The Kenosharising data presented here is a continuation of analysis from 2015 that began as an effort to set the “baseline” of economic impacts of the arts and culture in Kenosha County. Then throughout the Summer of 2016, a small team of researchers and arts advocates turned attention to analysis of the qualitative data presented in the original survey. These data reveal in more detail the strengths and opportunities of the local creative economy and are used to set the course for the Kenosha Creative Economy Strategic Plan that will begin in the Fall of 2016.

Kenosha Is Rising.
INSIGHTS FROM THE DATA:

1. 68 respondents answered this question, 55 of those replied yes—gatekeepers are significant. The range of responses reflecting many interpretations of the roles of gatekeepers (facilitator, curator, power broker, advocate, leader, promoter, etc) could be evidence that there is not much awareness or consensus about the role of gatekeepers. Additionally, many respondents used the opportunity to “unload” their hopes and expectations so it was difficult to find consistent themes in the data.

2. A number of respondents (30) also indicated that gatekeepers are effective in their role of advancing careers and have a positive overall impact. A smaller number (10) indicated that gatekeepers are ineffective and have a negative impact on careers.

3. There are high expectations of gatekeepers (despite the ambiguity about what they do). Some responses indicated an “avoidance” of gatekeepers by the artist/creative, presumably because of a bad experience in the past or general discomfort with the inherent power of the gatekeeper to affect careers. There are examples of dissatisfaction and some dismissive attitudes regarding interactions with gatekeepers that may be linked to unrealistic expectations of their abilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY:

1. It is recommended that the community host discussions with stakeholders (rather than pursuing additional surveying) to discover why gatekeepers are thought to be so significant and support these discussions with academic research from similarly-sized, thriving creative economies (e.g. Dubuque, Iowa) illustrating the central role gatekeepers play.

2. The community can work to develop a common, shared language that could define what makes a gatekeeper effective in his/her role and even collectively “prescribe” ways to make local gatekeepers more effective still. Again, it is recommended that the creative community come together to work out common concepts and definitions.

3. Finding ways to empower artists/creatives to be productive relationships with established gatekeepers may resolve the underlying discomfort some respondents feel toward these important fixtures in the creative economy.

QUESTION: “In your opinion, how significant are local gatekeepers (editors, curators, gallery owners, nightlife proprietors) to advancing artists’ careers and increasing the value of the arts?”

IMPLICATIONS OF GATEKEEPERS

A large portion of respondents did not answer the question regarding significance, we see this as evidence of a lack of understanding about what gatekeepers do.

INSIGHTS FROM THE DATA:

1. The question aimed at kinds of events/activities that assist you in quality networking, advance your career and/or provide access to gatekeepers (editors, curators, gallery owners, nightlife proprietors etc.)

2. There were limited occasions where respondents provided descriptions of kinds of activities they desire to engage in—and why: collaborative projects, teaching, volunteering, tours, colleague critiques, friendships among artists.

3. Respondents generally listed events that are open to the public but not events/activities that bring artists together with other artists. At this point we think that a lot of the activities and events conceptualized under ‘networking’ revolve around exposure to audiences who are buyers. Perhaps the local arts scene’s “maturity” is hindered when many artists and creatives look at networking (and gatekeepers?) in the context of immediate sales rather than recognizing the layered process of “career making” as a valuable outcome in its own right.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY:

1. Determine what events are most commonly listed and consider what—if any similarities exist between the various events. Are these events and activities truly useful for networking and career advancement—or simply for sales?

2. Investigate further why and how these “deeper” kinds of experiences occur. Why are they valued? If these kinds of experiences do indeed assist artists/creatives in quality networking, career advancement and gatekeeper access, determine how the Kenosha community institutions can foster/incentivize more of these kinds of experiences to occur more often.

3. Explore how and why “exposure” and “networking” may serve different purposes and provide differentiated events for differentiated purposes. Perhaps more “exclusive events” can be more effective for networking and then later presenting opportunities for “exposure.” There can be separate aims that support the other. Consider hosting “invitation-only” events with identified gatekeepers and artists that include discussions about how expertise can be used to advance the creative economy.

CONCLUSION: Based on KenoshaRising sample of qualitative survey data, there exists a general lack of consensus around the role and relative importance of gatekeepers. There is also a confused notion of the purpose of networking and vibrant social networks to advance careers in arts and creativity. Growth and development of the local creative economy depends on a broader and common understanding of these elements and structures. Community discourse would foster a shared language and advance the interests of artists, creatives and community-at-large.