

Summit meeting set to boost arts and culture sector in BC

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By Kevin Griffin

Can the provincial government increase the \$4.2 billion that Statistics Canada says the arts and cultural sector already contributes to the B.C. economy?

The moderator for a summit meeting of the major players in the province's arts and cultural scene believes that it can and should take a leadership role in recognizing the importance of artists, performers and creative people in creating the idea-based economy of the 21st century.

Max Wyman, who is also the mayor of Lions Bay, said the goal of Tuesday's day-long meeting at the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue is to develop strategies to create a road map for a new vision of arts and culture for B.C.

"What the government is looking for is a really comprehensive strategy for building a stronger creative economy in British Columbia," he said.

"I think that the government has come to recognize that the contribution that arts and culture make is quite astonishing and it wants to leverage that, particularly in the run-up to the Olympic Games, but beyond that as well."

Wyman, a former dance critic and editor for The Vancouver Sun, has been writing on the arts in B.C. and nationally for more than 30 years. Besides being the author of several books, including *Dance Canada: An Illustrated History*, Wyman is also the president of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO.

Wyman acknowledged that artists and creators might feel justified in questioning the seriousness of the government's intentions, given its past performance. But he said things have changed, and that Olga Ilich, minister of tourism, sport and the arts, is committed to building a vibrant arts and cultural sector.

"I've been around for 35 years and I've seen this before but I have never, ever seen the kind of will and determination on the part of a minister who wants to get this done," he said.

About 140 arts and cultural officials from around B.C. are expected at the summit. Speakers include Glen Murray, former mayor of Winnipeg, and David Baxter, from the Urban Futures Institute.

One of the main ideas behind the summit comes from Richard Florida, author of *The Rise of the Creative Class*. He says in the book that suburban areas are trying to create urban-style amenities such as pedestrian-friendly town centres with vibrant, street-level retail sought after by the creative class.

"Now even the suburbs are trying to emulate aspects of the quality of place associated with larger urban centres," he writes. "And they are doing so for hard-nosed economic reasons -- to attract the talented people and thus the companies that power growth in today's economy."

Recent studies by Hill Strategies, an arts research company, show that B.C. is a national hotbed of artistic activity.

Vancouver, according to a study released at the end of March, has more artists per capita than any other city in the country with a population in excess of 50,000. In fact, B.C. has five of the top nine artistic cities in the country: After Vancouver, Victoria is ranked second, followed by North Vancouver District in 4th, Saanich in 8th and New Westminster in 9th place. Richmond is in 10th place, tied with six other large cities.

Last week, the provincial government showed its commitment towards arts and culture by giving \$5 million to Vancouver for the planning and initial development of a new downtown cultural precinct. The money will be matched by \$5 million from the city's capital funds.

The money will go to reviewing several cultural initiatives being proposed for downtown. They include a new provincial Asia-Pacific Museum of Trade and Culture, a new Gallery of Aboriginal Art, the renovation of the Queen Elizabeth Theatre and the relocation of the Vancouver Art Gallery.

The city's galleries and museums are all vying to be part of redevelopment plans for Robson Square and city-owned lands bounded by Georgia, Hamilton, Dunsmuir and Beatty, the last prime development block downtown.