CHALLENGE STATEMENT //
SUSTAINING A PERFORMING ARTS THEATER

A small non-profit performing arts theater in the City of Trinidad has survived many years with the hard work and dedication of the director and staff, but the grants and donations are limited and inconsistent. How can a small, rural, performing arts theater reinvent its business model and operations to become an economic driver!

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF STUDIO WORKSHOP //

Over the course of the two-day Challenge Studio Workshop, a group of passionate Challenge Studio participants with a wide range of expertise gathered together to help address existential challenges facing the Southern Colorado Repertory Theatre (SCRT). These participants listened from key stakeholders, and brainstormed and debated ideas about possible approaches and partnerships. By the second day, it became clear that the SCRT has both immediate and long-term needs. In the short-term, the SCRT requires a paid, professional staff that can manage the nonprofit organization and build its capacity (i.e. executive director, grant writer, accountant, support staff) and funding to maintain facilities (i.e. performance and educational training spaces, scene shop, storage facilities, and possibly company housing for independent contractors). In the long-term, the SCRT requires a strategic plan that includes community and regional partners and a possible consolidation of community cultural assets. It was also recognized that the SCRT exists in a larger ecosystem of museums, festivals, and other cultural amenities that anchor the City economically and socially in terms of quality of life. As the SCRT progresses, it should not operate in a vacuum, but rather in collaboration with the larger community.
TEAM MEMBERS //

Facilitator
Deana Miller, Cultural Arts and Events Supervisor, Town of Superior

University of Colorado Denver School of Public Affairs Coordinators
Andy Zheng, Master of Public Administration Student, University of Colorado Denver School of Public Affairs
Rebecca Gianarkis, Master of Public Administration Student, University of Colorado Denver School of Public Affairs

Specialists
Debra Bustos, Senior Vice President of Real Estate, Urban Land Conservancy
Jesse Silverstein, Vice President and Senior Economist, Development Research Partners
Lauren DeBell, Senior Real Estate Associate, Urban Land Conservancy
Troy Bernberg, Managing Director of Public Finance, Northland Securities

Designer
David Gregory, Owner and Principal, Oxbow Design Collaborative, Ltd.

Local Leader
Harriet Vaugeois, Executive Director, Southern Colorado Repertory Theatre

Public Sector Partners
Fred Vaugeois, Business Advisor, Southern Colorado Repertory Theatre
Greg Sund, City Manager, City of Trinidad City
Marilyn Leuszler, Board Chair, Corazón de Trinidad Creative District
Paul Benedetti, Urban Renewal Authority
Stan Obrey, Ex officio, Financial Advisor, Southern Colorado Endowment for the Performing Arts
Tara Marshall, Board Liaison, Downtown Colorado, Inc. & Director of Development Services, City of Trinidad, Department of Local Affairs

Challenge Studio Participants
Aaron Schultz, Economic Development Strategic Plan Coordinator, City of Manitou Springs
Ariel Steele, President, Tax Credit Connection
Denise Aten, Senior Vice President and Denver Office Manager, Bohannan Huston, Inc.
Gayle Langley, Main Street Program Coordinator, Department of Local Affairs
Jarjah Walker, Executive Director, Colorado Springs Urban Renewal Authority
Karen Current, Principal/Marketing Director, DHM Design
Kareena Versalovic, Art District Coordinator and Membership Chair, Santa Fe Arts District
Trent Hyatt, Senior Planner, City of Glenwood Springs
Trevor Herasingh, Board Member, La Junta Urban Renewal Authority

COMMUNITY PROFILE //

Population: 8,200
Stakeholders + Partners:
- City of Trinidad
- Community residents
- Community businesses
- Cultural assets (ex. museums, galleries, nonprofit organizations)
- Developers
- Educational institutions
- Mission-aligned charitable foundations
- Private companies interested in community investment
- Regional performing arts theatres

Assets:
- Location along Interstate 25 and halfway between Denver, Colorado and Santa Fe, New Mexico (approximately 190 miles from each destination)
- Variety of historic buildings on Main Street and throughout the City
- Recent, noteworthy investment and growth in Trinidad including real estate development and public open space acquisition to include federal, state, and local government, nonprofit, and private partners
- Signature events to include ArtoCade ArtCar Festival, Trinidaddio Blues Fest, Corazón de Trinidad Poetry Festival, Pony Xpress Gravel 160 Bike Race, and more
- Authentic, quirky, artistic flair
- Comparatively low cost for land and properties

Obstacles:
- Many cultural assets/nonprofit organizations and insufficient community financial support to go around
- Partners are already investing in Trinidad in other ways besides in financial support for the SCRT
- The Fox-West Theatre is still being assessed and evaluated and has yet to undergo rehabilitation (time to rehabilitation is unknown)
Ideas regarding how to move forward, but no full-time, paid staff to execute

Levy of a sales tax to support cultural assets is regarded as politically unfavorable

BACKGROUND INFORMATION //

Many small and rural Colorado cities and towns have fallen victim to an unsustainable boom and bust economy, and so too have their local businesses and nonprofit organizations. Among them, the SCRT, located in Trinidad, is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that has been in operation for over 16 years and serves as a professional theatre that offers cultural and educational programming and attracts visitors and their patronage to the City. Despite its rich history, continued contributions to both quality of life and the economy in Trinidad and the Southern Colorado region, and enterprise zone designation, the SCRT is hard-pressed to continue as a nonprofit organization with three part-time employees and retired professional volunteers. According to the SCRT executive director, professional theaters in small towns are able to endure so long as they are equipped with one or more of the following: city funding, “deep-pocketed donor” funding, and proximity to a large population area. The SCRT is not equipped with any of these means of financial support.

Trinidad’s cultural amenities are growing because the City and its community (i.e. residents, businesses, etc.) recognize the need to diversify from its past glories in mining and oil and gas, and are embracing the fact that Trinidad is a viable and attractive place for artists and creative entrepreneurs. In fact, the City has recently devoted considerable time and financial resources to rebuilding its tourism website including a calendar of Trinidad events. While the proliferation of such assets is positive for the City and the community assets themselves, it also means that these assets are competing for the same, limited donations and dollars in terms of ticket sales, etc. Available local funding is not growing to support community needs and, while creatives are beginning to relocate to Trinidad, they are often young and without much expendable income. If these assets cannot invent ways to create efficiencies among themselves, those with more tenable funding such as the SCRT may not stand the test of time.

FINDINGS + IDEAS //

In the midst of all of this community development and the emphasis on creative endeavors in Trinidad, it would be striking if the City lost its professional theatre. In order to move forward, the SCRT should consider both short- and long-term solutions. Over the course of the coming months, the SCRT should focus its efforts on operational sustainability. In the longer term, the SCRT should demonstrate that theatre and culture are a community priority and that the theatre is an important aspect of community identity. SCRT and other cultural assets in Trinidad would do well to recognize that they are stronger together and that they should organize as a collective. Together they could eliminate duplicate efforts and approach funders and the City with a unified voice. One idea that begins to capture this collective is a “cultural trust” which could include SCRT, the Corazón de Trinidad Creative District, and one or two other anchor cultural assets with the hope that it would eventually include as many of the City’s cultural assets as possible.
1. **STEP ONE:** Conduct a mixed methods economic and social impact assessment to demonstrate the direct and indirect economic impact of the SCRT on the community and local support/interest which can be leveraged in conversations with possible investors, the City, patrons, etc.
   a. Preliminarily use the [Arts & Economic Prosperity 5 Calculator](#) to begin the conversation surrounding community economic impact
   b. Approach the Colorado Department of Local Affairs and the [Colorado Main Street Program](#) regarding the conduct of a formal economic and social impact assessment and inventory of capacity-building strategies (possible partnership with a consultant)
   c. Demonstrate what will happen to Trinidad in the absence of the SCRT with an appeal to the notion of placemaking

2. **STEP TWO:** Use economic and social impact assessment data to apply for grants and approach funders for operational expenses
   a. Funding is needed in the short term to secure staff (even if only on a contract basis to start) who can write grants and begin developing a marketing plan and to maintain facilities including temporary artist housing
   b. Contact [Colorado colleges and universities](#) with programs that educate students about public service and nonprofit work and inquire about whether the SCRT can partner (even for a semester) with a class focused on grant writing, for example, or with students seeking internships

3. **STEP THREE:** Financially secure theatre shop and temporary housing space (reserve some units for the SCRT theatre company tenants) located downtown and, ideally, in the Opportunity Zone using one or more the following financing options:
   a. Consider state tax credits and [United States Department of Agriculture](#) funding programs and low-interest loans available to those in rural communities
b. City of Trinidad purchases and resells to a developer (maybe incorporate local construction company) who can benefit from capital gain from property sale to be reinvested into the Opportunity Zone fund

c. City of Trinidad Urban Renewal Authority purchases

d. Rent to own

e. Own with right of first refusal
f. Partner with local K-12 school district where there is limited art and drama programming
g. Offer naming rights for the building to local business

The following steps should likely be pursued in many cases simultaneously and not necessarily in this order, It is acknowledged that these pursuits are contingent upon staff resources and the passage of time.

4. STEP FOUR: Generate additional income using any and all of the following methods:
   a. Increase space rentals (i.e. band performances, classes, other space rentals)
   b. Create exclusive meet and greets with performers
   c. Increase food and beverage charges (even give away tickets when ticket sales are low)
   d. Host dinner theatre and utilize talent to wait tables (feature popular chefs)
   e. “Round-up” campaign (i.e. round up to the nearest dollar to support the SCRT, the Fox, the arts in rural areas)

5. STEP FIVE: Establish a Cultural Trust Exploratory Committee to begin the definition and establishment of a “cultural trust” to eventually include membership representation from all Trinidad cultural assets but at least begins with representation from anchor cultural assets (i.e. SCRT, Corazón de Trinidad Creative District, and the Fox-West Theatre)
   a. In addition to the Network Council monthly meeting, establish a Cultural Trust Exploratory Committee that meets at least quarterly with representatives from each cultural asset willing to participate
   b. This group can bring a shared vision to city partners and implement a shared action plan
   c. The Cultural Trust could own real estate in the future, co-promote, share staff such as a grant writer, consider a community cooperated model (ex. sponsor a costume, etc.)

6. STEP SIX: Conduct a mixed methods economic and social impact assessment to demonstrate the direct and indirect economic impact of other cultural assets (so as to create a unified strategy) on the community and local support/interest which can be leveraged in conversations with possible investors, the City, patrons, etc.
   a. Once the Cultural Trust Exploratory Committee is established, this could be one of its first priorities

7. STEP SEVEN: Explore and pursue any and all of the following longer-term financing options:
   a. Sales tax as a sustainable funding source to support Cultural Trust (ex. Metropolitan Area Projects Plan in Oklahoma City)
   b. Leverage the Community Reinvestment Act which incentives local banks to reinvest in their communities
   c. Marijuana tax
   d. Lodging tax

8. STEP EIGHT: Collaborate with other regional, historic theatres in the Raton River Basin Region (i.e Shuler Theatre in Raton, New Mexico and Fox Theatre in Walsenburg, Colorado)
a. Form a regional tourism partnership to pursue grants and other regional funding opportunities (ex. partnership with production companies such as House of Blues and Live Nation)

9. **STEP NINE: Develop and implement a regional marketing plan to include the City of Trinidad, Las Animas County, and the Raton River Basin Region**
   a. Develop a marketing plan first for Trinidad cultural assets (i.e. Cultural Trust), then for the county, and then for the greater region so as to increase reach
   b. At the least, communicate to ensure that events are not competing with one another/overlapping
   c. At best, strategize as a region to build a weekend in the southern Colorado/northern New Mexico region, take a driving tour with a suggested route, sponsor a trip for a travel writer/blogger, etc.

**DESIRED OUTCOMES //**
1. Community engagement and stakeholder development
2. Financial security and operational sustainability for the SCRT
3. Consolidation of Trinidad cultural assets (“Trinidad Cultural Trust”)
4. Security and sustainability for Trinidad cultural assets
5. Economic resiliency for Trinidad and the region

**Colorado Challenge Program Overview**
The Colorado Challenge Accelerator Program is a unique team building accelerator focused on establishing a plan of work and proposal that engages public, private, and non-profit partners to address a significant community challenge over the course of twelve months. The Colorado Challenge works to transform the community’s challenge into an opportunity, to establish a proposal, financing approach, and team of community partners ready to implement. The program includes five phases of planning and development that will help our Colorado communities establish a plan for community-wide initiatives to foster sustainable community and economic development including public, private, and non-profit partners moving forward as a business-friendly destination for entrepreneurs and community initiatives.

Downtown Colorado, Inc. will continue working with Colorado Challenge Communities around the followings areas to drive progress in turning the Trinidad Challenge into an Opportunity.

- **Financing Approach**: Developing and presenting the proposal to a funders network for feedback and guidance. In the process, the participating communities are connected with supporting resources and networks to help them get the job done.
- **Program Continuation**: Coaching and referrals through the project financing and implementation phases.

We invite all partners to continue working in this challenge as we move into deeper exploration and implementation phases.