

GLOBE EDITORIAL

The Boston Globe

In the arts, a cast of hundreds

December 21, 2007

GREATER BOSTON'S cultural community just got a checkup, and the results are troubling. Sure, a lot looks good on the surface, from the Institute of Contemporary Art's new waterfront building to the many families who brave the cold to see the "The Nutcracker."

But a new Boston Foundation report points to bad cases of financial distress behind the scenes. From 1999 to 2004, the number of Greater Boston cultural organizations increased by 17 percent. But over those five years, all these groups were swimming in a shrinking pond; average revenues for cultural groups decreased by 16 percent. More groups may mean higher administrative costs and too few board members to go around.

The report bluntly calls on struggling organizations to consider "exit strategies." Ailing organizations could merge, or they could pull their own plugs and close. But before groups decide anything, they need to take an honest look at their challenges and seek out creative ways to respond.

The report names few names, but it does identify some common patterns. It notes that some midsized organizations may have more bricks and mortar than they can afford. While a building can seem like a moneymaking status symbol, these facilities also run up costs.

Groups without their own facilities should go to the Massachusetts Cultural Council, which helps cultural leaders assess whether to build. Those who develop a sound plan for construction can apply for money from the council's cultural facilities fund. The fund's screening process plays a constructive role; grants go only to groups that appear capable of sustaining themselves.

The current environment offers an opportunity to find efficiencies, better serve communities, and help strong local organizations achieve world-class status, argues Dan Hunter, executive director of the Massachusetts Advocates for the Arts, Sciences, and Humanities.

As the Boston Foundation report points out, there's more to learn about audiences. This should include figuring out the role of new technology and keeping up with the Boston area's growing minority communities.

The cultural community also has to continue its advocacy in the State House. Limits on home rule deny cities and towns the option of raising taxes to support the arts. Without this power, Boston can't keep up with the ample cultural funding found in New York and San Francisco.

Ultimately, though, individual nonprofits have to decide whether they can survive. Greater Boston is richer for its variety of arts organizations, and if groups use these leaner times as an impetus to innovate, so much the better. But groups should feel no shame in deciding that their artistic interests are best served by combining with others. One way or another, the Boston Foundation's report could lead to creative change. ■