

Hardened by battle, Erie County cultural groups present a united front

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The battle-hardened veterans filed neatly into the gallery of the Erie County Legislature's chambers in Old County Hall on Monday afternoon, many of them carrying small placards identifying their individual regiments:

The Olmsted Parks Conservancy. The Lancaster Opera House. The Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Juneteenth. The Orchard Park Chorale.

As the meeting came to order, they sat silently, nodding along with the clerk and patiently waiting for their turn to speak. With few exceptions, each speaker delivered a concise, forceful and fact-filled case about their collective cause: Erie County's continued support of arts organizations large and small as integral components of the region's emerging economy and quality of life.

This cultural army, organized under the banner of the Greater Buffalo Cultural Alliance, had been here before. They had memorized the landscape. They understood the enemy. And, since the group formed during the bruising Erie County cultural funding crisis of 2010-11, they had clearly been practicing their moves.

Their simple goal, Albright-Knox marketing and public relations director Maria Morreale said, was "to promote the integral role arts and culture play in the quality of life and economic health of the community" and a draw for "future residents who are deciding whether or not to call our region home."

Specifically, they had gathered to voice their support for Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz's [proposed budget \(http://www.buffalonews.com/opinion/buffalo-news-editorials/county-budget-holds-the-line-on-taxes-but-still-needs-close-legislative-review-20141017\)](http://www.buffalonews.com/opinion/buffalo-news-editorials/county-budget-holds-the-line-on-taxes-but-still-needs-close-legislative-review-20141017), which delivers on his promise to modestly increase cultural funding for 66 groups throughout the county.

While the general mood in the room was one of cautious optimism about the Republican-led legislature's willingness to fund arts and culture at the recommended levels, there remained a possibility that the majority's professed desire for a tax decrease might eat away at the sector's hard-won gains over the past few years.

And so there were countless stories about the payoffs from Erie County's [investment of \\$5.68 million \(http://data.buffalonews.com/databuff/arts-entertainment/grants-arts-cultural-organizations-erie-county-since-1996/\)](http://data.buffalonews.com/databuff/arts-entertainment/grants-arts-cultural-organizations-erie-county-since-1996/) in cultural organizations and programs over the past year.

We heard about the success of "Shark Girl," the impossibly popular sculpture at Canalside, which emerged from a new public arts partnership among Erie County, the City of Buffalo and the Albright-Knox. We heard about groups like the Western New York Book Arts Center, Young Audiences of Western New York, Theatre of Youth and many others stepping in to fill widening gaps in an educational system less concerned than ever with culture and creativity.

We heard from Melissa Kate Miller of Young Audiences, who, as if to drive home the theme of the day, actually stood up and led the crowd in a brief version of the military song "Hard Work." Her performance served to break up the monotony of the speeches and highlighted the dedication of cultural workers who toil to change lives first and for paychecks second.

And we heard from Albright-Knox Deputy Director Joe Lin-Hill that for every dollar of the \$60,000 the county kicks into its public art collaboration, \$10 is returned to the community. The assembled crowd also learned that county contributions typically account for less than 10 percent of organizations' budgets – a fact likely to surprise those who decry public funding for arts organizations as some sort terrible form of cultural welfare sure to lead directly to a communist revolution.

Exceptions to this rule include Shakespeare in Delaware Park, whose founder, Saul Elkin, was on hand to extol what now seems to be the radical idea of a free outdoor theater festival that draws 40,000 people

from across all racial and socioeconomic lines to see professional-level theater every summer. The festival is about to celebrate its 40th season.

“None of this would be possible without the generous support of Erie County,” Elkin said in his booming voice, going on to say that the organization sees itself as “a gift from the county” to citizens.

However the budget process shakes out, Erie County’s cultural groups can be confident that they made every effort, and every argument about their worthiness as a public investment.

Those arguments continue to gain nuance and force at every budget hearing, adapting to the makeup of the body and the changing economic landscape of the region. That they also now include a study about the crucial [economic impact of the arts \(http://www.buffalonews.com/gusto/art/new-study-touts-economic-impact-of-the-arts-20141105\)](http://www.buffalonews.com/gusto/art/new-study-touts-economic-impact-of-the-arts-20141105) commissioned by the Arts Services Initiative was an added bonus.

Unlike for-profit corporations that regularly receive tax breaks worth tens of millions of dollars as a matter of course merely by holding out their hand, cultural groups must fight for their fair share and literally sing for their supper at every opportunity.

That’s why it’s been so heartening over the past few years to witness the evolution of the cultural community from a rag-tag militia into an organized division marching more or less in lockstep to the same drummer.

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