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Next task for our cultural groups: Court individual donors

Individuals, not businesses, are biggest arts backers in many cities.

Posted: Sunday, Jun. 28, 2009

From Chris McLeod, vice president of the Greater Charlotte Cultural Trust, a supporting foundation of Foundation For The Carolinas: Our cultural community is at a crossroads: Charlotte's ambitions have outpaced its nascent culture of individual philanthropy. Too few donor dollars are supporting too many groups.

Charlotte's cultural community has relied disproportionately on the generosity of our major employers in banking, health care, real estate and energy. According to the Giving USA Foundation, in 2008 companies contributed only 5 percent of all charitable dollars. Individual donors are responsible for almost 90 percent of all charitable gifts. Most Charlotte nonprofits are chasing 5 percent of the pie.

We have yet to understand the important role individual giving plays in the long-term sustainability of our most important cultural organizations. Our cultural groups need to refocus, to engage and inspire donors. All too often, nonprofits show up with a shopping list or scripted "ask" rather than a willingness to converse about what donors find most inspiring and meaningful.

Cities such as Cleveland and Nashville, home to distinguished symphonies, have strong traditions of family philanthropy over two or three generations. Large companies and banks are rarely mentioned among top donors. The majority of symphonies similar in size to Charlotte's have a sizeable pool of donors who regularly make annual gifts of \$5,000 to \$15,000. That doesn't include those who have made outright gifts or bequests to symphony endowments. Even in Buffalo and Kansas City, symphonies have received gifts to their endowments of \$6 million and \$10 million respectively. The Observer has reported there's been only one gift greater than \$10 million to any Charlotte nonprofit – Levine Children's Hospital.

Charlotte has reason to be proud of its national reputation for volunteerism and for being home to two of the country's largest and most successful workplace campaigns. While the Arts & Science Council's annual fund drive is an important and efficient way to raising support, it was never intended to relieve cultural groups from raising major gifts or investing in development staff.

Charlotte is a young city where much of the wealth has been created in the past 25 years. We

are ambitious. We love to build buildings. But we have yet to understand the critical role ongoing program support and endowments play in the long-term sustainability of our most important cultural organizations. We need to be mindful of our legacy to future generations. Are we content to leave beautifully designed buildings? Are we willing to invest in robust outreach programs, expanded collections and inspired leadership? Are we prepared to make a charitable bequest to our favorite cultural institution to ensure its long term sustainability?

We need to build on the cultural platform given to our community by our corporations and their generous employees. To truly deserve our national reputation, more of us must make more generous financial contributions to Charlotte's cultural organizations.

Five new cultural facilities and a renovated Discovery Place will open in Charlotte in the next year. I challenge you to support them and our other cultural organizations.



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