

Nathan Smallwood: Arts sector should reach out to booming Warren

By Nathan Smallwood, COMMENTARY

The Western Star, Wednesday, January 02, 2008

Few places in America are experiencing more dramatic "exurban" growth than Warren County.

Across the nation, massive numbers of families are trading their traditional suburban lifestyles for bigger homes and yards and increased distance from perceived urban ills.

The seismic shift in southwest Ohio's demographics has hastened a race for the hearts, minds and dollars of Warren County residents.

But how will this vibrant new market develop? To what degree will this area affiliate culturally with the north, south — or neither? Will the once fragmented collection of small towns form a cohesive culture, wielding its own power as a distinct market?

One of the most important aspects of this shift will play out in arts and cultural development, with major ramifications for southwest Ohio.

Warren County is a favored exurban destination for two previously distinct metropolitan markets — Cincinnati to the south and Dayton to the north. In sharp contrast to southwest Ohio's overall stagnant growth, its population has boomed a staggering 21 percent since 2000. This ranks second among Ohio's 88 counties, and among the top 3 percent nationwide. The county population recently surpassed the city of Dayton's.

Meanwhile, the median income for Warren County households is \$67,804 (in 2005 dollars), ranking second in Ohio and nearly 30 percent higher than the statewide average.

The highest income zones within metropolitan Dayton and Cincinnati are now exurban, not suburban. The county's new immigrants from neighboring areas are younger, affluent professionals and families — an extremely attractive demographic to most businesses, the arts included.

Thus, Dayton and Cincinnati's business and cultural sectors face a comparable proposition. On the one hand, each risks losing prime patrons

and customers. On the other, by winning over Warren County, they'll not only keep these customers, but also gain valuable access to exurbanites from the other city.

This new shared market and gateway represents the "last best chance" for market development and expansion in a generation.

Cincinnati and Dayton have excellent artistic and cultural assets. While Warren County residents value these amenities, the county remains surprisingly underserved in arts and cultural programming. Thus, there will likely be significant development of the county's own cultural infrastructure.

Indeed, tourism/recreation has become the county's top industry. The county will leverage its position along the Dayton-Cincinnati corridor as a regional hub for arts, culture and leisure, as the "urban alternative." The excellent, yet small and under-promoted, local arts, theater, dance and music companies have a chance thrive as never before.

Meanwhile, urban-based arts and cultural institutions, many with shrinking audiences and donor bases, must capitalize on this opportunity. To do so, these institutions may need to transform their service models as radically as their markets have evolved. Until new market development, including reaching out to Warren County, becomes a top strategic priority, many groups risk stagnation, even decline.

How can downtown organizations best cultivate exurbanites? Our message: Spend less effort luring our residents to your cities. Instead, dramatically increase your efforts to partner with our local institutions. That is, serve locally, and cross-promote. Or in the parlance of marketing, use less "pull" and more "push."

The Warren County Arts Council is leading the way in developing the arts and cultural assets of the region. We want to partner with the local, regional and urban arts groups to invest and share in our growth.

The business sector has responded to this new market opportunity. Newspapers and communications media, banks and financial institutions, retail and service industries are vying fiercely for Warren County's dollar. The inheritance of market growth by incumbent firms has attracted vigorous competition from regional players. We're no longer "one horse towns."

Our message to that sector is: Extend your leadership in cultural investment. You will earn our business, with many happy returns. Regional corporations that traditionally focus their support primarily on downtown institutions need to turn their attention toward local institutions, and in helping urban arts/cultural groups expand here.

The Warren County Arts Council is planning a new regional arts and performance center that will serve local arts groups as well as regional performance organizations. This is a prime opportunity for downtown-based groups seeking market expansion. Further, it is a potential "crown jewel" investment for any business ready to demonstrate its commitment to the quality of life of our Warren County community.

In five to 10 years, this dramatic race for the hearts, minds and dollars of Warren County residents may well be decided. With it, one of the greatest opportunities for growth and investment in a generation will pass.

Let's make the most of it — together.

Nathan J. Smallwood is president of the Warren County Arts Council. Send e-mail to smallwood@warrencounty

arts.org or call (513) 228-2458.