

What's with all the fuss over public art, anyway?

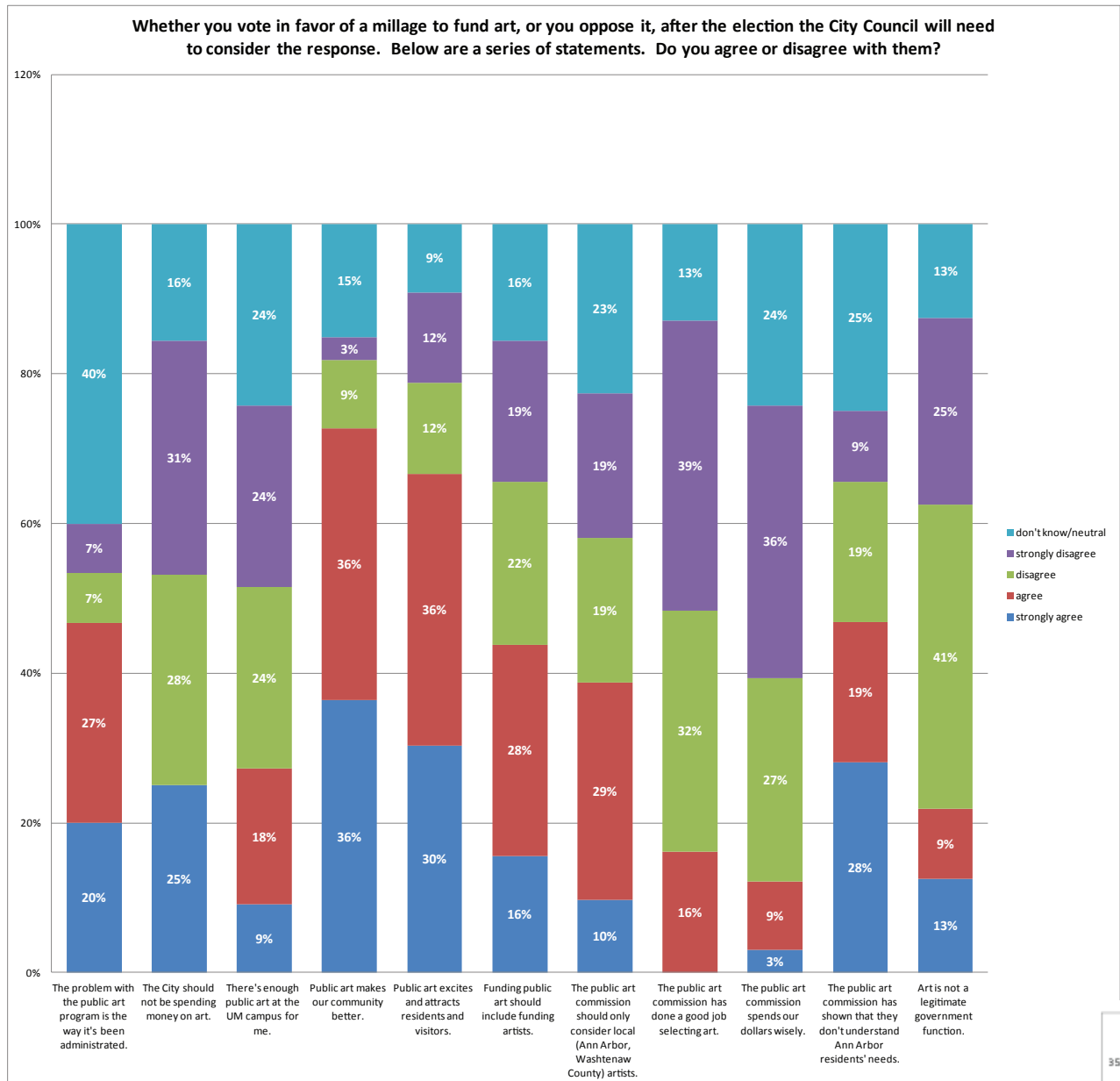
At the end of September I sent around a survey asking about attitudes toward public art.

For all the fuss about public art, the public art commission, and funding for public art, not many people responded. With 34 respondents, (that's less than 10% of the mailing list) I could imagine that public art isn't much of an issue for many. However, I

think instead that those who responded are passionate about art - but not in agreement.

Mostly, I think the graphs speak for themselves.

But I've divided the results into some categories. Seeing the results this way helped me understand the responses.



Survey design

I wanted to keep the survey short and focused. I asked one question with eleven (11) different statements embedded - and I asked people whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed or strongly disagreed — or whether they were simply unable to decide (don't know/neutral). Percentages are rounded. All 'neutral' responses can indicate that the respondent really checked 'don't know.'

The first graph shows the absolute results of that query — as a percentage of the total responses for each statement.

Other graphs reflect the number of respondents who

Art and government – Government and art

Some people have told me that they don't believe the City should play a role in funding public art. They are comfortable with philanthropic donations of art to the community, but object to dollars going toward art when they could be spent in some other way. Some of these folks also feel that the selection of public art is necessarily flawed. They would rather rely on donated art or donated funds for art acquisition and maintenance. So I offered two basic statements:

The City should not be spending money on art.

Although it doesn't show in the simplified graph, it's worth noting that 25% of respondents strongly agreed that the City should not be spending money on art (there were no folks who just agreed with this statement). However, 59% disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement, and another 16% were neutral.

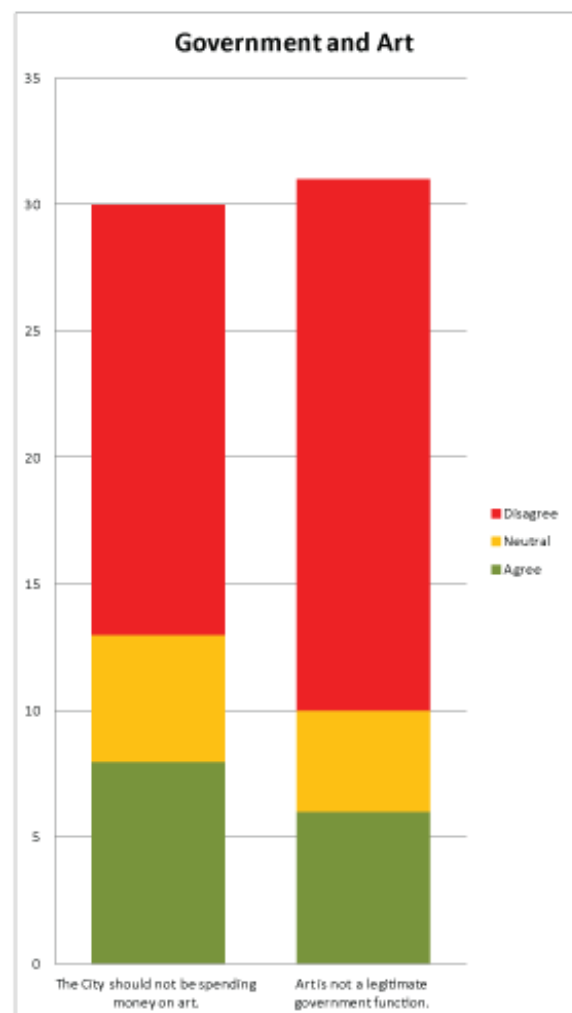
Art is not a legitimate government function.

The majority of respondents — 66% — disagreed with the statement that art is not a legitimate governmental function. Not quite a quarter (21%) agreed with that statement, while 13% did not express an opinion.

agreed, disagreed or were neutral. (In order to show the data as simply as possible, I combined the results for 'strongly agree' and 'agree' as well as those for 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'. These graphs break the results down into three categories rather than five.)

What did I learn from the survey responses?

If these responses reflect a clear community message, it's that many of us support publicly funded art in concept, but are not confident in the Public Art Commission's ability to manage dollars and select art. And those are the primary roles of the art commission right now.



Art, artists and the community

I've also heard that public art is a major economic driver — that the display of art in public actually improves the economy through increased employment opportunities and increased community investment. It seems that a strong commitment to public art is understood as a strong commitment to public welfare, too.

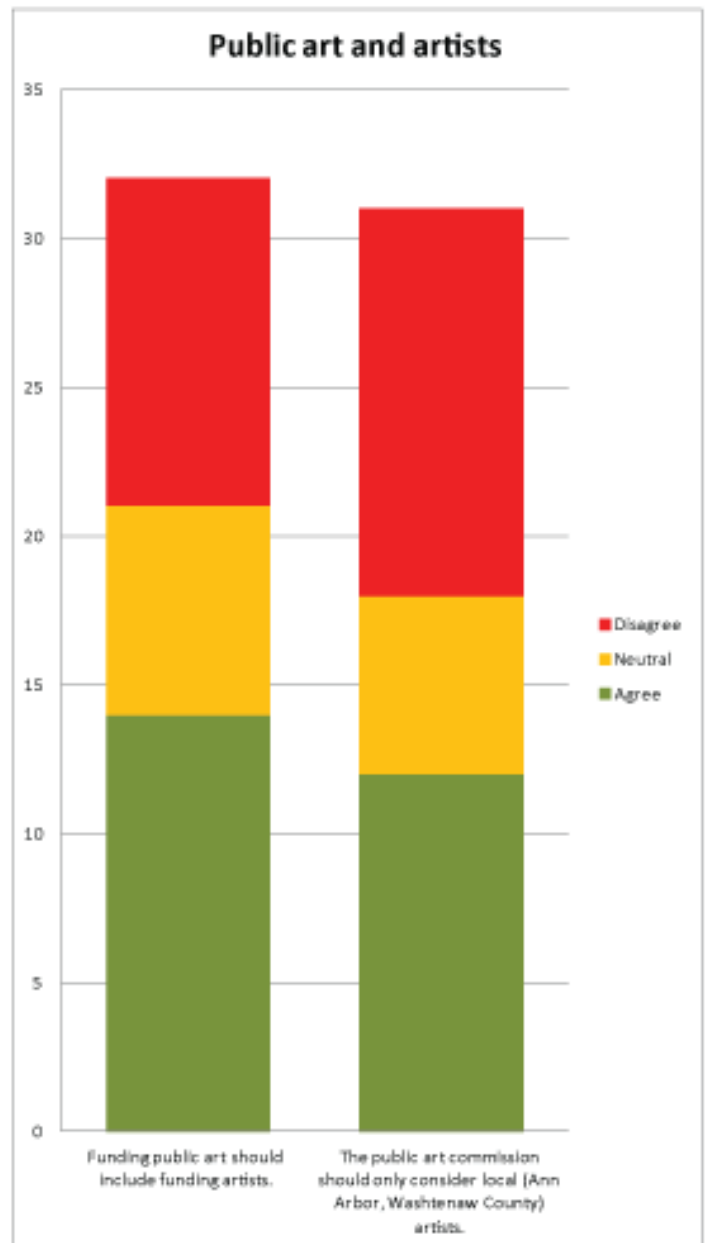
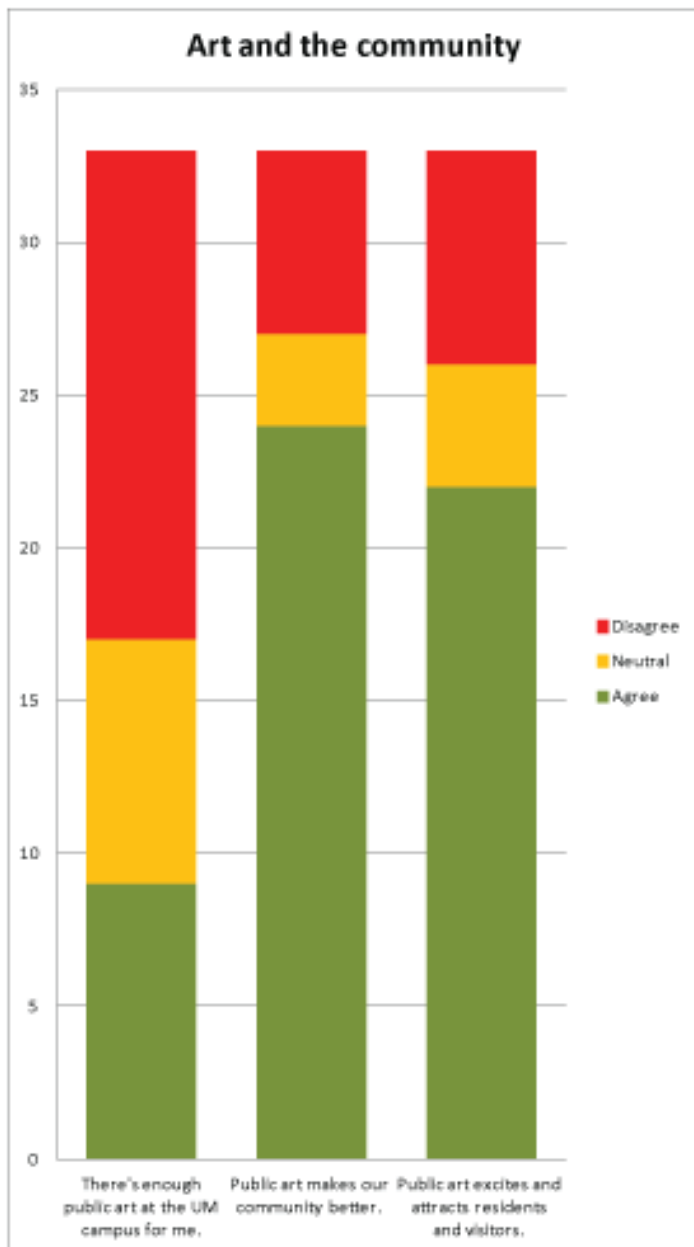
We're fortunate here in Ann Arbor. The UM campuses (central, medical and north) present an outdoor sculpture gallery that's readily available. The UM museum of art — and that of archeology — provide opportunities for current and historic art. These are all

available to the public.

I offered three statements related to the value of public art in our community.

There's enough public art at the UM campus for me.

Over a quarter (28%) are satisfied with art at the UM campus. But nearly half (48%) do not consider the art on the campus as meeting all of the community's needs. Whether they feel that art is not for them, or they simply want more art may be open to interpretation.



Public art makes our community better.

Public art excites and attracts residents and visitors.

These two value statements share strong positive responses. A significant majority (78%) agree that public art makes our community a better place, while only 12% disagreed. 66% indicated that public art is likely to attract positive attention from residents and visitors alike — although 12% disagreed.

I also offered two statements that might reflect an understanding that artists need support as well as appreciation.

The Public Art Commission

If the average respondent supports public spending on art in general, it's clear to me that respondents aren't as confident about the public art commission.

The problem with the public art program is the way it's been administered.

Some respondents placed their concern fully with the public art commission's ability to select the art. 47% of respondents believed any fault with the program lay with the administration - while 14% rejected that statement. But a significant portion (40%) didn't know or were neutral.

The public art commission has shown that they don't understand Ann Arbor residents' needs.

47% of respondents agreed with this statement (a full quarter remained neutral) while 26% disagreed.

The public art commission spends our dollars wisely.

The public art commission has done a good job selecting art.

64% disagreed that the public art commission allocated public dollars wisely, while just 12% indicated they agreed with this statement.

71% disagreed that the public art commission had done a good job selecting art, and 16% agreed. What doesn't show in the simplified graph is that 0% — no one — strongly agrees that the public art commission has done this task well.

Funding public art should include funding artists.

The public art commission should only consider local (Ann Arbor, Washtenaw County) artists.

On these questions, respondents were split. 44% of respondents agreed that public art should include funding artists — but 41% disagreed (16% were neutral). 39% agreed that the art commission should focus on local artists, only — and 39% would cast a wider net (23% were undecided).

