

Montgomery County Cultural Plan

Task 1.6 Montgomery County Cultural Plan Kickoff Recap

Prepared by Metris Arts Consulting

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On Wednesday, October 16, 2024, the Arts & Humanities Council of Montgomery County (AHCMC) gathered with 125 grantees, partners, and supporters at the Strathmore Music Hall to kick off its new cultural planning process. Over the next 18 months, AHCMC will work with Metris Arts Consulting (Metris) to create a cultural plan for Montgomery County.

CULTURAL PLANNING 101

Metris founder and “Muckety-Muck” Anne Gadwa Nicodemus explained that cultural planning is the practice of creating place-based plans that identify priorities, guide investment, and inform local policies concerning arts and culture. Nicodemus told the audience that cultural plans help guide how a locality (in this case, Montgomery County) should:

- Spend public and private dollars
- Develop facilities
- Establish or change regulations
- Use public spaces and government buildings
- Promote economic development and tourism
- Support educational or artistic programs
- Make other decisions that affect arts and culture in the county



With its new cultural plan, AHCMC hopes to:

- Adapt for Montgomery County’s rapid and diverse population growth, expand access to arts and culture programming for all residents, and the ways in which arts and culture can advance racial equity
- Map out how arts, culture, and the humanities can intersect with the work of the government in non-traditional ways, bringing innovation and fresh perspective to the county’s efforts in housing, economic development, health, education, and community building
- Respond to COVID-19’s continued impacts

Nicodemus encouraged participants at the event to stay informed and involved in the planning process by visiting the AHCMC website and following along on social media.

CREATIVE REFLECTION

Silver Spring artist Alyscia Cunningham led participants in a creative reflection exercise. She asked each attendee to think of a time when art and culture inspired a feeling of belonging for them and share it with the people at their table. Participants shared stories of attending cultural events specific to their heritage, participating in collective art making, learning to dance, and singing together over Zoom during the pandemic. These events all inspired feelings of belonging to something greater than themselves.

What was an art experience that gave you a sense of belonging to something larger than yourself?



KEYNOTE BY ROBERTO BEDOYA

AHCMC CEO Suzan Jenkins shared her own story of finding a sense of cultural belonging in the produce section of a grocery store shortly after moving to Montgomery County. Noting that “belonging” is the central theme of the Oakland, California cultural plan of 2018, Jenkins introduced Roberto Bedoya, the Cultural Affairs Manager for the City of Oakland. Bedoya guided the city in the creation of “Belonging in Oakland: A Cultural Development Plan.” He is a major voice nationally in the use of cultural policy to address exclusionary practices in cultural and public policy decision making.

Bedoya summarized the intent of the Oakland cultural plan for the audience, saying equity is the plan’s driving force, culture is its frame, and belonging is its goal. He explained further that cultural planning must look at “the ways people live their lives.” Planners should not think solely about art objects and instead focus on diversity of culture.

Guiding principles:

- Build trust, most importantly with local government so they will move things along
- Focus on assets not deficits
- Leverage resources
- Work collaboratively
- Look for intersectionality – how can arts and culture support the functions of the government, and vice versa?
- Build capacity for civic engagement among residents and other stakeholders
- Continually improve

Bedoya acknowledged some of the inherent tensions in municipal cultural planning. Policy tries to fix problems with rules, so policymakers’ instinct is to create guidelines. Culture is fluid, however, and does not fit neatly within policy guidelines. Bedoya urged the audience to think about what structures and policies can create belonging, saying, “How do we move from the ‘I’ to the ‘we’?”

Cities and counties have many “policies of dis-belonging,” he explained. Local governmental and societal structures create many divides between people based on race, orientation, language, and other factors. Instead, a city should have a belonging strategy that operates alongside its workforce, housing, safety, and other strategies. “The beauty of our work is we have this gift of knowing how art creates social belonging,” Bedoya said. “Civic belonging is also within our reach.”



In Oakland, Bedoya launched the Cultural Strategist-in-Government Program, which placed artists in city government agencies. He explained the program did not give artists the explicit charge of mingling the agencies' work with art. Instead, the artists acted as thought partners in addressing some of the city's challenges. For example, an artist embedded in the transportation department might think about routes in a new way. Bedoya said, “They were not making objects. They were making policy arguments.”

Finally, Bedoya explained that cultural planning should help localities move beyond thinking about ROI (return on investment) in rigid, monetary terms. Instead, ROI can mean return on imagination, influence, and innovation. The process helps people see the value of things and places differently. He concluded by charging participants to consider: “What is the return on imagination for Montgomery County?”

*What is the return on imagination for
Montgomery County?*

Q&A

Suzan Jenkins opened the question-and-answer period by talking about AHCMC's goals for the planning process. She said they hoped the process would help AHCMC understand "who we are as a community" and highlight intersectionality within the county's systems. She also hopes that the plan itself will be a living document that reflects people and changes as people change. She noted that Montgomery County itself has changed a great deal in both overall population and diversity since the last cultural plan debuted.



Jenkins asked Bedoya how he had arrived at "belonging" as the goal for the Oakland cultural plan and whether he had received pushback to that idea. He answered that placemaking – the focus of many cultural plans – typically doesn't talk about the politics of dis-belonging. "Belonging is scrappy and embracing that is challenging." He continued that belonging is something we want to engender intentionally, letting people know we all belong here together.

Bedoya said he believes strongly in the power of civic imagination. How do we imagine things being? Once we have that shared vision, we can address the pragmatic issues of how to accomplish it, such as focusing county agency attention on sidewalks in certain areas. According to Bedoya, the municipal agencies that "deliver belonging" are parks and recreation, libraries, and departments of cultural affairs. He cautioned, however, that the county's work should not be "either/or." All agencies should address and incorporate art and culture alongside their own areas of responsibility.

A participant asked what message Bedoya could send to county colleagues who wonder how a cultural plan will intersect with their departments. How can we help seemingly unrelated county agencies understand we are all in this together? Bedoya replied that the county departments “need to see the creative workforce as part of your problem solvers, not just people charged with making things beautiful.” For example, he mused, “what happens if you hire a poet or playwright for your town hall meeting? That will prompt imagination and that will take you outside of the box.” He finished by explaining that governments are inherently risk-averse, but the plan can help mitigate risk by encouraging thinking both inside and outside the box.

Bedoya elaborated on that concept in response to a question about how a cultural plan and disaster plan could work together. “I really believe in the artist community to offer remedies,” he said. As an example, he explained that many creeks in Oakland had been covered with roads in the past. An artist has mapped all of the “lost” creeks and is now involved in efforts to uncover them.

MAKING OUR WISHES

At the conclusion of the gathering, participants wrote their wishes for the new plan on colorful paper airplanes and sent them soaring. Their wishes echoed the value of diversity and belonging. They included:

- That everyone feels represented in the plan, that there is a place for and with them
- Include as many voices as possible in this large, diverse county
- Making the unfamiliar familiar, connecting communities of very different backgrounds and inspiring exploration
- I wish and hope that cultural identity and voices are embedded in the plan and our capital projects
- More color, less gray!
- Places/spaces for everyone
- Cultural unity through embracing cultural diversity
- For all of us to belong, survive, soar!



WISHES WORD CLOUD

