

EVANSTON ROUNDTABLE

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Council Considers EvanSTARTS' Preliminary 'Roadmap'

By Shawn Jones

A project designed to gather community input in order to create a "roadmap for the arts" in Evanston, begun in July 2012, presented its preliminary report to City Council Monday, March 18.

The resulting suggestions, a "cabinet level" City-employed arts czar as well as a flexible cultural facility in central downtown, will be more formally presented in May when the matter will return with a list of specific issues to address.

The evanSTARTS project was designed as "a community collaboration to gather public input on the arts in Evanston" according to materials provided by its organizers. It billed itself the first joint effort of the City of Evanston, the Evanston Community Foundation and the Evanston Arts Council. Through a series of meetings, presentations, and "listening sessions," the project generated recommendations for policy, programs and infrastructure focused on the arts in Evanston.

Presented findings to City Council, Amina Dickerson, the project's lead consultant, said that more than 750 stakeholders participated in the exercise returning time and again to the need for a cultural arts facility downtown and a high-ranking City official in charge of supporting and encouraging the arts community.

The goal of evanSTARTS was not to produce a working roadmap to achieve these goals, however. "We were the plan to plan. Now we have go to do the "Plan," said Ms. Dickerson.

Alderman Jane Grover, 7th Ward, expressed concern about funding for the recommendations. A director-level position in the City includes an annual salary and benefits. According to a recent presentation before Council, a cultural arts facility would cost between \$35 and \$50 million. That proposal also suggested three interrelated performing arts facilities with a total estimated pricetag of about \$123 million.

Judy Kemp of the Evanston Community Foundation said that a clear consensus for a united fund for the arts emerged from the evanSTARTS project. The level of City involvement, and the form and function of such a fund, has not been spelled out as yet. The report pointed out the importance of the arts as an economic engine, however. When people come to a City to participate in the arts, or just to take in a show, they spend money.

Alderman Delores Holmes, 5th Ward, asked about the level of City involvement in the evanSTARTS proposals. "I hope my question won't be misunderstood," she said, "but was there discussion of

someone other than the City taking a lead role [in promoting the arts]?" Ms. Dickerson said that the City was just one piece, and that the coalition created by evanSTARTS hoped to continue working toward the goals identified.

The City role, Ms. Dickerson said, would be to help create a brand for the arts in Evanston and support the work done by the arts community. The "cabinet level" position would facilitate communication and marketing of various arts organizations within in the City.

Several aldermen praised the efforts of the evanSTARTS collaboration. Alderman Ann Rainey, 8th w\Ward, called the report one of the most exciting she's seen while on Council. The report highlights the need to fund and build the Howard Street theater project, she said. City staff has continued to work on making the theater feasible since Council recently rejected the approximately \$1.7 million requested for the project several months ago. "A vision without action is just a dream," said Ald. Rainey.

City Manager Wally Bobkeiwicz said that it was staff's "intention to come back, probably in May, with a list of issues to address." The only action taken by the Council was to receive and accept the report. Council so voted to a round of applause from those gathered in Council chambers.