

A 20/20 hindsight perspective on the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District

Speech of Gully Stanford, 2009 Recipient of the SCFD's Rex Morgan Award Delivered November 16, 2009

Newcomers to Denver are perhaps unaware of the seismic impact that passage of the SCFD (the Polar Bear Tax) in 1988 had on the mile high city's cultural quality of life. This 1/10th of a cent sales tax (1 cent on every \$10 purchase) now generates over \$30 million a year, and has – over 20 years - invested over half a *billion* dollars in over 300 scientific, historical and cultural organizations in Metro Denver's 7-county region.

Reauthorized by popular vote in 2006, the District will next come up for a vote in 2018. Meanwhile, Gully Stanford, veteran of 4 SCFD campaigns and former Public Affairs Director at the DCPA, recently offered some thoughts on the significance of the SCFD at a gathering to celebrate its 20th year and to honor the memory of its principal advocate, Rex Morgan.

Its significance: It's not just the money, though half a billion dollars has nurtured and fostered an otherwise unthinkable level of excellence, diversity and accessibility, and ensured the emergence and survival of vibrant, professional organizations.

Two key developments have been

- The image of Metro Denver, and thus of Colorado, as a place where creativity flourishes, where the arts are healthy and adventurous, where every resident, regardless of socio-economic status, can enjoy the best that museums, theatres and symphonies can offer. Wellington Webb coined the phrase "Athens on the Platte" – whether it's that, or Paris on the Platte or Queen City of the Plains, Denver has come of age culturally thanks to the SCFD.
- Awareness, cooperation and collaboration: where once the "culturals" fought each other (often to the death) over scraps of public sector subsidies, that Balkanization has been replaced by a universal awareness of the diversity of cultural offerings across 7 counties and collaborations such as the Tier II Community Awareness Partnership, with pooled resources and shared mailing lists and strategic marketing and educational collaboratives...the envy of communities from across the nation.

Essential components of a successful campaign:

- First and foremost the Champion – Rex Morgan was the captain of a "Bounty" which brooked no mutiny. Had he not existed, we would have had to invent him...luckily for us, he did exist and was determined to succeed!
- The Volunteers – they read like a Who's Who of 20th century Denver, from patricians like Charles Gates, Bill Gossard and Don Seawell to hard-working arts managers like Anthony Radich, Robert Salisbury and Greg Geissler, a vast army of volunteers lobbied, worked and gave tirelessly and generously. Their passion was exemplified by the ubiquitous presence of pins with 2 pennies glued on (representing the 2 pennies a day which the tax would cost the average citizen), thought by some to have been manufactured – Betsy Ross-like – by Rex's good-humored widow Carolyn!

- A professional approach – “taking the cause as seriously as we wished the voters to take it” – with master-tacticians like Floyd Ciruli, this campaign was totally professional, from a serious campaign war-chest, to relentless polling, to firmly disciplined messaging...and the sonorous cadences of Raymond Burr, who donated the commentary for the campaign video...some 50 years after he starred as a youth in summer stock at Elitch’s Theatre.

The challenge of the 21st Century. We cannot rest on the generous laurels provided by the district’s taxpayers. The SCFD must lead, must create, must innovate, hewing to its core mantra of “excellence, diversity and accessibility”. In Denver, 2009, that means two major thrusts:

- Creative Economy: the Colorado Council on the Arts, www.colorarts.org, a division of the state’s Economic Development Office, has published a study of Colorado’s Creative Economy, identifying over 186,000 full time equivalent positions in creative industries, making the cultural sector the 5th largest categorical employer in the state. As we speak, the Lieutenant Governor has convened a task force to explore how Colorado can nurture the health of this vibrant and diverse sector.
- Creative Education: A creative economy and 21st Century professional skills require an educational system which nurtures students’ artistic, creative, communicative, individual and collective talents – in a word, we must restore a thorough and uniform arts education for Colorado’s students. The cost of failing to do so is best summed up by Denver’s Poet Lalo Delgado, who wrote:

Remember that Chicanito flunking math and English?
He is the Picasso of your western states.
But he will die
With one thousand masterpieces
Hanging only from his mind.

As we speak, House Education Chairman Michael Merrifield, is preparing a bill entitled “Concerning Creativity in Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness” which promises to promote arts education. There are many other ways, both regionally and locally, to support arts in our schools, our colleges and in the education departments of our great cultural institutions, to build a pipeline of talent and energy to meet the demands of a 21st century economy. There are ample voices and reports making the undeniable case – Daniel Pink, Richard Florida, Kenneth Kay.

The SCFD and its patrons must do more than attend and applaud. We must participate, protect and promote; we must, every day, earn the ongoing support of our taxpayers, and prove the foresight of our first president, George Washington, who anticipated the tremendous interplay of economic development and quality of life, when he said:

“The arts and sciences, essential to the prosperity of the state and the ornament of human life, have a primary claim to the encouragement of every lover of his country and mankind”.

Gully Stanford is Director of Partnerships at College In Colorado, an initiative of the Colorado Department of Higher Education and formerly Associate Vice-President and Director of Public Affairs at the DCPA.