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Q & A

Barbra Kavanaugh and Byron Brown

City Hall advocates for art

By Elizabeth Licata, photos by kc kratt.

In April, *Spree* sat down with Barbra Kavanaugh, Buffalo's new arts commissioner, and Mayor Byron Brown to talk about the state of arts activity, arts funding, and public art in Buffalo. As a former council member (1996-99), Kavanaugh knows her way around the various city departments, and thinks she can reinvigorate the arts commission, which has not been active for at least four years. She is taking this on as a volunteer; she'll continue to pursue her professional life as an attorney.



Barbra Kavanaugh

As for Brown, he has declared 2008 the "year of the arts" in his State of the City address, and part of that commitment is bringing Kavanaugh aboard and inaugurating a new urban arts center.

So, isn't the reinvigoration of the Buffalo Arts Commission kind of an unfunded mandate, as you are acting as a volunteer and there is really no budget for support of the arts?

Barbra Kavanaugh: First, I want to say that I don't see it as an unfunded mandate. My idea is to build the infrastructure that has not been here with the Arts Commission having been inactive. It's almost like you have to reeducate everyone on what the Arts Commission does.

Because I saw that as the first job, and because I've done city budgets myself, I said, "Give me twelve months to run with this and I'm not asking for money right now." That being said, there has been investment from the city. I have two twenty-hour interns, both of whom are being paid a living wage. I have an office on the twenty-fourth floor. We also will be working with the Assistant Corporation Counsel—it won't be his fulltime job, but he's going to be our fulltime lawyer. So I think a lot of resources are being put into it, if not necessarily dollars.

Byron Brown: And it's costing the city a certain amount to prepare the office space and provide computers. We also made a million-dollar commitment to an urban arts center in the Michigan Avenue cultural corridor area. (There might be some special state legislation establishing the district as historic.) What it does is it co-locates the African-American Cultural Center, Buffalo City Ballet, Ujima Theatre, and potentially other African-American arts organizations. It will have a music school in it as well.

So this means the African-American Cultural Center moves from Masten? What about the Langston Hughes Arts Center?

BB: Part of the plan contemplates them going into this facility as well. Actually, the city has allocated \$1.1 million for this. The \$100,000 is for selection of a consultant to design the space and marketing for the space. We see this becoming a major cultural in the city that would add to the rich diversity of arts venues we have in Buffalo. This would enhance our ability to attract people to come into the community and spend dollars here, patronizing the arts. Our federal congressional delegation, under the leadership of Congresswoman Louise Slaughter, has made an allocation of \$200,000. We expect the final costs for building the facility to be between 5 and 7 million. The whole idea is to make all of these facilities more self-sustaining than they are, to expand their audiences for the programming and education programs offered by these organizations. These new performance spaces will be so attractive they will pull people from throughout the region and beyond.

These are all organizations that have long existed here, some for over thirty years, but, for example, in the case of Paul Robeson Theatre, its neighborhood is in transition and the theater is not nearly big enough for some of their performances. They lose dollars because they don't have the capacity.

What gave you the idea to call 2008 "the year of the arts"?

BB: It happened in conversations with Barbra, with Dr. Muriel Howard [president] and Eunice Lewin [council member] of Buffalo State College, and many different people involved with the arts. Over some time we have been talking together about making more public investment in the arts, resuscitating the arts commission, and kind of teaming up to really capitalize on the rich arts activities we have here.

After all that thought, we did this formal declaration. Of course, later this year the new Burchfield-Penney opens; that will be the first major museum built in Buffalo in 100 years.

What about actual funding from the city for arts organizations, as used to be disbursed, even at minimal levels? Is there a plan for that to be reinstated?

BB: One of the ways I envision doing this is through the host local share of the casino revenue, which could start coming by 2010, when the permanent facility is built. [When asked about the county's claim that county government should receive this share:] We're the host community, so under the agreement, we should receive the revenue, but County Executive Collins is in agreement that there should be a dedicated revenue stream for the arts.



Byron Brown

BK: One of my passions is the arts as economic development. And we don't do that. We do cultural tourism, but I have not seen a commitment to bringing in and retaining a creative class. When people say "artists" they're often thinking of them as in an attic somewhere. But I'm talking about sound design, lighting design, filmmaking, animation. The economic impact study was rather narrow; it focused all on non-profits. I'm talking about people who have arts-related for-profit businesses here in Buffalo. Because we have an infrastructure to support that. There are people working here who have international client lists, like Brian Tennyson, who does sound design, and Rick Spaulding, who does light design. We have 2,500 people working in the arts in Western New York. That's a factory. I'm trying to get that message out there.

That's why, in addition to the traditional role of the commission, I'm focusing on this type of development, which the arts don't benefit from now.

BB: Dovetailing on that is the success of Artspace. These are people who could live anywhere to do the work that they do, but while sixty of those units are now occupied, there is a waiting list of 300 people from all over the country who would like to live in Buffalo. So now we are contemplating building out other projects to house artists. We had a meeting with the new executive director of the New York State Council of the Arts, and she was quite intrigued by Buffalo as a low-cost living environment for artists from downstate.

BK: My son is an artist and he lives in Artspace. I'm very happy that I have him here. But the truth is, even if we weren't from Buffalo, he might be here. He sees how expensive it is to live in Manhattan, working four jobs and still trying to get art done.

So support for the arts goes beyond giving grants to arts organizations?

BK: What I would like people to see is that funding for the infrastructure for the arts is economic development, developing the city's economic assets. That doesn't mean arts organizations with their hand out; what it means is people hand-in-hand developing the city's strengths.

The recent webpoll where Buffalo was voted the number-one mid-sized city got a mixed reaction. Some people found it to be boosterism and nothing more.

BK: Every other city was doing the same thing as us, and we were still number one. Or if they didn't, then they didn't have as cohesive an arts community and its supporters. I think it was a real, legitimate measure of the strength of our arts

community and its supporters.

Let's talk about public art. That's important on a few different levels. What is the state of the inventory that was started?

BK: That was actually done by an intern after David Granville left as arts commissioner. We need to work on that and finish it as at least a website. I think public art is very important; in fact, the arts commission's main purpose has always been the stewardship of public art, to maintain what we have and to create new art, with the help of the art-in-public-places legislation we passed when I was a council member.

That's the one-percent-for-art program, right?

BK: Yes, capital projects of 1 million or more that have received any city funding [capital funding, not tax breaks] must spend one percent of their costs on a public art project. Some of the more recent projects are the art in the B District police station and the Jefferson library. But the problem is that without an active arts commission, the mechanism, the process by which all that happens, hasn't been in place.

A diverse group of commission members—from all kinds of backgrounds—decide what projects will receive funding, to make sure that the quality is there. Possible future projects include art at the inner harbor historic site. I'm not an expert, so I am real comfortable with asking people who are experts, through a jurying process, to identify high-quality projects. *[Five members of the commission are selected by the mayor and five by the common council.]*

BB: We look for diversity and a variety of backgrounds: some people might be artists, some might be attorneys, and some are business people, but with all of them there is a passion/interest in the arts.

How do we fund maintenance of the public art we already have?

BK: This is in the charter and the funds are there. The Arts Commission can ask for funds from the city up to one percent of the city's capital budget, which is way more than we need, but it is the ceiling. One thing we have to do is evaluate what needs to be done and then request these funds. And, of course, we will be using the resources of our colleges and universities in this area.

When will you break ground on the urban arts center?

BB: We think it will be in two years; we need to raise the remainder of the funds.

Barbra Kavanaugh gives an informal bike tour of Buffalo's public art every summer, during the national Erie Canal bike ride. She hopes to make this a public tour soon. She says the favorite artwork of people who take her tour is J. Seward Johnson, Jr.'s sculpture of a man reading a newspaper on Niagara Street.

Elizabeth Licata is editor of Buffalo Spree.

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