

DRAFT MEETING NOTES – Putting Arts on the Map in Calumet (Session 2)
Calumet National Heritage Area Feasibility Study – Community Conversation
May 12, 2014
Vodak-East Side Library, 3710 East 106th Street, Chicago, IL 60617

On May 12, 2014, 21 residents and friends of the Calumet region came together to discuss current arts practices in the region and the role that the arts could play in a potential Calumet National Heritage Area. This was the second arts focused conversation in a series of community conversations where residents, organizations, and businesses will be asked what a future Heritage Area could be.

The meeting was conducted by staff from The Field Museum, in collaboration with the Calumet Heritage Partnership. It took place at the Vodak-East Side (Chicago) Library.

Upon their arrival, participants were asked to pinpoint their arts practices on a large map, and fill out a corresponding questionnaire with more information about where they create and display their art. After brief introductions, Field Museum staff gave a short presentation about the National Heritage Area program and the process for designation, and answered questions from the group.

Participants then filled out another short questionnaire about how their art is connected to “place” through the meaning or content of their work, the materials they use, and the people or organizations they work with, and the locations they choose to display their art.

A full-group discussion followed that highlighted some of the current arts practices that had been indicated on the map and described on the questionnaires, followed by break-out group discussions, and a report back to the full group.

Some initial questions posed regarding the role of the arts in the Calumet region:

- i. What story does this area tell? How can art help to tell that story?
- ii. What is your vision for the region? How do we overcome fractionalization?
- iii. How are landscapes shaped? How do we involve “untrained” artists?
- iv. How do we involve diverse ethnic groups?
- v. How can the arts help to connect to and make visible other regional strengths?

Comments on the Attendees

- Not all the attendees at this meeting were artists. Of the 21 attendees, sixteen were artists. The remaining were people interested in the arts and interested in incorporating the arts into their efforts.
- Artist attendees came from throughout the Calumet region, but represented perhaps 7 different locations or “clusters” where art is produced. OR for combined FN: The maps represent a number of different locations or “clusters” where art is produced and/or displayed across the region.

Key Points from the discussion

- There were differing views as to the boundaries of the “Calumet Region”. Some participants from the Southeast Side of Chicago stated they did not see the Calumet extending much past Gary. Another attendee said he associated the Calumet region with the areas near the rivers.

- The notion that there are “art hubs” in the region, which arose during the previous “arts session” was verified. Hammond appears to stand out as a place that supports the arts, as well as Michigan City. Other hubs seem to center on the region’s colleges and universities.
- Attendees felt the region was not well linked internally. In addition to the bi-state issue there was a feeling that there was often inter community conflict and divisions. Although Hammond was identified as an arts hub, its future was questioned. The new mayor apparently does not support the arts in the way that the previous mayor did.
- Local colleges and universities play a significant role in creating art and supporting artists in the region. Universities, such as Indiana University-LA Porte, Purdue North Central (Westville), and Valparaiso University are considered “hubs of art”. Governors State, which may not be in the Calumet region, was also identified as an important art site.
- Artists stressed that many communities of arts practices are smaller than a how geographer might define the region, but that they are interested in building connections to expand their communities.
- While the arts in the Calumet may not be as robust as in other parts of the Chicago region (“up north” was frequently mentioned) there is nonetheless a lively art scene in the Calumet.. It was generally agreed that the economic atmosphere for the arts was improving.
- Not all artists deal with heritage per se as a subject in their art work. The artists who do cited aspects of the region’s heritage -- industry, nature, and ethnic diversity – as inspiration for their work. The new Steel Workers Park has provided opportunities to bring together art and heritage. Artists cited both the juxtaposition of industry and nature was a unique and compelling feature of the Calumet region, as well as the relationship between urban and industrial decay and nature, i.e., nature taking over defunct industry. (Ed. Note: This seems a historically consistent theme in art – for examples old paintings of decaying Roman ruins).
- The arts could be used to make people aware of the region and to make those within the region aware of what there is in the region. Some caution was expressed regarding using steel heritage as a theme, as among younger people it no longer seems to be a big part of the region’s identity.
- There are opportunities to encourage youth artists in the area through work on video, spoken word and murals. The Major Taylor Trail, Cal-Sag Trail, and Steel Workers Park provide opportunities to link these newer art forms to heritage.