

Baltimore needs a strong Clayworks

By **Fred Lazarus**

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Several weeks ago, as a long term supporter of the Baltimore Clayworks, I received an email stating that the governing board had **decided to sell** the Clayworks Campus in Mount Washington, use the proceeds to pay off the organization's mortgages and debt, and apply the balance to facilitate a relocation to a new location. A number constituents of the Clayworks who oppose the board's decision have initiated a campaign to keep the board from proceeding with the sale. They fear that without a clear plan going forward, the survival of the organization could be jeopardized.

For many in the Baltimore area who do not know ceramics, the impact of the Clayworks both to the city and nationally may not be fully understood. Within its field, it is recognized as one of the top centers for ceramics in the country. Its studios are one of the few places in the region where artists and students who work in clay can learn and create work. Its outreach programs have provided access to young people in some of Baltimore's most challenging communities, and the young people's programs at the Mt. Washington campus do the same.

Its exhibition program brings in the work of the top ceramic artists to Baltimore, and its residency program has been a springboard for artists from all over the world and an inspiration to local artists. A decade ago, Clayworks brought the NCECA national ceramics conference to Baltimore, which drew thousands of ceramic artist to our city and in conjunction with it a citywide exhibit of ceramic work that included dozens of venues and the work of the best ceramic artists in the world.

The current decision by the board will pay off the current mortgage and other debts, but there is no clear public plan about how this decision will lead to the stabilization, much less survival, of the organization. There has been talk of moving the organization to Station North or another location in the city. However, because of the capital requirements of ceramics and the costs to replicate the current facilities, it is not clear if this can be paid for and how the operations could be sustained and be more financially viable in the new location.

Every small and mid sized arts organization struggles to balance its budget year after year. Some years this is more challenging than others. Baltimore has a number of organizations that meet this description. It is often especially difficult when an organization transitions from a long term successful director, as was the case with Clayworks. The only way these organizations can sustain and grow their operations through these times is to have a strong board committed to the mission and a broad base of support. The Clayworks has lost a number of its board members, and the controversy over the decision to sell the campus and move has the potential to lose students and donors who have been so critical to its development over the years. Neither of these create a favorable climate for the organization to move forward.

This can only happen if the process moving forward has a broad base of support from not only the Clayworks' traditional constituency, but the city as a whole. It is the time to build a plan for the future that will galvanize this support. It is essential that the board and the community can work together in the weeks and months ahead to build such a plan. If additional resources or people are needed to develop such a plan, I am confident that they exist within Baltimore. Not only does the ceramics community need a strong Clayworks — Baltimore needs it.

*A **briefing** will be held on Baltimore Clayworks Tuesday at 3 p.m. in room 120 of the House Appropriations Committee hearing room of the House Office Building (6 Bladen St., Annapolis).*

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