

The Columbus Dispatch

'User fee' on ticket sales would benefit Columbus arts groups

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Hoping to provide long-term stability for arts organizations in Columbus, the Greater Columbus Arts Council will soon ask the city council to approve a "user fee" on certain ticket sales and also request funding from Franklin County.

GCAC President Tom Katzenmeyer said the plan could generate between \$15 million and \$20 million a year, most of which would go back to the dozens of artists and organizations that GCAC supports.

"We are well below where all of our peer cities are in terms of public funding (for the arts)," Katzenmeyer said. "I'm not complaining about it; I'm just observing that that's the case. So this is an informed solution and a unique public-private partnership."

Katzenmeyer said the GCAC will brief council members about the proposal in a meeting next week. If the council approves the plan, a charge of between 3 and 8 percent would be added to all tickets to arts, cultural, entertainment and professional sporting events within the city limits.

That would include events at Nationwide Arena, Value City Arena and Ohio Stadium — except for collegiate and high-school sporting events.

According to a 2012 city funding review for tourism, arts and human services, the city council has the authority to levy a surcharge on admissions without voter approval.

The funding review estimated that a user fee would generate \$1.25 million per every 1 percent levied — meaning that the fee, depending on the percentage levied, would generate an estimated \$3.75 million (3 percent) to \$10 million (8

percent).

"I'm interested to hear from the arts community," Council President Shannon G. Hardin said. "We know how important arts and culture are to the city of Columbus. I look forward to a full briefing of that information when I get it. We'll kind of go from there."

Two council members — Priscilla Tyson and Mike Stinziano — serve on the GCAC Board of Trustees.

Although most of the money raised would go to arts groups, possibly \$4 million a year would go to Nationwide Arena for capital expenditures, according to Don Brown, executive director of the Franklin County Convention Facilities Authority.

"We really think this is a good fit for the community," Brown said. "A user tax matches up a bunch of needs with the people who benefit from those programs."

Katzenmeyer said the city's major source of public funding for the arts is GCAC's portion of the "bed tax" charged to people who stay in city hotels.

In 2017, GCAC received a record \$6.77 million from the bed tax.

GCAC, in turn, awarded \$6.8 million in funding to groups large (BalletMet, \$275,000) and small (Dear Poetry, \$476) as well as individuals.

Katzenmeyer said he foresees a financial crunch coming, as the city's arts scene continues to grow, placing more demands on the GCAC grant programs. He also pointed to a recent national study that found that the nonprofit arts and culture industry in greater Columbus generates \$412.3 million in annual economic activity and supports the equivalent of 14,980 full-time jobs.

Nannette Maciejunes, executive director of the Columbus Museum of Art, said the museum receives 7 percent of its \$10.6 million annual budget from public funding. The rest comes from contributions, earned revenue and an endowment.

"This (proposed surcharge) would be transformative," Maciejunes said. "We have too many organizations living hand to mouth."

Arts officials say cities such as Cincinnati and Cleveland have arts groups with much-larger endowments, owing to their heritage as 19th-century industrial towns with more “old money.”

Cleveland’s arts groups also benefit from a 30-cents-per-pack tax on cigarettes passed by Cuyahoga County voters in 2005 and renewed in 2015. The tax is expected to generate \$10.2 million in 2018.

Katzenmeyer said the effort to boost public arts funding has been ongoing for 10 to 12 years. He, Maciejunes and Brown all said they think the public will support the proposal.

“I’m optimistic that it will be well-received,” Katzenmeyer said. “It’s about creating a framework for sustainability for these organizations. It’s very future-focused.”

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