

# Arts community reacts to potential 'game-changer'

By Jerry Boggs  
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## Barr Foundation

News that the prestigious Barr Foundation is routing \$500,000 to the SouthCoast arts community was met with the excitement such an influx of funding naturally brings.

The Foundation, which has made a name for itself contributing to climate and education issues in Boston, is branching out, not just thematically — adding arts and culture to its favored causes — but also geographically. Not only will the SouthCoast (New Bedford and Fall River, et. al.) get a half-million dollar contribution, so will Essex County, Western Massachusetts, Worcester and the Berkshires.

The funds will be distributed “on the ground” by community foundations in each region with the Community Foundation of Southeastern Massachusetts taking the reins locally.

The details of how that money will flow into the arts community are still being settled, but John Vasconcellos, president of the Community Foundation, said plans are to make grants in the two cities for things like public art, pilot money for new projects, and innovative programs at existing organizations.

The foundation will convene interested parties on a regular basis to talk about best practices and work together, and it may also invest in a small nonprofit and become its mentor, he said.

“Congratulations to the Community Foundation for their outstanding efforts to bring the Barr Foundation funds to New Bedford and Fall River,” said Rosemary Gill, Zeiterion Performing Arts Center’s executive director of programming and development. “I must add, the value of their effort goes beyond securing the much-needed funds. Their process will bring connection among artists and arts organizations, and big picture thinking to the community.

“I’m sure the outcome will serve to enhance the dynamic work of our artists, The Zeiterion and all performing and visual arts organizations.”

Prior to the Barr Foundation’s announcement, the arts community on SouthCoast was already among the most prominent in the state, with New Bedford named the Commonwealth’s most

creative community in 2016.

That recognition, said AHA! New Bedford Director Lee Heald, reflects not only the quantity of arts and cultural organizations, events and activities in the city, but the important role that community plays in revitalizing the area and creating a thriving network.

That the Barr Foundation includes arts and culture with its focus on community-changing priorities such as education and climate is a significant thing, she said.

“The fact the Barr Foundation has chosen to investigate and invest in arts and culture, and the Barr Foundation believes it’s an important way to grow these communities is, I think, one marker of importance,” said Heald.

“It’s a stamp of approval. The Barr Foundation not only brings funding, it brings a level of expertise and support to the issue.”

Dena Haden, an artist and co-founder of the co-working space Groundwork!, said the foundation’s work could have far-reaching effects on New Bedford and future generations of artists.

“This is wonderful news for the city of New Bedford. It marks a moment in time where we can re-envision the importance of the role that art and artists play in the fabric of the city, driving engagement, connection and economic growth,” she said. “As we gain momentum, what a gift it would be to provide access to the arts to the youth and throughout all the neighborhoods in our city.”

The news also coincides with work by the city to develop an arts and cultural plan. That convergence has the arts community poised to make a leap forward, said Eric Paradis, founder of the NB JazzFest and a member of Your Theatre Inc.

“The Community Foundation of New Bedford is at the center of a great opportunity to enhance the already growing arts scene,” he said. “Combine this with what is already happening, and the potential that the City of New Bedford Arts and Culture Planning Project that is going

on right now, we are poised for another growth spurt.”

Such a growth spurt would not only lift the arts and cultural community, but also it would send ripples throughout the city, noted Derek Santos, executive director of the New Bedford Economic Development Council.

“What I’m really excited about is the notion that, right when we have a community-wide arts and culture plan, the Community Foundation, through the generosity of the Barr Foundation, will say, ‘How can we help facilitate the kind of things the arts and culture pan will identify,’” he said. “I think the timing couldn’t have been better.”

The ripples touch local restaurants, shows and hotels, he noted, which already feel the bump when there’s a show at the Zeiterion or a gallery opening.

The Foundation’s regional approach to the SouthCoast as a whole could be beneficial to all the communities in the region, he said.

As tourists visit “The Berkshires” as opposed to Pittsfield or North Adams, they could be visiting the SouthCoast, not just New Bedford or Fall River.

“The more this region is known for the arts and culture scene, the better it is for New Bedford,” he said.

Jamie Uretsky, curator at New Bedford Art Museum/ArtWorks! expressed excitement about seeing arts funding flow from the state capital to outlying communities.

“Distribution of funds to smaller cities outside of Boston is what this state needs to bring more art programming to communities of varying socioeconomic backgrounds, Uretsky said. “Financial support also makes it possible for institutions, like the Art Museum, to collaborate with different cultural groups and organizations in an effort to generate the most dynamic and authentic exhibitions and programs.”

The grant won’t just buoy the arts community, it will have an effect on the region’s cultural attractions as well.

“New Bedford and Fall



**John Vasconcellos welcomes customers to a plant sale at the Alan Haskell Public Gardens in New Bedford. Vasconcellos is president of the Community Foundation of Southern Massachusetts, the agency which will oversee the arts and cultural grand funds announced this week by the Barr Foundation.** [DAVID W. OLIVEIR/STANDARD-TIMES SPECIAL/FILE]

River are two of the most undervalued cultural assets of Massachusetts,” said Jim Lopes, former trustee of MassHumanities and former vice-chair of the New Bedford Whaling Museum. “Both have rich histories and amazing cultural diversity.

“When I was a trustee with MassHumanities, we reviewed funding proposals from throughout the state for initiatives in the humanities. Very often I would read a compelling proposal and think ‘We could do that in New Bedford or Fall River — and probably better,’” he continued.

“Our people hail from six continents, each with their own art, music, history and culture. Hopefully, this grant will help us spread our regional magic to all the other kingdoms.”

The city’s diverse cultures are a focus of both the city arts and culture plan and the Community Foundation, Vasconcellos noted in a meeting with The Standard-Times.

He told a story about one of the planning meetings held in New Bedford’s North End, which attracted performing artists of Guatemalan, Honduran and Salvadoran descent. The foundation asked them where they practice and perform and how they think about developing their audience. The foundation also asked participants when they last visited any of the downtown arts organizations, like the Zeiterion Performing Arts Center, New Bedford Art Museum or New Bedford Whaling Museum.

“Forget it. Total disconnect,” Vasconcellos said.

“Access isn’t just about being able to walk through a door,” he

said. “It’s about psychological access and economic access.”

Involving New Bedford’s diverse communities was also stressed by Charles Hauck of Gallery X, who took part in steering committee meetings leading up to the announcement.

“It’s really going to be a big help promoting arts and the different ethnic communities and bringing arts to the people and bringing the community together. I think it’s a fantastic thing,” he said. “We know what great things are going on and it would be great if money was spent to get the word out and get people to come visit and spend some money and support the arts.”

Artist Steven Frois, who writes about the arts for Coastin’, described the announcement as a potential “game-changer.”

“Not only is the funding of great benefit, the administration of this support through the Community Foundation’s expansive, yet inclusive approach, is just as important,” he said. “As articulated by its president, John Vasconcellos, that support promises more opportunity for all of the area’s creative residents.

“That’s how an ‘arts scene’ transforms into a self-sustaining force of human nature in a community.”

Overall, the reaction of the local arts community may best be summed up by Hauck in a phone message he left after being contacted for a comment.

“You can’t tell from where you are, but I’m dancing right now.”

*Standard-Times writer  
Jennette Barnes contributed to this report.*