

Title: Chicago's Cultural Plan: A Plea for Restraint

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Kudos to Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Michelle Boone, Chicago's cultural commissioner, for inviting public debate around their ambitious campaign to revamp and strengthen the city's arts and culture scene. Cultural Plan 2012, the first such program in 25 years, lays out no fewer than 200 proposed initiatives to amp up cultural participation and convert creativity into innovation, boosting Chicago's economy along with its status as a global city.

There's no question that the arts are good for business, tourism and the quality of our lives. And the city's creative economy is already an engine worth turbocharging. According to the mayor, Chicago is home to 24,000 arts enterprises, including nearly 650 nonprofit arts organizations generating more than \$2 billion annually and employing 150,000 people.

But Cultural Plan 2012 takes a wholesale and scattershot approach over the next five years, leaving for another day the financial and human costs of its vision.

The plan promotes a second museum campus anchored by the Museum of Science and Industry, a year-round festival site and a high-profile cultural festival. It would streamline zoning to encourage street vendors, performance artists and multimedia art installations; donate vacant land and buildings to arts groups; and designate new cultural districts with freshly restored buildings. It would offer microfinance programs for artists, tax credits and incentives for local film productions and tax-increment financing funds for affordable artist housing. It would post a chief creative officer in every school and ensure arts education for every child, grade, school and art form.

Although the goals of the plan are noble, how it would be funded remains unclear and uncertain. Cultural Plan 2012 speculates on private investment, an increase in the hotel occupancy tax, a new tax dedicated to the arts and a collaboration with the city's controversial infrastructure trust, an untested public-private financing vehicle.

Moreover, the TIF-rich cultural districts the plan would encourage may see their housing prices and rents balloon, and their low-income residents who lack creative skills displaced. Neighborhoods reimagined as magnets for the arts might irretrievably lose their historic personalities. Even in this city

where, for more than a century, policymakers have been admonished to “make no little plans,” less is sometimes more, especially when the grander vision overshoots the mark.

Rather than offering up the public's scarce resources to the arts community as a whole, we should scale back Cultural Plan 2012 before it's made final next month so that it helps only those artists and arts organizations whose needs, talents and missions merit our support, always ensuring that our strategy is affordable, harms no one and benefits all of us.



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