

Opinion: Montgomery County needs a ‘space race’ for the arts

Opinion by Lee Rucker Keiser

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When it came to performing, those cicadas had it made: 17 years to rehearse, rent-free space and captive audiences for pitch-perfect concerts — albeit with limited repertoire. As an amateur musician for more than two cicada cycles, I realize that the pandemic-paused 25th season of my Montgomery County-based, all-volunteer community orchestra prompts sustainability concerns beyond our musicality. With cautious public health protocols planned for members, we’re eager to regather, rehearse and rebuild our musicians’ community. After a 17-month performance pause, what’s missing is space to tune up, to practice and to welcome back in-person audiences for free concerts.

This pandemic could yield a more holistic approach to helping performing arts groups manage their affordable “space race.” In December, for example, Seattle launched its [Cultural Space Agency](#), a quasi-governmental real estate development authority. Its board is composed of graduates of the city’s [Build Art Space Equitably certification program](#) that provides cultural community advocates with basic training about commercial property development. Fostering more than short-term rentals, this Space Agency is building real estate prowess to enrich creative space-matching collaboration for decades to come.

A prepare-to-launch pathway is required now, especially as amateur musicians in other local on-hiatus orchestras, with whom I play quartets weekly, confirm our space race’s urgency and ubiquity. Our groups lack residency status, a privilege typically reserved for professional ensembles that often rehearse and perform in world-class halls. Given this summer’s raging coronavirus delta variant, houses of worship where we previously rented space are understandably hesitant to confirm autumn tenants; some groups may instead queue up for school rentals.

Restart logistics might be less daunting if the region emerged with a new-normal vision to define, seek and align cultural space. Jurisdiction-specific arts funding councils could simplify and expedite this mission-critical, labor-intensive process. First, performing arts groups that are council grantees can self-identify rehearsal and performance space needs, incorporating audience size, admission policy and post-pandemic budgets.

Second, respective councils can solicit data for inventories of public and private cultural space. This idea tracks Montgomery Planning’s draft [Thrive Montgomery 2050](#) recommendation for an “arts space bank of underused spaces” and resembles cultural SpaceFinder online portals launched in New York City, D.C., Baltimore and Toronto. However, pandemic resets should optimize space matching — of arts groups and available space — using a strategic, proactive process to foster more sustainable connections.

publicly funded municipal buildings with auditoriums, such as Montgomery Planning's in Wheaton; and acoustically superior performance facilities that could host lesser-known performing arts groups at reduced rates, between in-residence performances. During the pandemic, Germantown's BlackRock Center for the Arts has been a welcoming, flexible venue for lower-budget professional ensembles to record virtual concerts and to perform live indoor concerts this fall.

Rental fees, inclusive of security and audiovisual support, may naturally limit any group's practical space options. However, this assumes that performing arts space-matching is strictly an economic calculation. An enlightened example is Arts Fairfax and Fairfax County's partnership with Tysons' new Capital One Hall, featuring a 1,600-seat performance hall, a 225-seat black box theater and classrooms. Fairfax community arts groups were recently invited to submit applications; those selected will be eligible for county-negotiated rental rates at this venue commencing September 2022.

In Montgomery County, where federal vaccine development funding and related pandemic research expanded Maryland's life sciences footprint to serve U.S. and global customers, biotech companies could also help enrich hometown communities by offering space to vetted performing arts groups. Such cultural engagement could be pursued via a Cultural Space Collaboration, piloted in 2021, with trusted partners including the Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County, Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation, Montgomery Planning and commercial real estate representatives. Besides proactively building inventories, this collaboration would complement business incentives such as Maryland's 29 arts and entertainment districts and Montgomery Planning's calculation of developers' public benefit points for public art or public open space.

Same old, same old defines cyclical cicadas, but successfully implementing cultural space-matching requires an enlightened vision. A symbiotic pilot described here could accelerate creative comebacks and enhance long-term vitality of performing arts communities while strengthening civic ties and residents' cultural enrichment.

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