

## ArtsEdNews: NEA's Rocco Landesman tours country to underscore link between arts and jobs

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On Friday morning, National Endowment for the Arts Chairman Rocco Landesman was not jetting from city to town observing the country's arts machinery, but sitting in the agency's conference room reporting back.

"Last week, I was in California, and I learned that nonprofit arts organizations there have annual revenues of \$2.4 billion, which is roughly equivalent to the revenues of California's convenience stores. That is significant," said a smiling Landesman. "But arts workers make more than Slurpees, they make places." The arts, Landesman said, help "change the ethos of a town or community. They enliven it, they activate the public life."

With wit, amazement and solemnity, as arts organizations face a painful struggle during economic uncertainty, Landesman made his first report to the National Council on the Arts. That panel, whose members are appointed by the White House, oversees the work of the NEA and approves or rejects the agency's grants.

Since he announced an Art Works Tour in October, Landesman has traveled to 13 cities. His message, whether talking to artists or businessmen or donors, he said, is that "art jobs are real jobs that are part of the real economy."

The tour serves to introduce Landesman, who has been on the job [since August](#), to local arts communities. But it also helps broaden Landesman's knowledge of the arts beyond professional theater, where he spent most of his career as a high-stakes Broadway producer. His productions of "Big River," "Angels in America" and "The Producers" won multiple Tony Awards.

There he was in Philadelphia, walking the streets in his signature cowboy boots, examining [murals](#). "Mayor Michael Nutter told me that Philly has some 3,000 murals, and I think we must have seen about half of them," Landesman reported. "I was amazed at the way these murals helped create neighborhood identity. They brightened blocks and were landmarks."

At each stop Landesman analyzed the factors needed for success, including private sector and political support. He started in Peoria, Ill., after making a crack about its mediocre arts scene, and after 13 straight hours, proclaimed it vibrant. He has acquired some new language, including the catchphrase "arts as placemakers," which speaks to the ability of arts and arts organizations to "build stronger communities," he said.

With a PowerPoint presentation featuring snapshots of all his visits, from Miami to San Francisco, Landesman said he found working formulas in many places. He praised cities,

like San Diego, which are trying adaptive use of old buildings. He spoke of Memphis, and its three key elements for arts progress. "They have a vibrant tradition in the arts, a committed private sector and a local political structure that gets it," Landesman said.

**Despite the fragile arts economy, Landesman said, artists, administrators and city officials are not giving up. This week, he visited Michigan, swinging from Chelsea to Detroit in two days. In Chelsea, he went to the Purple Rose Theatre with its founder, actor Jeff Daniels, held discussions with local officials and concluded that the town of 4,000 had "a thriving art scene."**

**In Detroit, where he said 40 square miles are vacant and public arts funding has almost disappeared, he found "tremendous resilience" and no closed doors. "Some, like the Detroit Institute of Arts, are in financial distress. They are finding ways to hang in and survive," he said.**

The travels have helped him build a clear picture of the needs of the arts infrastructure to take back to Congress, which controls the purse strings of the NEA. The agency is the largest funder of the arts in the country. Its federal appropriation this year is \$167.5 million, compared with \$155 million last year. The White House is asking Congress for \$161.3 million for next year.

Landesman is expected to appear before the House Appropriations subcommittee April 13.

In addition to the arts tour, Landesman has revitalized an NEA design program, which brings the country's mayors together with architects, city planners and other design professionals, by infusing it with new funding. He has also been advocating consultation between arts groups and local transportation, small business and public education departments. And he's shifting attention to arts education, proposing grants for every congressional district.

The Art Works Tour will continue, but right now Landesman is prepping for his testimony to Congress. The whistle-stop tour, he said, has been "hugely helpful for shaping my thinking and widening my reference points."