

I haven't called Jim Willis yet to congratulate him on the charter system designation and, I may be inadvertently opening a can of worms but, from what I understand about a charter system, this is a really good thing for our children and our county. It's particularly meaningful in light of recent state legislation that has far-reaching and serious ramifications for all of us.

I'm not sure what they call it in other states but, here, our state-wide arts agency is known as the Georgia Council for the Arts. They are the funnel through which the federal NEA money is filtered and they are a significant supporter of many small community arts centers like The Plaza. We have been the benefactor of three small grants and we were lined up to go for the biggie in 2011: operating support grant. This is the way we would be able to expand beyond a staff of one (me) and really start to departmentalize as we grow and increase our programming. We are ready!

Last week, however, the Georgia legislature voted to withdraw the funding to this important organization and make our state the first in a brand new category: States without Arts Agencies. It's simply unheard of and I think it's a profound loss for everyone in Georgia.

The good news for Putnam County residents is that, by becoming a charter system, the Board of Education will be able to re-vitalize the arts within the context of our children's education.

I can't speculate what will happen to numerous small centers and groups like The Plaza but, I dare say, many around the state will be seriously impaired. It's possible some won't survive. It's possible that The Plaza won't be able to grow to its full capabilities without this important funding. We will, of course, but the Georgia Council for the Arts could have surely helped us up the ante and the pace.

You probably didn't pay attention but the federal government's stimulus package last year included \$10 million to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). That's a lot of money and Georgia organizations certainly want our fair share. Without the GCA, our state has no way to apply for and administrate our portion. So, guess what? A chunk of those funds aren't likely to find their way here. We should all be outraged.

Would it surprise you to know that the 'arts' in Georgia generates \$18 million in tax revenue to our state? It's a major component in economic development and cultural tourism, which is a huge source of revenue for many communities. Just ask our Chamber of Commerce.

And, if you don't think The Plaza Arts Center has been good for Eatonton, just ask the restaurants and gas stations around town every time we have an event. Someone recently asked rhetorically 'what did we do before The Plaza?' and the answer was 'nothing'. Watching this town come alive is delightful.

Forgive my soapbox speech but this is a very sad commentary on our state and the value it places on the arts. Studies have proven time and again that there is a recognizable correlation between students with high IQ's and musical talent and ability. Children who are exposed to the arts become more well-rounded adults.

Even in a poor economy, we still have a basic need for recreation and entertainment. You may not take a fancy vacation this year but I bet you'll buy a ticket to see a movie or a concert. It feels good to gather together.

It's tough to run an arts center and make it profitable (hence, they are mostly organized as non-profit agencies). A few short years ago much of their funding support came from local businesses. Not so today. Another large portion comes from grants; federal, local and privately-funded. Not so much today. And certainly not at all without the Georgia Council for the Arts.

The last grant money we will receive from them was given for our next children's program, *How to Eat Like a Child*. Rehearsals will be on Sundays from 2:00 to 5:00 and their big performance will be on Sunday, June 6. Children of all ages are encouraged to participate and a fee of \$100 per child is required. With our GCA grant, we can underwrite 15 talented children in our midst who might really want to try acting and singing but whose families might not be able to afford the participation fee. I think that's an awesome use of our taxpayer money. I'm just sorry it will be our last.

On a lighter note, I'm really excited to announce that comedian James Gregory will bring his folksy style of story-telling and comedy to The Plaza Arts Center on Friday, June 11. Let's make his show another sell-out because we depend on your ticket purchases and memberships now more than ever.

See you at The Plaza!