

Opinions about Public Art in San Diego County

By John Nienstedt

Divergent Opinions = Divergent Priorities

Ask a group of County residents what the purpose of public art should be and the most frequent response you will hear is that it should enhance the immediate surroundings. But from another substantial chunk of the population you will hear that public art's primary function should be to build the local economy by attracting tourists. Another group will say it should provide a community landmark and still more folks say public art's main goal is to stimulate community dialogue. With so many different points of view on what public art should do, it is not surprising to find that residents are fairly evenly divided over how high a priority local government should make it. We find that 30% feel it should be moderate or high priority, 28% say it should be a low priority and 31% do not want government involved at all. Clearly, most folks do not want their local City Council spending more time on public art than potholes and police protection.

So what is a local government to do when confronted with the question of acquiring and presenting public art? Well County residents resoundingly say local elected officials should not be making those decisions at all. Most say the public – either voters or all residents (registered to vote or not) should make the call, though another 22% believe artists and art experts should decide what should be purchased and how it should be displayed.

To get a feel for how much attention residents pay to public works of art, we asked them specifically about the proposal for a 200-foot long bronze sculpture of Neptune being pulled by whales that would be situated in San Diego Bay. Though it has garnered considerable ink in the local press, only 6% say they are very familiar with it and one-in-four are at least somewhat familiar with the artwork. On the other hand, 41% say they have never heard about it. Despite the lack of awareness, most residents like the idea of a 50-foot high sculpture paid for with corporate donations as 52% say that if they

were in charge they would approve it. Still, 22% say they would definitely reject it. Again, public art is certainly not immune to divergent opinion.

Class Warfare

With residents all over the map about how important public art is, it is interesting to analyze where the support and ambivalence towards the arts come from. Support for public art is strongest among affluent residents (those with annual incomes over \$80,000) and extremely weak among people earning less than \$20,000 per year. Over half on the lowest economic rung believe local government has no business getting involved in public art. This suggests that poor folks view public art as a “rich person’s game” which takes government away from its primary responsibilities.

The survey finds that liberal residents are also much more supportive of public art than conservatives. In fact, more than 70% of liberals feel art should be a priority for government, while more than 55% of strong conservatives feel government should stay out of the art debate all together. It should not be surprising, therefore, that Democrats consider public art a higher priority than Republicans. Younger residents are also more likely than others to support a civic role for public art, while people 60 and over are much more likely to feel the government should not make it a priority. There appears to be no significant geographic variation throughout the County on this issue.

Who Decides?

Residents consider decisions on public art the prerogative of the citizens themselves. A large majority (61%) feel voters or the general public should have the most say in the purchase and display of public art. It is interesting to note that even registered voters tend to believe the public at-large, registered or not, should be the decision-makers.

The survey found that those who want the government to stay out of public art are more likely to be the ones who want the general public deciding about community artwork.

On the other hand, as one believes art should be a higher priority, some distrust of the masses creeps in. Among those who say local government should place a high priority on public art, 30% say the decisions on what to purchase and where to place that art should be left up to artists and art experts and another 20% believe a combination of decision-makers should be employed. Less affluent residents tend to trust the public with art decisions while those making over \$80,000 are less inclined to do so. Very liberal residents are also significantly less likely to want these decisions made by the public.

But What's It All About?

Though 39% feel the main purpose of public art should be to enhance the immediate surroundings, as mentioned above, opinions run the gamut and 7% are unsure what the main purpose of art should be.

Ethnicity plays a big role here. Whites tend to focus on enhancing surroundings while very few see public art as principally an economic stimulant. On the other hand Hispanics and other ethnic minorities are most likely to feel the main purpose of public art is to attract tourists who help fuel economy is the main purpose of public art. Perhaps perceiving a direct economic benefit, low income residents also elevate the tourist attracting qualities of art and downgrade its purpose as an enhancer of community dialogue. The survey also found that those who place a high priority on public art also tend to see its potential economic benefits at an attraction for travelers. This suggests that those most committed to public art are not necessarily purists who only desire “art for art’s sake.”

Neptune Swims Below the Sonar

Most San Diegans are unfamiliar with local artist A. Wasil’s recent proposal to the Port Commission to build a giant sculpture in San Diego Bay. In fact, only one-quarter are at least “somewhat familiar” with the 200-foot long harborside bronze sculpture of Neptune

being pulled by five whales.

The survey did not find any relationship between citizens who feel public art should be prioritized and familiarity with the proposal. In other words, those who place a low priority or no priority on art are just as likely to know about the Wasil proposal as those who say art should receive the highest priority. This project appears to be more public than most since familiarity with it (and lack thereof) is not limited to a small circle of art intelligentsia.

But the data do show that awareness of the project is closely related to political ideology. Following in the footsteps of earlier findings, the data show that conservatives tend to be much less familiar with the proposed sculpture than liberals. Forty-two percent of very liberal residents say they are somewhat or very familiar with it, while just 13% of very conservative residents achieve that amount of awareness! So liberals do not merely suggest art should be higher public priority, when it comes to this specific project they are actually paying much more attention than their conservative counterparts.

The survey also shows that very few in the North Suburbs are familiar with the proposed sculpture, younger residents are less informed than seniors, women are less likely to know about it than men and those who are registered to vote are a bit more likely to have some knowledge of the sculpture than those who are not registered. Both discoveries related to age and voter registration show that those who tend to be more aware of civic happenings are significantly more likely to know of the proposed piece of art.

Project Gets Moderate Thumbs Up From Public

After residents are told that the sculpture would be the largest of its kind in the world, that it would be paid for by corporate donations, and that it would sit on land donated by the Port Commission, opinion is generally positive. Fifty-two percent say they would

approve of the project if they were in charge and 27% say they would “definitely” approve it. On the other hand, though dissension is not broad, 22% say they would definitely reject the project. Another 17% are unsure how they would react.

The major variance in opinion here is the dramatic split between younger and older residents. Sixty-five percent in the youngest age group would approve the project (38% strongly). The proposed project steadily loses steam as age increases. Then, at 60 to 69, residents are basically split on the idea and among those 70 and over 53% disapprove (42% strongly)! Clearly Wasil’s proposal has an appeal with younger residents that rub older folks the wrong way. Perhaps the elderly find the Neptune design immature and untraditional while those under 40 see it as energetic and vibrant.

The survey also shows a geographic component to the sculpture question. Perhaps as sort of a backhanded compliment, those who are farthest away from San Diego Bay voice the fewest objections. Residents of the north and east suburbs and in the east county all show markedly lower levels of rejection than those elsewhere. This is not to say that those living nearest the site are negatively disposed. Those in the South San Diego City area break-out 57% “approve” vs. 30% “reject.”

Finally the data shows that those who are more familiar with the proposed sculpture do indeed favor it more (in addition to having stronger feelings about it). Among those who claim they are very familiar with it, 54% would approve of it (50% definitely) and 41% would reject it (33% definitely). Results were much closer and more ambiguous among those who had only heard of the proposal during the interview. Therefore, it was not our description that fueled support for the project.

Conclusion

With opinions all over the map on what priority should be given to public art and what its main goal should be, drawing sharp conclusions is difficult, which is probably acceptable when dealing with something as intangible as art. That said, San Diegans

definitely do not place a high priority on public art. However, well over half say it should at least *be* a priority. So San Diego opinion neither reflects a cu-de-sac of artistic oblivion or a cultural hotbed; the truth lies somewhere in between. There are disturbing -- but not altogether surprising -- differences based on income and ideology. Liberals and the affluent tend to want more public art while the poor and conservatives suggest that there are much more important things to work on.

But one thing related to art, which San Diegans tend to agree on, is that they know better than anyone else, which projects should be funded and displayed and which should not. And for heaven's sake, don't leave those decisions up to government officials.

The biggest, literally, art project San Diego has ever seen, has not received much notice. However, residents tend to support the idea, especially those who are familiar with it.