'Creative economy' redefined

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Suppose the city of San Antonio had a few million extra dollars for arts support each year. How should that extra money be spent?

The Cultural Collaborative - the proposed cultural plan for San Antonio - recommends boosting the arts budget, which now stands at $3.3 million for grants and administration, with a dedicated, tax-based revenue stream.

Even a very modest tax, costing only $5 a year per household, would generate more than $2 million in new revenue. Increasing the arts' share of local hotel tax revenues to 15 percent, as allowed by state law, would have added $2.9 million to the pie in 2003.
Adding either of those figures to current dollars would still leave San Antonio near the low end among large cities in per capita arts support, but not shamefully low.
Before asking how new money should be invested, let's step back and ask what kind of city we want San Antonio to be.

General assent might endorse an answer something like this: San Antonio aspires to be a community that sustains continual improvement in its residents' well-being by habitually creating value, readily adapting to change and intelligently innovating, while wisely nurturing its authentic regional culture and preserving its historic legacy.

In light of that aspiration - however you might formulate it - I think the cultural plan errs by stating as its goal the improvement of San Antonio's "**creative economy**," defined narrowly as the individuals and institutions that are engaged in nonprofit or commercial artistic work.
The actual "**creative economy**" is much broader, including scientists, engineers, artisans, health care professionals, the occasional developer, even the mail-room clerk with a good idea - anyone who puts things together in new ways to create new value.

The arts, as they are commonly understood, are a potentially important subset of the **creative economy**, but don't necessarily contribute much to it. A performing arts company, for example, that does little or nothing beyond standard repertoire, in the standard way, has but slight claim on the term "**creative**."

The city should continue to help competent arts institutions - **creative** or not, big or small - with their operating costs because institutions are a more or less necessary platform for innovation. But if significant new money is made available, much of it should be directed to efforts that make the arts better and stronger in their own creativity and help them contribute to the larger **creative economy**.

That means supporting research and development - new works, new genres, new forms of presentation, risks. It means encouraging productive and exploratory collaborations - not just "outreach" - between the arts and other parts of the **creative economy**, including the sciences, medicine and information technology.

It means pushing for continually higher standards, demanding and assisting professionalism in both artistic direction and administration - and recognizing that "volunteerism" often brings "amateurism."

It means investing more in educational programs that expand the **creative** capacity of individuals, in incentives that expand the **creative** capacity of businesses, in public works - including arts

venues - that expand the **creative** capacity of neighborhoods.

A public funding program should not just assume that the arts are generically good. It should be guided by understanding of how they do good and what they're good for.
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