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A Conversation With . . .

Arts Council For Long Beach Executive Director Craig Watson



Craig Watson, pictured at the Museum of Latin American Art, is the executive director of the Arts Council for Long Beach. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

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Arts and culture is ever-present everywhere we look – from a loud skateboard design to a plein-air painting, from hip-hop beats pulsating out of a car to a folk band strumming at an outdoor market – and all of the classical things we think of when we use the terms “arts” and “culture.” These truths reach across the globe and are also found in the cultural hub that is Long Beach.

Arts Council For Long Beach Executive Director Craig Watson said he believes art is a universal language that “surrounds us and makes our lives so much more worth living.”

Watson said his biggest challenge with the city’s arts agency is to reverse the huge strain on the local arts community that has developed over the years. “[The challenge] is helping to tell the story, the story about why the arts need to go beyond survival to thriving.”

The strain on the arts community is real. In the past year, the city almost lost the Long Beach Symphony. International City Theatre and Musical Theatre West both had to reduce some of

their outreach programs. The University Art Museum at California State University, Long Beach had to cancel its major arts initiatives.

“It’s all reflective of this very difficult financial period, so my biggest challenge, really, is how to add value in that kind of environment,” Watson said. “So what we’re fighting for is every new source of support, helping arts groups get better at what they do, being a better advocate for why the arts are important, even as other things are being cut back.”

A History Of Arts Advocacy

As an advocate for local arts, the city’s Arts Council has been around for more than 30 years. It was established in 1973 to develop cultural resources and address the needs of the growing arts community. The agency had similar beginnings to many other arts councils – through a nationwide movement to create these organizations as a way to foster more support for the arts and to develop a broader vision of the importance of the arts.

The council has a unique status: it is the official arts agency of the City of Long Beach but also a private 501(c)(3) nonprofit. It



The Pacific Island Ethnic Art Museum (PIEAM) opens Friday, October 15. The opening celebration includes a community blessing, dance performances and artist demonstrations. Other celebratory events continue through October 17. PIEAM features ethnic and living arts from Micronesia, Polynesia and Melanesia. It will also have rotating exhibits, educational programs, a sculpture garden and is available for private events. Activities and admission to the museum are free during opening festivities. Museum hours are Wednesday through Sunday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is \$5, \$2 for students and seniors with valid ID. The museum is located at 695 Alamitos Ave. (Photo By The Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

is essentially the city's investment arm for the arts by administering the dollars it receives through arts grants.

Watson said the city invests General Fund dollars into the arts through the council because city leaders "believe that's a better way to look at the needs in the arts community and find a way to invest those [dollars] in a way that is not based on favoritism, not based on who screams the loudest, but based on a true belief that the arts at all levels – neighborhood arts, individual artists and large institutions – are part of what makes Long Beach a great place." The council also receives support from individuals, corporations and foundations.

Five staff members work alongside Watson: an office manager, two public art managers, one art education manager and a part-time bookkeeper. The organizational structure has five tiers that support its mission: public art, neighborhood and educational programs, professional development, grants and marketing services for artists and cultural organizations. The agency also runs a series of professional development programs for artists and public art programs in the city's schools.

Another effort of the council is managing the public art process for the city's redevelopment agency (RDA). To complement the numerous projects the RDA funds throughout the city, the agency established the Percent for Public Art program in 1989. Through this program, all new projects more than \$250,000 in the city's redevelopment project areas are required to contribute 1 percent of construction costs to fund public art.

A Passion For The Arts

Watson has held his current position for the last year and a half, which recently went from a part-time position to a full-time job. The executive director has a long background in the arts, having studied sculpture as an undergrad and having assisted one of his favorite sculpture artists, Christo, build the famous work "Running Fence" in Sonoma County. After his temporary job

working with Christo ended, he continued his involvement with the arts by working as the assistant director of a small community arts center in Santa Rosa called the Sonoma County Arts Council, then ran a nonprofit group called Rural Arts Services and provided technical assistance to other nonprofit arts groups in Northern California.

In 1979, Watson was offered a fellowship with the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C., and after returning to California, was lured to co-direct the Santa Barbara Arts Services. There he helped create a cultural master plan for the County of Santa Barbara. From there he took a 26-year "detour" from his arts passion to work for Charter Communications.

He continued his involvement in the arts while working for television by helping found The Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena and getting the Charter screening room inside of the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach. When Charter closed its Long Beach headquarters in January 2009, Watson was back on the job market but wanted to stay in Long Beach.

The opportunity to return to his love for the arts came with the opportunity to work for the Arts Council of Long Beach. "My passion for the arts now has come back in full force and I love what I do," he said.

Tracking The Economic Impact Of The Arts

The structure and function of the council hasn't changed much since Watson came on board, however the agency has expanded its board and welcomed new boardmembers to bring in new perspectives and ensure the board reflects the diversity of Long Beach.

When Watson arrived, the board initially asked him to review the council programs to see what needed to stop, expand or change. The newest effort to come out of that process is GLOBAL, the Greater Long Beach Arts Lab, which began October 2009 as a month-long, local celebration of the National Arts and

Humanities Month with about 360 events. This October's GLOBAL festivities include more than 1,000 events, which can be found at www.GlobalLB.org.

This year, Watson said the council will be tracking the economic impact of GLOBAL on local businesses through a combination of ways. The council will include headcount estimates, which can be compared to the data the agency collected from last year. The council also plans on interviewing and surveying both businesses and arts organizations, as well as compiling media impressions.

The council will study how many new participants GLOBAL attracts, if businesses experience increased sales (due to art events being held in their commercial district) and if participating arts organizations experience increased membership. "I think each year we need to become more sophisticated in this, because if you're going to make the investment you want to know your return on that investment," Watson said.

The council is promoting GLOBAL through significant radio advertising on KCRW, extensive Facebook ad placements and other social media efforts. "We've got a significant commitment to the social media. I think next year we'll be looking at Four Square and some of the check-in services."

The Future Of The Arts

The council's big idea for the future of the arts in Long Beach is to make the city appear as an arts destination. According to Watson, the framework is already here: the Museum of Latin American Art, one of the major cultural destination attractions of the city; the Aquarium of the Pacific, which is increasingly including visual and performing arts as part of the Aquarium experience; the Long Beach Opera, which is reviewed by the London Times and sometimes better known outside of Long Beach than in the city; the Khmer Arts Academy's world-renowned Cambodian dance troupe, which is also better known outside the city; and the Long Beach Symphony, to name a few.

"My vision for Long Beach – our vision for Long Beach – is that those assets will be much better understood by a regional and even national audience; that Long Beach becomes a legitimate destination for cultural tourism," Watson said. "If you're coming to Los Angeles to see some amazing art event, then you absolutely want to include Long Beach in your itinerary."

Over the next six months, the council, in partnership with the RDA, is set to reveal a series of public art projects that have been in the pipeline for the last couple of years. "It's going to be quite a bit of an explosion of public art for Long Beach," Watson said.

The artists behind the projects were chosen in a competitive nationwide call-to-artists that included a peer panel review with

participation from the community and art professionals. The agencies are set to reveal three of the seven projects in parks and medians in the upcoming months.

A 30-foot sculpture of the flow of an undersea meadow called "Sea Grass" was designed and produced by Barbara Grygutis and is to be installed in the median at Ocean Boulevard and Chestnut Avenue in downtown. The piece will be illuminated at night to create a beacon on the Ocean Boulevard corridor. A series of three related sculptures called "Learning Curves," by John Clement, will be installed in the median on Martin Luther King Boulevard between 19th and 20th Streets. The third piece, also by Clement, is a form of open curvilinear shapes that will be installed in the median on Artesia Boulevard east of Long Beach Boulevard.

The council has two other notable initiatives for the next year, one of which is a major arts education summit that will bring together education leaders, artists and arts groups who have a vested interest in promoting arts in school. "At the end of the day, we need to build future audiences for the arts, so art in education is critical," Watson said. Further details on the summit are forthcoming.

The other is the launch of another nationwide design competition, this time challenging architects and artists to collaboratively design a portable performance space for the city. Long Beach is one of only 21 cities to get funding from the National Endowment of the Arts for this particular project, with matching dollars coming from the RDA and the Los Angeles County Arts Commission.

The basic concept for the space is that it could be moved from one space to another, such as from a park to an empty lot, and in some way opened, unfolded and plugged in for convenience and versatility. He sees the purpose being to allow a theatre, dance or other arts group to perform in neighborhoods that normally don't have access to staged performances. "We have these culturally rich neighborhoods, whether it's the Cambodian town community or our Samoan community . . . [that] are venue poor. So by having a venue that can come to these rich neighborhoods and provide more neighborhood-based arts experiences, that's very important."

The competition is launching this month. The budget for the design phase of the competition is \$30,000, which includes all costs associated with design fees, engineering fees, insurance, materials and travel. Finalist teams will receive \$2,500 along with a travel stipend to attend the selection ceremony. Most of the work will take place in winter and spring, with a deadline of March 2011 to execute a design contract with the finalist.

For more information on the council and the arts programs and initiatives throughout Long Beach, visit www.ArtsLB.org. ■