London: I am talking with Suzie Surkamer. She is the Executive Director of the South Carolina Arts Commission.

Surkamer: Thank you for having me today.

London: What is your vision for the state of South Carolina?

Surkamer: My vision for the state of South Carolina is a prosperous state that has a wide variety of jobs and opportunities for people that is based on the strengths of the past, where we are currently and always working on the future. But within that, being conscious about our communities, our citizens and our quality of life.

London: Where does the South Carolina Arts Commission and arts in general fit into that vision?

Surkamer: I think the arts have an incredible role to play in the future of our state, in the economy, and also in people and their lives. The arts are vital in our communities. Many of our communities want to expand what they do in the arts and make the community a better place to be and to live and where people want to live. The arts have been growing in our state for many, many years, but I think we are on the brink of an even brighter side of the arts where it plays a role in many more aspects of the state than people normally think.

London: You mention the connection between the economy and the arts. Can you expand on that?

Surkamer: Certainly. The arts industry in South Carolina is quite large. In fact, the arts industry employs over 30,000 people in our state. It has an economic impact of $2.2 billion dollars and returns an incredible amount of money to the state in taxes on arts activities. It is a major industry in our state. That is one way it plays to the economy. In addition, we also have the role to play in that the state wants companies to locate here and when companies locate somewhere they certainly want a good education system and we have a very strong arts education system in our state within the school system. In addition, the people that come frequently, mostly, especially people in the creative class, what their community looks like and what there is to do in that community is very important. The arts play an ever-growing significant role in that.

London: You mentioned the creative class and that is something we frequently hear of in Richard Florida’s work as well as what we see in most prosperous areas of South Carolina. Can you expand on why art is so important in the community?
Surkamer: Well, art provides a sense of place, plays a big role in that. It provides a link to what that community is, an artist’s interpretation of that community. All of that helps people feel good about their community, want to be in that community and want to participate in that community. The arts help in providing opportunities for people to be able to participate in the arts and people that participate in the arts are usually also very engaged in other civic activities. So what a community wants are for people to live, work, play and be involved in their community. The arts really help with that, as well as providing an outlet for people as far as producing art. Whether it’s as a professional or as an amateur, participating in the arts as a volunteer, as an audience, participant, etc.

London: We talked about arts in the prosperous communities, the prosperous part of South Carolina but another part of South Carolina that is not so well off, that is in need of artists, the creative class and prosperity. Is there any way that the Arts Commission is involved in these rural communities?

Surkamer: Well, it’s interesting because the Arts Commission was started by legislation in 1967. It did various activities and programs for quite a few years. In 1980, we surveyed the state to find out what they wanted in the arts and from the State Arts Commission and what came out was that the rural areas of our state wanted their arts also. Sure, they wanted to drive occasionally an hour to go to something but in general, on a day-to-day basis they wanted the arts in their community. So the Arts Commission really started focusing on how to involve the rural communities in the arts. So actually, when you drive around our state now, people just aren’t aware of this, but there are arts activities everywhere throughout our state. We work in all 46 counties, not just in the urban areas. Our staff spends a lot of time in the rural areas. A lot of artists prefer to live in the rural areas. Not all, by any means, but a lot of them. And I think that some of the smaller communities have understood how to use artists as a very creative aspect of their community and involved in community planning also. They bring a special vision and a special perspective on how to make things work in small towns that may not have a lot of resources financially or even as far as infrastructure.

London: Frequently, rural communities provide inspiration for works of art.

Surkamer: Yes. Yes they do.

London: The Arts Commission is involved in a number of areas. It is not only the visual arts.

Surkamer: No, it is not just visual arts. We are involved in all of the art forms, visual, performing, music, dance, theater. We’re involved in literary arts, design
arts and media arts in a significant way. This goes across all art forms, but a major effort for many, many years in arts education in our state.

London: We have talked about your vision and the expansive activity of the Arts Commission. Talk about the issues that need to be addressed to continue to support the arts, artists, artists and the future of our communities.

Surkamer: A few issues come to mind. One certainly is education, not just related to the arts, but also related to keeping our state competitive in the country and in this global economy. Education is an issue that I think needs to continue to be addressed every year, year after year. Within that, arts education. Because arts education helps with educating students to be creative, imaginative and able to synthesize information and able to be good thinkers. That is what our education system needs to do today in order to keep us competitive. In general, that’s what the education system needs to do. The arts do that extremely well. You can also use the arts with all the subject areas so that people who are interested in math or science can also have a broader background and be able to bring more to that job as an engineer than just the technical aspect. That is an ever-growing important aspect of educating our students no matter what career option they want to go to. They have to be able to think and to synthesize and that’s what the arts do. So education is one issue that the state needs to continue to address.

Infrastructure is another issue. We have to continually maintain the roads. Also within infrastructure, we have to think about the infrastructure of the arts. You can’t have performances without buildings usually. Now granted some performances are open-air performances but a lot of them do take place indoors. So, every so often we need to put money into the infrastructure: rehabbing a building, building a new building, an addition to a building, buying equipment. Every so often arts organizations provide a small amount of money to help them upgrade their computers because that’s hard money for an arts organization to find. So we provide an incentive. The state, in general, needs to think about infrastructure as well as including the arts in that infrastructure. Those are two areas that we need to address within our growing economy and where the state is going.

London: Do you believe the next generation of South Carolinians will be able to compete in the global economy?

Surkamer: I think that the next generation will be able to compete if we are successful in educating them in a way that they need to be educated to compete. As we move, from as Daniel Pink says, from the information age to the conceptual age, we’ve got to be able to teach people to think that way. I don’t think you can educate a student to do that without involving the arts.
London: To get to that level, what are the responsibilities of our leaders regarding future generations of South Carolinians?

Surkamer: I think that we have got to put more emphasis on planning for the future in our state. You see a whole variety of good things going on in the state. There is something in this region of the state or something in that particular locale. What I think that we need to look at more seriously is some type of way that government, state government, local government, county government as well as private industry, talks more together on a statewide level and looks at the future. So one of the things that we can do is to really call together the key leaders in government and industry to really talk about that and plan for the future rather than just this area planning and that area planning and private industry talking about this. I think that we need to have much more joint discussion.

London: Any particular items that you want to bring up that you are particularly passionate about?

Surkamer: Well one of the things that you talk about in a global economy is how do you keep your local community. Actually, I think in order to compete in a global economy, it is what happens in the local community that enables you to compete. So in that particular situation, your sense of place and your link to the traditions of your local community is what people want and therefore then they can compete. That’s one comment I would like to make.

Surkamer: The second is that in looking at the future of South Carolina, an area that I think is critically important is the work that happens community by community in designing their town and their city and their county. We need to put more emphasis on what we at the Arts Commission would call the design of their community. What does that main street look like? We need to have a much more conscious effort in designing what that community is going to look like and so that people love their community and never want to leave.

London: Who should make those decisions?

Surkamer: I think there are many people that can have input on it. I think it ultimately comes down to the local community. The city officials and the people that elect them.

London: People that know the culture, history and pride.

Surkamer: Yes.