**Fiscal Facts: Curtain Time: Assessing and Responding to Milwaukee’s Performing Arts Challenges**

As Milwaukee’s performing arts sector continues to struggle to recapture pre-pandemic ticket revenues, a new Wisconsin Policy Forum report suggests a new strategic vision and exploration of partnerships between individual arts groups could bolster the sector’s sustainability.

Efforts to formulate a new vision could include convening top funders, board leaders, arts group directors, and public sector officials. The goal would be to plot a sustainable future for the performing arts by strategically linking the sector -- and its need for additional funding -- to broader community goals.

Looking beyond Wisconsin, the Forum’s analysis finds examples of arts communities in peer cities, including Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and Kansas City, that have established successful collective efforts. It also finds that to relieve some of the burden on philanthropy, Milwaukee performing arts leaders may wish to elevate their push for increased public arts funding from local and state governments.

The report analyzes the finances of six “cornerstone” members of Milwaukee’s United Performing Arts Fund and seven regular members for which historical data is available. Cornerstone members are: Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, Milwaukee Repertory Theater, Milwaukee Ballet, First Stage Children’s Theater, Florentine Opera, and Skylight Music Theatre. Regular members are: Milwaukee Youth Symphony Orchestra, Danceworks Performance Company, Next Act Theatre, Milwaukee Chamber Theatre, Renaissance Theaterworks, Present Music, and Bel Canto Chorus.

The performing arts have long depended on philanthropy, and in Milwaukee, that was increasingly true in the years leading up to COVID-19. Then the pandemic brought a two-year hit to ticket sales, which was only partially alleviated by federal pandemic relief funds. The result was that these groups came to rely even more heavily on philanthropy to sustain their operations – raising questions about the future of some organizations if that generosity cannot be sustained.

Other key questions include the long-term future and vision for the United Performing Arts Fund, as well as the fact that that arts organizations in Wisconsin receive scant public funding compared to other states. In 2023, Wisconsin ranked last in per capita state funding for arts agencies, according to the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies.

Ultimately, the report concludes that increasing reliance on philanthropic support and doubts about the full return of pre-pandemic ticket sales revenues make this a critical time for visionary leadership. If Milwaukee leaders wish to pursue sustainability for the performing arts sector so it can minimally continue to look roughly the same as it does today in terms of both breadth and depth, then an organized effort is necessary.

*This information is a service of the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the state’s leading resource for nonpartisan state and local government research and civic education. Learn more at* [*wispolicyforum.org*](https://wispolicyforum.org/research/state-tax-burden-up-but-overall-burden-still-falling/)*.*