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Bloomberg calls for collaboration, not censorship in New York

Mayor Bloomberg has set up a Cultural Affairs Advisory Commission which, he says, will help non-profit organisations

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When Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced the appointment of a Cultural Affairs Advisory Commission, alarm bells rang. It sounded like a reprise of former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's creation of the Decency Commission which critics decried as a dangerous move towards city censorship of the arts. But it is nothing of the kind.

A provision within the city charter entitles the mayor to appoint a commission to co-ordinate and promote cultural activities in the city and it instructs all city agencies to cooperate with such a commission.

Commissioner of Cultural Affairs Kate Levin, who advised Mayor Bloomberg on appointments to

the group, told The Art Newspaper, “The commission will have nothing to do with imposing standards on arts in the city.” Nor, she says, will it generate funds to replace public money cut from the city arts budget, as some reports have suggested. Instead, it will assist the Department of Cultural Affairs in serving New York’s huge not-for-profit cultural community.

The 21 advisors—businessmen, art patrons, artists, and arts administrators—will serve three-year, unpaid terms, meeting four times annually. Instead of acting as a culture vice squad, their role includes recommending policy, writing reports, and coordinating city, State, and federal agencies.

Agnes Gund, one of the city’s leading arts patrons and, until recently, president of the Museum of Modern Art, will chair the new group, which she says will “foster collaborations, attract new audiences and support, and help school children develop lifelong relationships with the arts.”

Jitters concerning the return of a Decency Commission are understandable. It was only a few years ago that Rudolph Giuliani reconstituted the long-dormant commission to advise on what kinds of art should get city funds. Having objected to offensive works in the “Sensation” exhibition of Charles Saatchi’s Young British Artists at the city-funded Brooklyn Museum in 1998, he made it an election issue, first threatening to withhold city funds from the museum, then appointing the so-called Decency Commission. He believed tax money should not fund art that rubs anyone the wrong way by appearing disrespectful of religion or ethnicity. In the end, the Giuliani commission submitted reports, but led to no action of any kind.

“This commission does not have that mandate,” emphasizes Ms Levin, adding that Mayor Bloomberg has said nothing about propriety, appropriateness, or anything concerning the character of what the city will support. “The mayor believes very strongly in the First Amendment,” she says.

Asked what the commission will do, Ms Levin explains, “It became clear to me that there were four areas in which a group like this could make a material difference: management and board development; arts education; marketing and outreach, and capital assistance [technical advice on construction projects].” Members were chosen based on their ability to contribute to this preliminary agenda, she says, noting that five-person subcommittees will focus on each area.

Commissioner Levin says the group aims to match up individuals interested in public service with organisations seeking to recruit board members; to consider how best to reintegrate the arts within the public-school curriculum; to develop a comprehensive marketing plan for the

city’s non-profit arts organisations; to draft an accounting template that non-profit organisations could use to present their financial data; and to assist 120 non-profit groups currently engaged in building projects.

“Thanks to the vast knowledge, vision, and talents of the members,” says the mayor, “the city will enhance its ability to assist the cultural community, particularly non-profit organisations.”

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