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Sacramento Mayor Johnson aids arts fundraising

eortiz@sacbee.com

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Over a seven-day period in August – and in the middle of tough economic times – Sacramento Mayor Kevin Johnson secured \$100,000 to fund a fledgling "For Arts Sake" initiative.

Johnson left little doubt that the plight of the arts is a focus for his administration. But the swift fundraising also proved that Sacramento-based corporations are willing to provide new funds for the arts.

Johnson said the first pitches in his initiative were directed at AT&T, Western Health Advantage, Wells Fargo Bank and the Sacramento Region Community Foundation.

"That means we're four for four," Johnson said. "People have said that no initiative in the past has ever worked this way, because we are delivering things in record time."

For many area arts organizations, results like Johnson's fundraising would be monumental. And given the tough economic climate – for example, the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission faces a budget cut by county officials of as much as a 39 percent – the mayor's corporate fundraising is drawing attention.

"I think that everyone realizes that, with the cuts to SMAC and the county, we need some private resources to help us weather the storm," Johnson said.

"We, as a city, do not give from a philanthropic perspective like other cities around the country," he said. "So we have a long way to go. But I think this gives us hope."

Johnson said he will approach each contributor again for more funds.

"At the end of the year, if they feel good about their investment, they might stay on for a multiyear commitment. But we've not had that discussion yet," he said.

For AT&T, the eagerness to fund the mayor's arts initiative dovetails with a specific philanthropic focus: education.

"We see the 'For Art's Sake' initiative here in Sacramento as using the arts to encourage students to graduate from high school and pursue college and other institutions of higher learning," said Kathy McKim, AT&T's vice president for external affairs in Sacramento.

"If children learn about arts early and are engaged in art programs, they're more likely to stay in school," she said.

So far, the initiative's evolution and funding have impressed the Sacramento arts community.

"The idea that you 'own' the importance of the arts as critical to the life of the city, for financial, cultural reasons ... that without it a city is without its soul, not to mention how it helps kids stay in school ... we've heard all that before," said Joe Landon, policy director of the California Alliance for Arts Education, and one of the 32 members of the city's education subcommittee. "But what is truly unique is hearing it all from someone with no direct link to the arts."

Landon is nonetheless taking a wait-and-see approach to the initiative. "They raised money to pay for staff, but where it goes from here depends on the depth of commitment from Johnson and the initiative's supporters."

Some, like Sacramento Philharmonic executive director Marc Feldman, are encouraged by new corporate funding for the initiative. Corporate funding is something Feldman eagerly courts, but he believes too much of it has become focused on education.

"They want to make sure that our community engagement programs are funded, and that's wonderful, but the thing is the actual art is becoming harder to fund," Feldman said. "Nonetheless, the initiative puts the arts back in (corporations') thinking. For that, someone has to be a leader."

The biggest chunk of the contributed funds – \$40,000 – will be used for the salary of part-time arts liaison Sharon Gerber. Another \$5,000 will help fund the services of ArtSmart, a consulting firm run by former Sacramento Philharmonic executive director Jane Hill. And \$12,000 will pay an intern, Johnson said.

Of the remaining funds, \$25,000 will go to marketing, including a Web site and the design of a new logo. Results of some of those efforts, like the new Web site, will be announced at the fourth meeting of the initiative's participants, Sept. 23 at the Sacramento Ballet studios, 1631 K St.

At these monthly meetings, Johnson has been keen on inviting as speakers some noted individuals from the arts. Randy Weeks, president of the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, will speak at the next meeting about securing permanent sources of public funding.

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