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The Humanities in Public Life at the Allegheny Regional Asset District

In 1993, the Pennsylvania General Assembly passed Act 77, which resulted in the creation of the Allegheny Regional Asset District (RAD), a special purpose unit of government that grants half of 1% additional sales tax to regional assets, including parks, libraries, regional attractions, arts and cultural organizations, sports and civic facilities, and public transit. The other half of that 1% sales tax funds municipal services on a weighted basis across the county.

In 2020 I joined RAD with the goal of completing an assessment project that would examine the impact of a \$4 billion investment in Allegheny County over the last 25 years. The project is both a data-driven and qualitative approach to assessing the extent to which the public/private partnership of RAD has had a far greater impact than the direct grant dollars provided by RAD.

Over the past year I have developed a research plan, did secondary research on how experts in various fields track and measure key benchmarks and success, have gathered primary source data and reports, have conducted numerous informational interviews, and have begun drafting the final report. I intend for this comprehensive report to have the broadest possible reach and have three main objectives:

1. Policymakers will have a greater understanding of RAD's impact and will support its continued existence
2. Regional assets will be able to communicate with their audiences the impact of RAD on their operations
3. The community will understand and support RAD and its assets

The philosophical questions for the group are: How can reports on the impact of a significant financial investment effectively reach audiences with varying levels of academic training and interest? How can this report meet the needs of visual learners, data geeks, historians, economists, policy wonks, the general public, creative types, and more? Related, how can the humanities be successfully integrated into policy-oriented reports?

The more practical concerns I have for the group to consider come at an opportune time. I am currently at a crossroads in my report draft. I have packed a lot of detailed and academic-oriented information into a limited space, but I want to be able to catch people's attention throughout the report. Design and effective data visualization techniques can go a long way towards achieving that desired balance, but is there more that can and should be done? I am currently soliciting personal, human-touch stories from RAD's assets. Ideally, these will bring a different perspective to understanding RAD's impact. Will these stories, along with effective design, achieve the balance I seek?

In September 2021 I presented some preliminary findings to the RAD Board and members of the public over Zoom. In the Zoom webinar environment it is difficult to know if and how a presentation is effectively reaching its audience. The presentation is included for the group to refer to and can serve as a launching point for discussing the role of the humanities in public life. Hopefully it will inform the conversation on how one – especially someone with post baccalaureate training in the humanities – can effectively balance both an academic and non-academic approach to impact reports.