or a “proxy argument”—value in terms of its contribution to society—is something that every organization, no matter its size, has the ability to do.

Essential to the welfare of arts groups, Katz believes, are three interdependent attributes: artistic quality, financial stability, and community engagement. He notes that even while asserting itself as a civic resource, an orchestra cannot neglect the areas of aesthetic excellence and financial solvency. “Focusing on one of these doesn’t work. It requires a balance. You need any two to make the third one. Without community engagement and financial stability, it’s hard to have a good artistic product; without the good artistic product and financial stability, it’s hard to build civic engagement.”

And civic engagement begins with the alignment of ideals; it isn’t just neigh-
While asserting itself as a civic resource, an orchestra cannot neglect the areas of aesthetic excellence and financial solvency. A balance is required.

neighborhood concerts and elementary school tours. “If one wants to be successful as a civic resource,” says Katz, “you have to say: ‘Where is my community going? What kind of life are people hoping to establish?’ The following question is, ‘How can our symphony be a resource to those goals?’ ”

Understandably, goals will differ from city to city, but Nashville Mayor Bill Purcell believes that, along with education and public safety, every city must assure the quality of life for its inhabitants. That’s a nebulous and highly subjective notion, but Purcell has a clear-cut conception of what it entails for Nashville: “Quality of life in a city depends upon the existence of the arts at every level,” he believes. “The arts are not an add-on or a thrill; they’re not something you can have one year and not the next. The availability of the arts for everyone in the city is critical.”

Building consensus in the community about the importance of culture requires talking about civic obligations and how the arts can intersect with them at every opportunity. “People begin to perceive themselves in a competitive position,” Purcell says. “They approach it as a zero-sum game where more for one means less for me—more support for education and safety finds itself in competition with the arts. What I’ve tried to do is make it very clear that we’re all in it together.”

Schermerhorn Symphony Center, completed in fall 2006, is evidence of Nashville’s collaborative spirit. A product of dialogue, significant private funds, and public-sector property and support, the new hall serves as a venue not only for Western classical music, but music of all kinds. Nashville Symphony leaders communicated a need and merged their goals with the community’s Music City identity. The end result will enrich both the orchestra and the city for years to come.

The lines of communication in Nashville are open, and civic and arts leaders are in tune with each other’s priorities—an optimal setting for civic engagement. “I think the Nashville story is a perfect one for any city of any size,” Purcell says, “because it makes the case clearly that it can be done anywhere.” The city of Nashville “decided this was important and, through the nurturing of leaders, got it done. That’s a good message for everybody: If you decide it’s important, you can have this.”

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