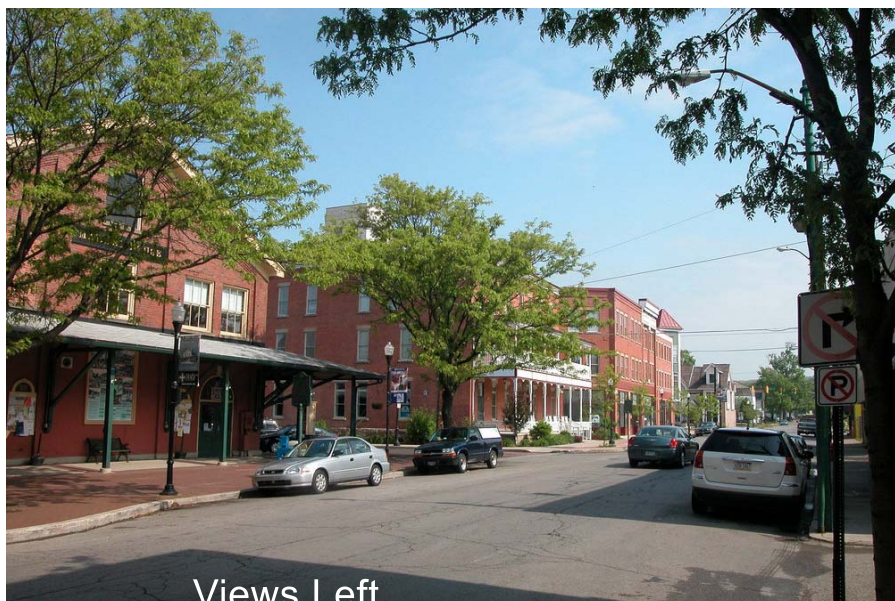# Inside Philanthropy
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Can the Humanities Play a Role in Community Development? One Foundation Thinks So

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MEADVILLE, PA

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If you're reading this, you're probably familiar with many of the talking points about how the humanities benefit society.

Exposure to the arts improves student test scores. Museum attendance leads to positive developmental outcomes. And a liberal arts education can cultivate a set of skills in students that appeal to employers.

But can the humanities play a constructive role in community planning efforts? It's an intriguing idea, and it goes to the heart of the Orton Family Foundation's Community Heart and Soul method. This method "empowers people to shape the future of their communities by improving local decision making, creating a shared sense of belonging, and ultimately strengthening the social, cultural and economic vibrancy of communities."

The foundation, which is headquartered in Vermont, is currently employing this method in four Pennsylvania towns in partnership with the Pennsylvania Humanities Council (PHC): Carlisle, Meadville, Williamsport and Easton.

"We believe the humanities can provide a path to action and long-term positive change in Pennsylvania," Laurie Zierer, PHC's executive director, has said. "With story gathering at the heart of planning and development, local voices become the foundation for building stronger communities and a better future."

Of course, there is no shortage of ways for arts-focused funders to boost the fortunes of American cities. Creative placemaking proponents like ArtPlace America funds projects in over 40 states and the District of Columbia. Funders like Bloomberg Philanthropies have framed public art as a strong entry point to urban environmental planning initiatives. And the Portland, Maine-based Libra Foundation recently purchased a huge chunk of the rural hamlet of Monson, Maine, and expects to spend as much as $10 million revitalizing it through arts-related activities.

The Orton Family Foundation approach is a different beast entirely. Rather than solicit, review and award grants, it works with partnering cities to advance its community development framework.

This framework consists of four phases. The first involves identifying key stakeholders and "developing a road map for successful Heart & Soul community engagement." Second, planners "gather residents' stories and build relationships across divides." Third, participants "identify options for the future and base decisions on what matters most to everyone." And fourth, "partners and residents work together to take action and ownership." Heart & Soul Statements are applied to future decision making and "become part of the fabric of the community."

By this point, I admit that I didn't find the "humanities" component to be glaringly evident. Perhaps it's a matter of semantics. Most of us understand the term "humanities" in the academic context. Did I expect the foundation's approach to integrate the teachings of Greek philosophers or the

drama of *King Lear*? No, not really. But I still craved additional context and clarification.

A more crystallized definition of "humanities-based community development" comes to us from PHC, which argues that the "key to the process is learning what matters most to the community through gathering stories from and engaging as many residents as possible, including those who don't typically participate in public processes."

Now, that makes sense. This approach uses *stories* as a means to engage and give ownership to previously disenfranchised residents. Not coincidentally, the approach perfectly aligns with the surge of storytelling-related giving across the arts philanthropy space.

But how do stories influence the practical nuts and bolts of community planning? James Cowhey, the president of the Pennsylvania chapter of the American Planning Association, says, "Planners can analyze the data and information about changing conditions and help a community outline choices for action that will result in the desired future for its citizens," he said.

Cowhey's thoughts surface a follow-up question: How does this humanities-based approach differ from a town's typical planning meeting? After all, planners have been soliciting feedback from residents for centuries.

According to Cowhey, a humanities-based approach take a broader and more interdisciplinary view of community planning. Planners tend to address a specific challenge—say, the need for more bus lines to

a specific part of town—in isolation. It becomes an A or B discussion: More bus lines are good; more bus lines are bad.

Such debates can ignore far larger conceptual questions like, "What matters most to our community?" Or, as seen in the foundation's work in Meadville, "How can stakeholders raise the level of civic engagement among residents and increase their participation in local decision making?"

A humanities-based approach views challenges in a larger historical and sociopolitical context and, to quote Cowhey, "informs the way we improve the physical environment we inhabit by pointing the way to improving social interactions and 'livability' or quality of place."

Again, the use of the term "humanities" initially threw me for a loop. Perhaps "story-based community planning" would have come across as more intuitive. But once you drill a bit deeper, the usage of the word makes more sense. The approach infuses many of the key characteristics associated with the humanities— critical thinking, problem-solving, self-expression— into the community planning process.

And so I'll let Cowhey have the last word: "Art and literature can help a community better imagine what it can be by providing a means of envisioning the future."

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