

ORANGE COUNTY VOICES

O.C. Needs Coordinating Agency for Arts Interests

■ **Opinion:** Well-planned and effective cultural expenditures are long-term social investments.

By CHARLES DESMARAIS

A recent news interview on the drug crisis produced one of those sound bites TV can leave gnawing at the rim of one's mind. The speaker, a grammar school teacher, was decrying the negative emphasis of an anti-drug campaign that has as its theme the phrase, *Just Say No*.

"What alternative do we offer our kids?" she said. "What are we giving them to say yes to?"

Orange County has been presented with the opportunity to say yes—to plan for the kind of social environment in which it will carry on its business, spend its leisure time, raise its children.

The Committee for an Orange County Arts Council, an assembly of art leaders, has recommended that the Board of Supervisors create a local arts agency that would foster arts education, promote the financial health and growth of arts organizations countywide and encourage a systematic approach to cultural planning for our community.

The ad-hoc committee was made up of 27 members, representing the large-budget arts organizations of the county, city arts agencies and emerging groups such as Relampago del Cielo (Santa Ana), the Center for the Study of Decorative Arts (San Juan Capistrano) and Poets Reading (Fullerton). The committee conducted a nine-month study of the cultural needs of the county. We met with 175 arts professionals, artists and other interested citizens in a series of "town meetings"; we examined the cultural coordinating agencies of nearby counties, as well as model agencies nationwide; we looked at the cost of such an agency, possible sources of funding and the needs and prospective goals to be addressed in our county.

One thing we found was that of 58 counties in California, Orange County is one of just two with no agency to coordinate the growth and development of its

cultural activities. The other 56—many of them in rural and depressed areas—have chosen to provide financial support to their local arts agencies. Why have they done this, in the face of such social ills as crime, homelessness and the drug epidemic?

Perhaps the political leaders of those counties believe that money spent on law enforcement, prison construction, drug interdiction and the like, however necessary, amounts to short-term, high-cost damage control. Such approaches may temporarily relieve symptoms, but the diseases of ignorance and disaffection continue to fester.

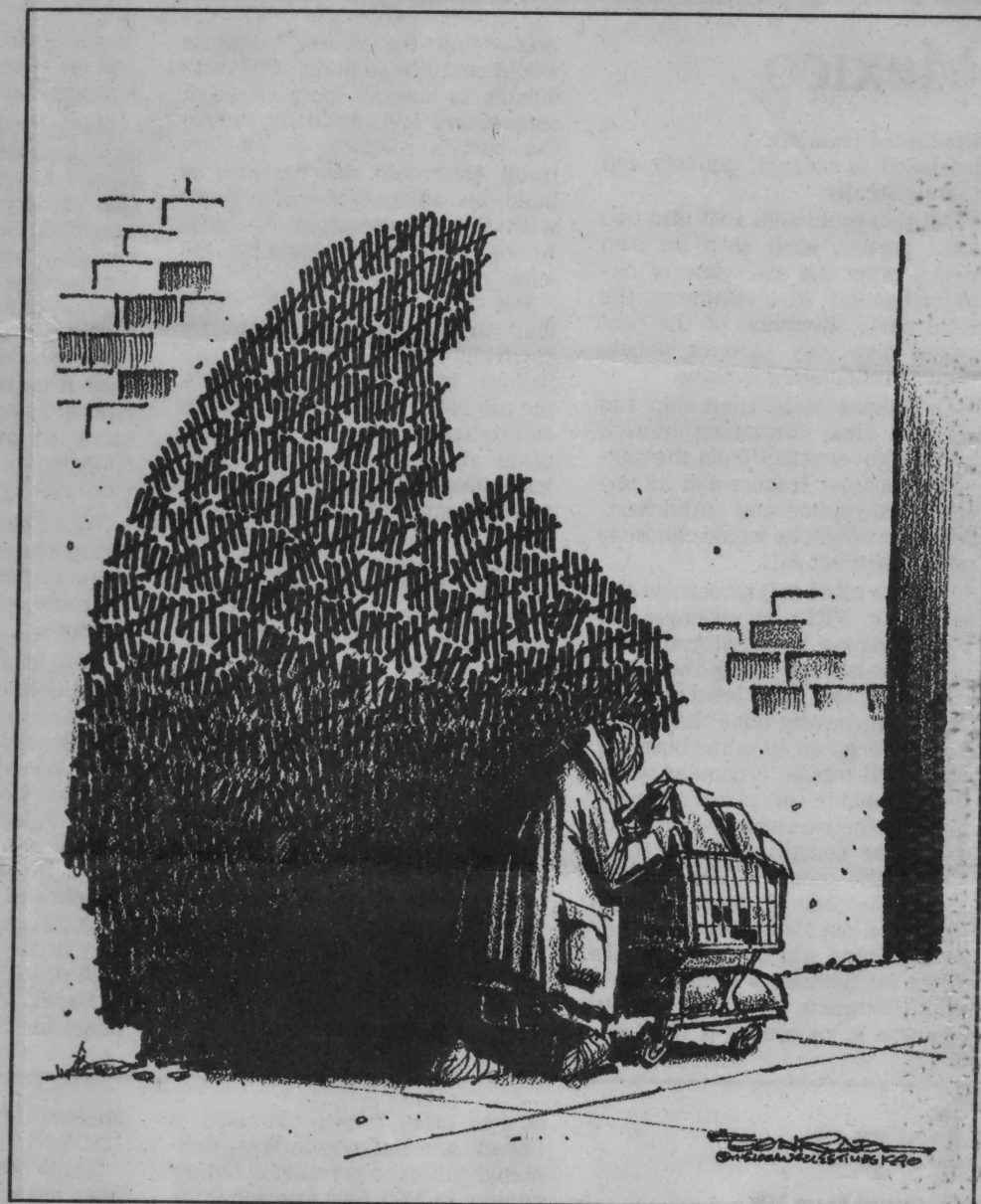
On the other hand, well-planned and effective cultural spending—while certainly no panacea—are long-term investments in a sane and enriching society.

In the 30 years since the founding of the New York State Council on the Arts—a bold innovation that prompted establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts and began a movement in which arts councils have been created in every state and thousands of communities nationally—we have had a virtual renaissance in our country.

Local arts agencies have leveraged private and corporate gifts and encouraged innovation and quality in arts institutions of all sorts, from storefront artists' spaces to big-city opera companies. But even as an agency helps the arts, it affects and greatly benefits all segments of the community. As a kind of broker, or translator, among arts interests, school boards, government, business and the rest of the community, local arts agencies benefit their communities in myriad ways. To name three:

■ **Education:** There is ample evidence that curricula-based arts education improves problem-solving, helping children to learn math, science and language skills, enhance self-esteem and keeping them engaged and in school.

In Santa Cruz, parents, teachers and children formed an advocacy group through their local arts agency that worked to put arts education back in the curricula. Today a model program is in place.



■ **Economic Development:** The arts can help to increase off-season tourism through artists' studio tours, festivals and special events. They can enhance elements of the design, growth and development of communities by encouraging the planning participation of artists.

Local arts agencies are the catalysts and coordination points for such activities in other communities; in Orange County, when the arts community cooperates in the public interest at all, we reinvent the wheel for each project.

■ **Intercultural Understanding:** In an era and a community where vast gulfs exist among the cultural backgrounds of our citizens, the arts can be an important vehicle for communication among groups and an emblem of self-respect for groups

and individuals.

By fostering multicultural festivals and community events, local arts agencies contribute to increased understanding of what we have in common and to pride in our diversity.

The Committee for an Orange County Arts Council recommended that the county pay for part (44%) of the budget for a new council, at a cost of \$125,000 in the first year. The issue before us now is whether we can afford not to invest less than 6 cents per county citizen in the long-term cultural prospects of our community. The question is whether we are willing to say yes.

Charles Desmarais is director of the Laguna Art Museum and heads the Committee for an Orange County Arts Council.