

The **Creative** *Economy*, **PUBLIC POLICY**, and *Community* Development

On the first Friday evening of every month, residents and visitors fill the streets of Brattleboro, a 12,000-person community located on the Connecticut River in Vermont. Considered one of the top 10 small “Art Towns” in America, Brattleboro shows how the arts can boost a region’s economic vitality.¹

The Gallery Walk’s 40 stores and galleries sit in a three-block historic downtown district. This architecturally intact 19th century streetscape forms an aesthetic backdrop for the crowds weaving their way in and out of storefronts during the event. It is one large community block party. Neighbors and friends stop to greet and linger to chat. Musical groups serenade the crowds. It is possible to hear nationally known but locally based musicians or members of the Brattleboro High School Band (who performed in the Obama inaugural parade), all playing for joy. Nonprofits sell baked goods or raffle tickets from tables set up on the sidewalk.

by Mollie S. Burke
Vermont State Representative



Residents and visitors in Brattleboro, Vermont, turn out for the annual Strolling of the Heifers parade. Photograph: Greg Worden

Building on a Strength

Gallery Walk was founded in 1995 amid concerns about the way online shopping and big-box stores in nearby New Hampshire were contributing to declining revenues “downstreet.” The idea was that capitalizing on Brattleboro’s artistic wealth could help to preserve the fragile downtown economy.

As Gallery Walk has evolved, so has the town’s sense of itself as an arts community. In 2001, a citizens group called the Brattleboro Arts Initiative purchased the historic art deco Latchis hotel and theater to procure a performing arts space and hotel for downtown economic development and architectural preservation.

These are only two of the many arts institutions that define Brattleboro. A short skip down the street from the Latchis are the Brattleboro Museum and Art Center and the dynamic New England Youth Theater. Scattered nearby are a music school, a dance school, and a visual arts school. About a mile south, an old mill building houses the Vermont Jazz Center, the New

A nationwide study, “Arts and Economic Prosperity III,” confirmed that investment in the arts promotes community and economic development.

England Center for Circus Arts, and several incubating businesses, including a pottery studio and a cabinet-design company.

Annual arts festivals add to the tapstry. A Women’s Film Festival occurs in March and the Brattleboro Literary Festival in October. The arts are even a component of the June Heifer Stroll, which draws in thousands to celebrate Vermont agriculture.

In 2005, Americans for the Arts, a nonprofit organization that promotes the arts in the United States, conducted a nationwide

study, “Arts and Economic Prosperity III.”²² It confirmed that investment in the arts promotes community and economic development. It also revealed that although less than \$4 billion is spent on the arts annually by local, state, and federal governments, there is a \$30 billion return on investment.

Americans for the Arts collected data from 6,080 nonprofit arts and culture organizations across the country, including those in Brattleboro. The Arts Council of Windham County, Vermont, along with two other arts organizations, administered the Brattleboro part of the study. The Economic Impact of the Nonprofit Arts Sector of Greater Brattleboro found that local nonprofit arts organizations produced \$11 million in economic activity in 2005, almost as much as the entire town budget. In addition, the arts generated \$270,000 in local taxes and \$600,000 in state revenue. And that doesn’t include the for-profit arts sector of self-employed artists and retail galleries.

The figures for jobs generated are equally significant. Nonprofit arts organizations in Brattleboro create 200

full-time-equivalent jobs, representing a total of \$6.2 million in salaries, wages, and self-employment income. These jobs are community based and not the sort that can be outsourced. Further, the money is likely to be spent within the community.³

Arts events leverage spending at restaurants and stores, while a vital arts community attracts cultural tourists, who often spend twice as much as local audiences and are apt to return or spread the word to friends.

Beyond the Numbers

Armed with the compelling numbers, arts organizations across the country are stating the case for continued and increased investment in the arts at the level of public policy. Alex Aldrich, head of the Vermont Arts Council, used Vermont's strong numbers in February 2010 to defend his organization's funding request before the appropriations committee of the Vermont House of Representatives. Over the past five years, he stated, 30,000 employment opportunities for Vermont artists and arts educators had been provided, and \$4.6 million had been contributed to the Vermont economy. That's impressive for a state with a population of 600,000 people and a total budget of about \$4 billion.

However, the economic numbers do not tell the entire story. At a recent meeting at the Vermont State House billed as "Tourism and the Arts," representatives from arts organizations noted that the state needs to improve its use of the arts as a tourist draw to benefit both itself and the artists. Greg Worden, chair of the Arts Council of Windham County, expressed concern that Brattleboro may be at a critical point and that the growing and flourishing arts scene could start to decline without sufficient support. He called for judicious spending of both state and private advertising dollars to attract new audiences.

The problem is that on Brattleboro's Main Street, even though the performing events and restaurants are full, the art galleries have been hit hard by the recession and are struggling. One gallery owner observed recently that tourists are coming to look but not to buy. The Windham Arts Gallery, a longstanding cooperative, closed last year.

Moreover, the artists themselves, the people whose talent and vision create a thriving arts community, have often missed out on the creative-economy benefits. In April 2007, an Artist Town Meeting took place in Brattleboro to identify concerns.

The needs that emerged—affordable living and work space, jobs and funding, health care—remain needs today. Many artists and writers struggle to make a living, often working at low-paying, part-time jobs to eke out enough time and money to practice their art. Others find teaching jobs that offer health insurance and a decent salary but drain time and energy from creative endeavors.

Historical precedents for recognizing artists as a community resource and backing that up with financial assistance do exist. The Federal Art Project and Federal Writers Project of the New Deal put artists and writers to work in community settings. Forty years later, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of 1973 (CETA) funded artists along with other occupations. The primary goal of these programs was employ-

Armed with the compelling numbers, arts organizations across the country are stating the case for continued and increased investment in the arts at the level of public policy.

ment, but they also added to our cultural heritage and community well-being. They were a good economic investment, giving a leg up to many at the beginning of their careers who later achieved economic success on their own.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (the "stimulus") attempted to address the issue of arts jobs by allocating \$50 million nationwide. The Vermont Arts Council received \$250,000 for distribution to nonprofit organizations to retain employees. Although that amount was welcomed by recipients, it represented a small fraction of the \$789 billion of total federal stimulus money. As Aldrich testified, it was a missed opportunity for job creation, given the economic potential of the arts.

A strong case can be made for public arts funding, but there are also visionary private philanthropists who see the economic and cultural advantages. The founder of the Vermont-based Orton Family Foundation, which engages citizens in articulating community values and planning for the future,

saw the potential for artists to participate in the process. Lyman Orton provided \$25,000 in 2009 for each of 10 selected Vermont visual artists to create work envisioning the future of the state. The work is touring Vermont towns for one year, provoking conversations and communicating visions and challenges.

This gets to the heart of the issue. Investing in the arts and artists pays economic and cultural dividends and enhances a community's quality of life. But beyond that, there is value in the kind of thinking that artists are known for, and the more that business organizations, community leaders, and policymakers recognize that, the better off the state will be. By definition, artists are creative, and they engage in the innovative and adaptive thinking that communities need in order to flourish.

We need an abundance of both innovation and adaptability to reenvision our communities and our world. We can start by engaging artists in planning, in community decision making, and in the articulation of values and visions.

Mollie S. Burke is a member of the Vermont House of Representatives. She is also a visual artist and director of Art in the Neighborhood, a nonprofit organization that provides arts classes to economically disadvantaged children.

Endnotes

¹ John Villani, *The 100 Best Art Towns in America* (Woodstock, Vermont: The Countryman Press, 2005).

² *Arts and Economic Prosperity III* (Washington, DC: Americans for the Arts, 2005), <http://www.scribd.com/doc/2687771/Arts-Economic-Prosperity-III-summary-report>.

³ *Economic Impact of the Non-profit Arts Sector of Greater Brattleboro* (Brattleboro, Vermont: Brattleboro Arts Initiative, Alliance for the Arts, Arts Council of Windham County in conjunction with Americans for the Arts, November 2007).

► This Communities & Banking article is copyrighted by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. The views expressed are not necessarily those of the Bank or the Federal Reserve System. Copies of articles may be downloaded without cost at www.bos.frb.org/commdev/c&b/index.htm.