



Leveraging Public Investment in the Arts

The Role of Arts-based
Economic Development Strategies in
Georgia Communities

INTRODUCTION

Georgia is home to countless vibrant communities – from mountain towns to coastal cities, from the urban and suburban piedmont to the rural plains. Part of what makes these communities energetic is the local economy. Another source for their liveliness and sense of cohesion is the arts and culture. Some of the most interesting work happening in localities around the state is where those forces intersect – where the arts and culture are employed as part of a local economic development strategy.

While there is data available about the impact of the creative industries on Georgia's economy, including 200,000 jobs and \$29 billion in industry revenues, data alone can only provide so much insight. Elected officials, civic and business leaders, and creative professionals need concrete illustrations of how creative industries and artists impact the economy in their communities. More importantly, providing these examples has the potential to inspire other elected and community leaders to explore options to incorporate the arts as part of the economic development strategies employed in their own cities.

CASE STUDIES AND PROJECT STUDIES

Toward these ends, Georgia Council for the Arts (GCA) and the Georgia Municipal Association (GMA) entered into a partnership to develop a series of case studies and project studies to share the stories of Georgia communities that are successfully using the arts as part of their local economic development efforts. For the purposes of this report, case studies have a broader scope, examining multiple aspects of a community's approach to economic development through the arts and culture, while project studies focus on one specific venture implemented by a local entity.

GCA and GMA carefully considered the communities included in the case studies. We are aware that there are numerous examples of model arts and economic development efforts in local communities throughout the state. Due to the limited scope of this research, however, we are unable to include all of them here. Our selection process included searching for a variety of communities based on population, geography, demographics, resources, and specific strategies employed by each city. With those diverse criteria in mind, we chose to feature the following communities as case studies:

Athens

Best known as home to the state's largest university, the most fervent college football fans, and a groundbreaking music scene, Athens and its leaders have invested in local infrastructure, organizations, and public art to give their community a culturally rich atmosphere that attracts and supports the creative residents that are abundant in their city. Local citizens have signified their backing for the arts by voting to approve numerous SPLOST projects, by volunteering to promote and coordinate the arts, and through widespread participation in events, classes, and festivals.

Blue Ridge

Nestled in the north Georgia mountains, Blue Ridge beckons to those wishing to escape the congestion of urban areas for a weekend, or for the rest of their lives. Active cultural organizations, abundant arts festivals, and a picturesque downtown draw tourists, retirees, and artists to this quaint but thriving community. Their success is orchestrated through county support for the arts and culture, Chamber of Commerce coordination with arts organizations to attract tourists, and the vision of private developers to carefully curate their downtown storefronts with unique businesses operated by creative entrepreneurs.

Duluth

Located in a bustling Atlanta suburb in Gwinnett County, Duluth is using the arts to differentiate itself from dozens of other suburban communities. Whether it is Eddie Owen's Red Clay Music Foundry, summer concerts, seasonal festivals, regular art walks, or permanent public art, Duluth is investing in arts infrastructure and cultural programs to draw residents and visitors to its revitalized downtown. City leadership is the driving force behind their success, exemplified by increased visitors, additional restaurants and shops, and new residential projects.

Springfield

Located 25 miles northwest of Savannah, the seat of Effingham County was struggling to attract traffic and business to its city center. Then community leaders and elected officials developed a plan. Step one was to renovate the historic Mars Theatre. Step two was to develop programming to draw residents and visitors to the center of town. Step three was to hire a cultural affairs director to help make all of that happen. While the vision of city leaders has many more steps, if what they have accomplished so far is any sign, the rest will soon be history.

Thomasville

The city of Thomasville and the Thomasville Center for the Arts work hand-in-hand to help their city fulfill its potential. The arts and culture are deeply infused into the community – from bike racks to murals, from classes to performances, from coffee to dairy, from leather to yarn, from schools to downtown. Thomasville leaders and residents understand that creativity is the future. Their plan for a creative district will only add to the community's appeal for years to come.

GCA and GMA also selected two unique programs to highlight as specific project studies:

Entrepreneurship Training for Immigrant Artisans in Clarkston

Located in one of the most diverse cities in the country, the Clarkston Community Center has embarked on efforts to train immigrant artisans to become better artists and business people. This investment is paying off by developing creative entrepreneurs who are becoming self-sufficient using their unique talents and their cultural heritage.

Shipping Containers as Pop-up Galleries in Hapeville

What does a community do when they have a plan to expand the availability of the arts, but there is a lack of physical space? In Hapeville, they turned to shipping containers. Building on their plan to establish a more creative community, the Hapeville Arts Alliance has taken a unique approach to create new visual art galleries in their historic downtown.

CONCLUSION

The case studies and project studies featured in this report illustrate that the arts are far from mere decoration or light entertainment. Rather, they are a serious component of economic development strategies in communities throughout the state. These Georgia cities have employed the arts as a lever to increase visitors, attract residents and businesses, create jobs, improve quality of life, and increase local tax revenues.

Notably, these communities did not use carbon copies of economic development plans employed by their neighbors. Instead, they found what was unique about their communities, their local cultures, their resident artists, their resources, and their leadership, and developed a strategy tailored to their strengths.

As readers contemplate these case studies, we encourage you to consider your own community—its assets and eccentricities, the unique talents of its residents, underutilized resources, and the vision of local leadership—and apply these lessons to incorporate the arts in your community's economic development strategy.



The Artistic Rise of Blue Ridge

For as long as anyone can remember, the outdoor majesty of Blue Ridge has beckoned people to escape from hectic everyday life. Vacationers and weekenders alike have been drawn to its picturesque mountains, National Forest and lakes and streams.

Downtown was another story. Twenty years ago, only a handful of businesses occupied buildings; the rest of the town was a mix of empty shops and plywood storefronts. While Blue Ridge offered breathtaking views, downtown didn't have much for visitors to see or do.

Bo Chance exemplifies how all of that changed. He'd been coming to Blue Ridge for several years after his parents had retired in the area. Tired of the frenetic pace of traveling with his job as a software developer and the congestion of Atlanta, he and his wife decided to pull up stakes and move to Blue Ridge in 1995. They also bought and renovated a building downtown, opening it as High Country Art and Antiques.

When Bo Chance looked at the city's core, he saw opportunity. "And I wasn't alone," Chance says. "There were about five of us who took a leap of faith at that point. It was really a collective, unorganized effort."

Around the time Bo Chance and others decided to open a few businesses downtown, other efforts were being made to draw more people to the area. In 1996, Fannin County approved a hotel/lodging tax to support and promote tourism.

A separate grassroots effort proved just as important. In 1998, a group of citizens from Blue Ridge and McCaysville approached the Georgia Northeastern Railroad about running a train between the two cities, starting and ending from a depot in downtown Blue Ridge. The railroad agreed, and that train became a reality.

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– Nichole Potzauf, Executive Director,
Blue Ridge Mountains Arts Association

"The Blue Ridge Scenic Railway was the catalyst for development of downtown Blue Ridge," says Jan Hackett, president of the Fannin County Chamber of Commerce, "along with the increase in destination tourism stimulated by the Chamber's promotional efforts." Hackett estimates the train now brings in about 40,000 tourists a year.

To demonstrate how much the area has grown, in 2002, the county collected \$91,000 from the hotel/motel tax. In 2013, the number skyrocketed to \$1 million. The Chamber now receives 5 percent of the tax collected for marketing efforts, which includes promoting all of the arts venues.

Allure of The Arts

The attraction of new visitors to Blue Ridge sparked new enterprise in the arts. In 1998, a local writer worked with the well-established Blue Ridge Mountains Arts Association (BRMAA) to bring a regional writers' workshop to town, a now-annual weekend of guest speakers, work sessions and networking events. The Blue Ridge Community Theatre, which began as an entity of BRMAA before growing into its own nonprofit, put on plays in public school cafeterias, open air parks or anywhere else they could find a space.

In 2004, BRMAA found its first permanent home when the county suggested it take over the historic Fannin County Courthouse, which had been vacant for years. Not only was it a beneficial way to make use of a dormant building, but it also allowed The Art Center to expand its programs and have a presence downtown. Fannin County paid for a new roof on the building, and through the years has provided matching funds for renovations and structural improvements. The county also supports the BRMAA by leasing the organization the building in exchange for maintenance and upkeep, and paying the salary of the executive director and another staff person.





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– Lynn Kemp, Owner, Gawdy Bobbles and Canoe Bags

As with BRMAA, the acquisition of its own building in 2009 spurred the Blue Ridge Community Theatre to new attendance and acclaim. “The permanent location gave us credibility,” says Mike Lacy, who has been involved with the theatre since 2001 and now serves as a vice president of its board. “We’re proud of what we’ve created; it’s been a group accomplishment.” He says the theatre performs a major production almost every month, along with providing acting classes and summer camps for children. The theatre has also expanded into live music performances. “We were looking for a way to fill those ‘dark weekends’ between productions,” says Lacy. “We’ve invested in new sound and video equipment to draw bigger talent as well as a more regional audience.”

Other developments have added fuel to the growth of the arts in Blue Ridge. Artists from around the country participate in a national juried art show staged by the Southern Appalachian Artist Guild, which is housed at The Art Center. Their works draw crowds to the gallery housed in the former courtroom in the Center during the fall. Arts in the Park, a small festival started back in 1976, and now supported by the Center, has grown into two events, one in the spring and one in fall, attracting hundreds of artists and vendors and thousands of visitors.

From these efforts sprung the creative community that Blue Ridge is today, and its success is nothing short of remarkable. BRMAA now has more than 1,000 members. The Art Center houses studios, a pottery and kiln studio, five artistic guilds, five galleries and an artist-in-residence program. It also sells art supplies. Classes in visual arts, music and dance - for all ages and skill levels - draw people from Tennessee and North Carolina, and all over Georgia.

BRMAA also co-sponsors the Fall Plein Air Festival, part of the International Plein Air Painters Artists Organization. Each year, 40 or more artists venture to Blue Ridge to render its outdoor beauty on canvas. “Nature is our biggest asset,” says Nichole Potzauf, executive director of the Art Center, “and nature is also the defining factor of Plein Air.”

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Downtown: Home To Creative Businesses

The entrepreneurship of business owners - led by the efforts of Bo Chance - has played an equally pivotal role in Blue Ridge’s development. Chance sold his High Country Arts and Antiques business several years after he opened it, but kept the building. Over the years, he acquired 19 other buildings downtown, forging a new career in property management.

He has always had a clear idea of what he wanted Blue Ridge to be and that philosophy and practice set him apart from typical landlords. He carefully curates tenants, making sure each is a good fit for the area – and has the potential to succeed.

"If a business owner requires a lot of foot traffic, I'm not going to rent them a building that is off the beaten path," he says as an example. "I also won't locate a competitor near an existing business if I can help it. My philosophy is 'your success is my success.' I want each business to thrive."

One of those thriving businesses is owned by Lynn Kemp, another Atlanta transplant and former Macy's buyer who moved to Blue Ridge with her husband and started making her own jewelry. In 2011, Kemp rented a building from Chance and opened Gawdy Bobbles, a design studio and shop that sells handcrafted jewelry with an artistic flair, made on the premises. "It's a different retail customer here every day of the week," she says. "We have some locals and lots of tourists. Blue Ridge is one of a kind. I couldn't have this business in Atlanta."



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– Mike Lacy, Owner, Multitudes Gallery



Kemp's success led her to buy her own building and open a second business, Canoe Bags, last year. The handbags are designed by Kemp and hand-sewn locally.

"We have an environment that's conducive to someone who is successful at selling a form of art," says Chance. Indeed, downtown Blue Ridge is now home to an array of crafted and creative enterprises. Bill and Shannen Oyster own Oyster Fly Rods, in which they not only custom make and sell hand-crafted bamboo rods with shotgun-steel engraving, but teach others how to do it in their six-day classes. Fly fishing enthusiasts come in from all over the country to create their own custom made rods in these classes, which usually fill up six months in advance.

Mike Lacy of the Blue Ridge Community Theatre also owns Multitudes Gallery, which features hand-blown glass and other fine art.

A stroll along the streets of downtown Blue Ridge turns up many other examples – artistic businesses and shops that reflect a love for the aesthetic as well as a second life for their proprietors. And visitors would be hard-pressed to find an empty storefront. Chance says occupancy is near 100 percent.

"A lot of people come up here to Blue Ridge to reinvent themselves," says Lacy. "It's been exciting to see that over and over again. The creative energy just draws people to this town."