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New Arts District in Baltimore?

There is a sentiment among people who truly appreciate the arts in which they believe that an arts district can lead to the revitalization of portions of a city, and some of those people are among the city leaders of Baltimore. Under a proposal endorsed by Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, Baltimore's west side would become the city's third arts and entertainment district, joining the two others in Station North and Highlandtown. This designation would make the west side a magnet for galleries, theaters, studios, and other arts activities as well as investment opportunities; it would also make certain business and property owners eligible for tax breaks. There are already some artsy locations in the west side, such as the France-Merrick Performing Arts Center (home of the Hippodrome Theatre) and the Bromo Seltzer Arts Tower.

The idea for a west-side arts district has been around for over a decade. In 1995, former Mayer Kurt Schmoke's administration posted signs on Howard Street, renaming it the "Avenue of the Arts." The idea was raised again during Martin O'Malley's time as mayor, and it has been given new life under Rawlings-Blake. (City leaders were seeking a $250,000 matching grant from the National Endowment of the Arts in addition to the city's own funds to help develop plans for the proposed district. Ultimately, Baltimore was not one of the cities invited to compete for the grant, but local arts leaders say that they hope to find alternative funds as they seek to continue planning.)

Baltimore's west side has already been on the path of revitalization in the past several years, with the renovation of the Hippodrome Theatre and the imminent arrival of the Everyman Theatre Company. With this development already taking place, one may wonder if the designation of "arts district" is necessary. There are some large-scale revitalization plans (involving the Hippodrome, the former Town theatre on Fayette Street, and the Bromo Seltzer Tower) whose success likely does not depend upon the designation happening. The difference that the designation would make is in the smaller projects that would become easier to accomplish. Tax incentives would be offered that would help members of the creative class live and work in underdeveloped areas. For this reason, the Baltimore Sun has thrown its support behind this initiative in a recent editorial. This piece notes that Baltimore's two current arts districts really began to turn around when an influx of young artists came into the areas, drawn by relatively low rents and a notable amount of studio space.

Not everyone has gotten behind the push for a new arts district; indeed, not even everyone at the Baltimore Sun has expressed support. Sam Sessa, the Sun's nightlife and local entertainment reporter, does not believe that Baltimore is a big enough city to sustain three arts districts. The way he sees it, the city is only one for two in its success rate with its current arts districts. Station North is the one successful district, and even in that case, the success took several years to get going. As for Highlandtown, other than the Creative Alliance at the Patterson performance space, Sessa states, this district does not have much more in the way of the arts than it did when it was designated as an arts district back in 2003. For these reasons, he

believes that the city should focus on developing its current arts districts instead of creating a new one.

We here at WLOY applaud any successful effort in spreading the arts throughout Baltimore, or any city, for that matter. But it would be a great loss if the designation of a new arts district turned out to ultimately be a waste of money. Therefore, city leaders are advised to be thorough and realistic in determining the potential results of such a designation. Involve the artists who would work on the "small-scale" projects in the planning process. In the end, do not be discouraged about the potential for the arts to flourish if the designation cannot happen.