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Providence's innovative arts department is confident about the future

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Storyteller Len Cabral, left, heads the nonprofit group Providence Inner City Arts, which will host Sound Session July 8 and 9.

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PROVIDENCE — In 2003, the City of Providence and its then-newly elected mayor, David N. Cicilline, did something that few American cities have ever done: they created a new public agency, the Department of Art, Culture and Tourism, to oversee arts-related events and activities. At the stroke of a pen, art, music and theater joined public safety and pothole repair on the list of basic city services.

Eight years later, a lot has changed.

Providence has a new mayor, Angel Taveras, and a new agenda shaped less by the so-called “creative economy” — a Cicilline buzzword — and more by forecasts of looming budget deficits and public pension shortfalls. Cicilline, meanwhile, is a first-term congressman whose once-sterling reputation has been tarnished by accusations of financial mismanagement during his years in City Hall.

And the Department of Art, Culture and Tourism?

“Actually, we’re doing pretty well,” says director Lynne McCormack. “Obviously, a lot of cities are struggling these days, and Providence is no exception. But when it comes to arts and culture, this city really has a lot going for it. And I think we’ve played a role in that.”

As an example, McCormack points to the recent visit of Rocco Landesman, the outspoken head of the National Endowment for the Arts. A successful Broadway promoter and producer before landing the NEA job, Landesman isn’t shy about voicing his opinions, pro or con.

After getting a tour of the city, including stops at Trinity Rep, The Steel Yard and other local arts groups, McCormack says Landesman was “knocked out” by what he saw.

“You could tell he was really fired up,” she says. “He kept saying ‘You guys get it. You really get it. The kind of things that we’re always talking about in meetings — things like creative place-making and using the arts to bring communities together — you’re already doing it.’ ”

Another bright spot: making good on a campaign pledge, the Taveras administration has submitted an ordinance that formally certifies the Department of Arts, Culture and Tourism as a city department. If, as expected, the council approves the ordinance, the department would have the same legal standing as other city agencies, such as housing, public works and communications. (Cicilline, by contrast, took a faster but less binding route — issuing an executive order — when he created the department in 2003.)

“Given all the challenges the city is facing right now, that’s a pretty bold step,” McCormack says. “It shows that arts and culture aren’t going to get lost in the shuffle.”

Still, there’s no escaping the black hole that is Providence’s budget mess.

Faced with an estimated \$110-million deficit in next year’s budget, the Taveras administration has asked all city agencies to trim their operating budgets by 15 percent. For the Department of Art, Culture and Tourism, that means a drop of about \$75,000 over its 2010-2011 budget of \$500,000.

More ominously, the city has just begun to grapple with a public-employee pension shortfall of nearly \$1 billion. Even if city and union officials can agree on a package of benefit cuts — a very big “if” — the city’s finances could remain on shaky ground for years to come. That, in turn, could lead to further cuts in arts funding and knock arts and cultural programming off the city’s to-do list.

Nevertheless, in a recent series of interviews sandwiched in between budget meetings and meet-and-greet events with local arts leaders, McCormack sounded surprisingly upbeat.

The prospect of a 15-percent budget cut? Not a problem, since the same ordinance granting the department full legal status also contains language allowing it to seek money and other kinds of support

from private sources. "If we need money, we'll be able to go out and raise it," McCormack says.

McCormack also notes that the nature of the department's work is changing in ways that should make it easier to ride out the city's budget crisis. Rather than funding events directly, for example, the department now spends much of its time serving as an advisor and "facilitator" for local arts organizations.

That's a change from the 1980s and '90s, when the city's arts programming was handled by the Office of Cultural Affairs. An offshoot of the Providence Parks Department, the office actively sponsored events like concerts in Roger Williams Park and the now-defunct Convergence arts festival.

McCormack says the current system gives the department more leeway, allowing it to "leverage" its limited resources and providing "the biggest arts bang for the buck."

"Twenty or thirty years ago, there weren't a lot of organizations doing public arts programming in Providence. So you needed an agency like the Office of Cultural Affairs to handle everything — booking, fundraising, advertising, set-up and so on. Now, the situation is very different. There are dozens of arts organizations that do their own public programming. As a result, our role has changed."

This year, for example, the department has worked closely with a local nonprofit — Providence Inner City Arts — on plans to save Sound Session, the city's hugely popular summer music series. Launched in 2004, Sound Session has become one of the highlights of the city's cultural calendar, attracting performers such as Caribbean singer Emeline Michel and legendary jazz bassist Ron Carter.

But when the series' organizer, the Providence Black Repertory Company, ran into serious financial trouble in 2008, the fate of Sound Session suddenly looked dim.

This year, the series has rebounded, albeit on a somewhat smaller scale. Rather than the weeklong event of years past, it will take place over two days — July 8 and 9 — and will feature performances by Afro-Cuban band leader Bobby Sanabria and a tribute to soul legend James Brown.

"Lynne and her staff have been great to work with," says Providence Inner City Arts director Len Cabral. "Since this is our first year, we really had a lot to learn. But they stepped up with a lot of logistical and background support. They helped us make it happen."

In another change, the department is focusing more attention on using the arts to help spur economic development. As part of a shake-up of city departments ordered by Mayor Taveras, McCormack and her three-person staff are working more closely with economic policy-makers, including the city's Department of Planning and Development. They've also strengthened ties the Providence-Warwick Convention and Visitors Bureaus while reaching out to many of the city's neighborhood improvement groups.

In addition, the department is working with a national group — Americans for the Arts — to gather information on the economic impact of arts and cultural programs throughout the city.

Education is another area where the department's role is expanding. Among other things, the department is compiling a list of local arts education providers. The goal: to offset cuts in school-based arts

programs with arts workshops and other activities supported by outside grants.

“Basically, the mayor has tasked us to do better with less,” McCormack says. “That’s our mandate.”

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