What are the benefits in focusing on the arts in my community? Mark J. Stern and Susan Seifert recently published a study from their Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP) at the University of Pennsylvania. The model used in the study highlights the collective value of the arts as a net contributor to the economic development of communities, the creation of a strong community identity, and the building of community organizational capacity and civic commitment.

Why might FCS be involved in establishing an arts council? According to the strategic plan of Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Extension, building the capacity of volunteer leaders is critical for the sustainability of communities that support and strengthen families. The Empowering Community Leaders program initiative is committed to engaging, educating, and empowering local citizens to investigate issues, make responsible decisions, and take ownership of solutions.

In support of the FCS Extension goal to increase community support for improving community quality of life, Debbie Temple, FCS Agent in Ballard County, has been working with community members to establish an Arts Council.

Several people in the community had recently expressed the desire for the organization of an arts council in Ballard County. Temple of the local Cooperative Extension office facilitated bringing together community members as an Arts Council Development Group to discuss the idea of establishing an Arts Council for Ballard County. Representatives from county government, education, the art community, small business, the County Chamber of Commerce and Cooperative Extension make up the Arts Council Development Group.

Chuck Stamper, Cooperative Extension's Fine Arts Program Leader, was invited to serve as the facilitator of the Arts Council Development Group's first meeting. He led the group in a SWOT analysis related to the arts where they identified the county’s Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. This process revealed that an Arts Council was not just something a few community members wanted, but was something that Ballard County needed.

Next, the Arts Council Development Group developed a survey to gauge public interest and support for an arts council. To ensure an optimal return rate, the group secured three incentives: $50 in Chamber Bucks, to be redeemed at participating businesses; a $50 gift card to Olive Garden; and a tin-punched wax warmer. Surveys were delivered to over 500 elementary school students, 136 Extension Homemakers (attached to their monthly newsletter), and to Chamber of Commerce members through their weekly newsletter. In addition, Chamber members were personally given a survey to fill out at a monthly breakfast meeting, where members of the development group presented the idea of an Arts Council. Even though the majority of returned surveys were from parents of elementary age students, an overwhelming 100% of survey participants indicated that they were in favor of an arts council and 60% indicated they would support activities and events sponsored by the council through attendance and volunteer contributions.

The group is coming together again later this month to discuss the survey results and to decide next steps in the development of an Arts Council for Ballard County.