

Art-Speak

CITY OF PORTSMOUTH CULTURAL COMMISSION

Mayor Ferrini, members of the City Council and City Manager Bohenko,

Today I have the honor to present Art-Speak's annual State of the Arts report. Arts and culture remain a strong and vibrant component of Portsmouth's economy, providing programs and activities, jobs and venues that enrich the lives of Portsmouth's citizens and visitors alike.

The rest of the world is acknowledging what we already know - Portsmouth is a terrific setting for arts and culture. For the fourth year in a row, American Style Magazine named Portsmouth among the 25 top small city arts destinations nationally. And, you will recall, that last October National Geographic Traveler magazine ranked Portsmouth number 28 on its list of the world's most historic places, and number 6 in that category in the United States. The magazine stated that "Portsmouth is aesthetically and historically of high caliber. It is alive with positive activity; new businesses, restoration of the local Athenaeum and establishment of the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail."

We see evidence of this thriving arts and cultural life all around us. Here are a few of the accomplishments of our community's arts and cultural agencies during the past year:

- Pro Portsmouth hosted the 31st annual Market Square Day with a sold-out road race (1,700 runners), 150 vendor booths and 3 stages filled with local and regional music. There were approximately 8,000 people attending and scores of volunteers who made it all come together.
- Portsmouth Music and Arts Center (PMAC) launched a new summer program for adults with a wide variety of music and visual arts camps
- The Portsmouth Historical Society's Discover Portsmouth Center served 5,600 visitors in its first season.
- The Seacoast Science Center's "Art in Nature" week, held in July 2008, featured 18 artists leading 34 workshops attracting 93 young campers and 250 other participants.
- In September 2008, the Music Hall opened its new Beaux Arts Lobby designed by the Portsmouth firm TMS Architects. As a Boston Globe critic noted, "It also marks the only time my daughters have been dazzled by the architecture of a ladies' room. If the plumbing can impress kids, imagine what the rest of the place will do."
- New Hampshire Theatre Project celebrated its 20th Anniversary Season this year with 7 different productions employing over 50 local artists, and educational programs that reached 100 adult students, and over 2,500 teens and children.
- Portsmouth-based Sounds of the Seacoast, a 30 year old women's *a cappella* chorus of more than 40 women, sang at many community events including opening night at Prescott Park in 2008 and their own annual Christmas Cabaret, a sold out performance at Casey Function Center in Portsmouth.
- The Moffatt-Ladd House is restoring the Coach House which will open as an exhibit center on June 6, 2009. Major improvements were also made to garden structures and pathways, and the restored large arched window in the house's Great Hall stair landing will be reinstalled in early June.

The City of Portsmouth both recognizes and supports the contributions of the arts and cultural community. As the City's cultural agency, Art-Speak continues to make progress toward implementing the arts and culture goals of the City's Master Plan.

During 2008, the consulting group hired by the City's Economic Development Commission to work on the Islington Street Corridor Improvement Plan made significant progress, meeting with community members, businesses, arts and cultural organizations and others as they examined potential long-term and short-term improvements to this vital city artery. Art-Speak contributed \$12,000 from the National Endowment for the Arts to the study to explore arts and cultural activities along the corridor for the arts-related business sector as well as individual artists and arts organizations. Art-Speak board and staff continue to be working members of the project team and provide input as the Corridor plans are finalized.

A highlight of Art-Speak's year was Overnight Art. Whether you loved or loathed the giant red ant in Market Square, this work of art symbolized the importance of the arts not only to our city but to the region and the nation. The beheading of the ant made the news from Portsmouth to CNN. The ant was only one of six original artworks that Art-Speak commissioned from local artists that were part of the city's fabric for more than three months. Funded by private donations and the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts, the exhibit was available to everyone. Overnight Art expanded our opportunity to live with art.

Public art is also the focus of two projects to honor the sacrifices of two very different groups. The African Burying Ground project made substantial progress in the past year, engaging a nationally recognized outdoor sculpture artist to collaborate with the committee and the landscape designer on the development of a commemorative installation. The Portsmouth Fire Department commissioned a New Hampshire artist to design a monument to firefighters past and present which will be unveiled this coming fall. The creation and development of the first new piece of Portsmouth public sculpture built with private contributions in more than 20 years will be the focus of Art-Speak's 2009 symposium, scheduled to take place at the Central Fire Station on June 23. There will also be a small exhibit highlighting the inspiration for and creation of the firefighter's monument at the Discover Portsmouth Center over the summer to help visitors interpret the activity as the sculpture site is prepared.

Art-Speak is working with the Fire Department on the city's first Percent for Art project for the new fire station on Lafayette Road. More information about this project will be made public soon. In addition, Art-Speak is developing guidelines for the city detailing the acceptance of donated works of public art that we will bring to City Council for review.

You may have seen student works of art, created by Portsmouth Middle and High School students during Youth Art Month in March, displayed in area businesses. Art-Speak helped to create the link between the students and the businesses, another partnership in support of public arts in our community.

Like all businesses, the arts and cultural community is concerned about the economy. As part of the State's budget hearing process, Art-Speak board members testified on behalf of the NH State Council on the Arts, advocating for restoration of funds to this vital arts and culture resource. Local organizations too are trimming their budgets and their staff to ensure that they will stay healthy. We anticipate that despite tough times, the most resilient arts and cultural organizations will continue to inform, educate, soothe, provoke, amaze and delight residents and visitors alike.

ON behalf of the many arts and cultural organizations and Art-Speak, thank you for all you do to support Portsmouth's arts and cultural community.

Ellen Fineberg
Chair, Board of Directors
Art-Speak