

Tourism and the Arts – A view from southern Vermont

Southern Vermont has been and continues to be a hotbed for the arts. Musicians, visual artists, sculptors, culinary artists, actors, performing artists, writers....the list goes on are attracted to the area and, in turn, attract an audience from both within and without Vermont. Those in the audience from without Vermont tend to spend a lot more than those from within Vermont. So, it only makes sense to get more visitors to become part of our “arts audience.”

Economically, the arts have a strong impact. A study of just non-profit arts organizations in the Brattleboro area in 2007 showed a multi-million dollar impact almost as large as the entire yearly budget of Brattleboro.

About 80 per cent of the audiences for performances by non-profits in 2007 were Vermont residents, but the 20 per cent who were visitors to the state spent about four times the amount spent by in-staters. (see Brattleboro area study of non-profit arts organizations; www.acwc.us) With some extra tourism dollars spent on advertising the arts, the total revenue figure could be significantly higher. The study did not take into account the for-profit arts-related individuals and businesses, which also benefit from added visitors.

Take, for example, Brattleboro-West Arts. Some 25 local artisans that include instrument makers, glassblowers, potters, visual artists, weavers and more, have banded together in a loosely knit cooperative to advertise a new studio tour in September. Collectively, they now bring in about \$750,000 in annual income, much of it from out of state sales. If the studio tour catches on, that figure could easily grow from additional in-state sales, as well.

Brattleboro-West Arts is the newest, but only one of several studio tours in southern Vermont. The Putney Crafts tour each November is probably the oldest – more than 30 years already. The Rock River Studio Tour in July has been around for 17 years. And, the Cotton Mill Studio Tour in December has been around for the past several years.

What draws the artists? (See “A Violinmaker’s Tale” by Doug Cox)

Then, there are the galleries and other venues that participate in Brattleboro’s Gallery Walk which hosts openings around town on the first Friday of each month. Anywhere from 35 to 55 openings are featured each month. Quite a step up from the initial First Friday art walks nearly 20 years ago with four arts venues and the local movie theater. While it’s quite a party for locals on the first Friday, it doesn’t necessarily translate into sales -- with the exception of full restaurants.

The variety of art and music is great and has helped Brattleboro become recognized as one of the Top 25 Arts Towns in America with populations of 100,000 and under. Not bad for a town of 12,000. Burlington also made the list. For Vermont to have two of 25 recognized arts towns – along with the likes of Santa Fe, Aspen, Chapel Hill, Asheville, Key West, Boulder, Portsmouth, Carmel and Corning – is pretty impressive by itself. The potential value of those listings is a marketer’s dream.

Vermont gets quite a bit of free press coverage in major markets – take last year’s New Yorker 12-page article about the Marlboro Music Festival as just one example. Additionally, Marlboro was able to get some advertising support from friends who purchased an ad featuring the festival in Southern Vermont in another issue of the New Yorker to help bolster the impact of the article. The festival had one of their best seasons in years. And, many in the audience were first-time visitors to the venerable festival who had a great time and promised to return.

Last year’s Brattleboro Literary Festival drew a huge number of people from the five-college area of Massachusetts, but fewer than usual from New York. The free-to-the-public festival brings 25-30 world-class authors to town in October for readings in a variety of venues around town. And restaurants, hotels and shopping destinations benefit as well as those attending the sessions.

And more is in the wings!

The Brattleboro Music Center is eyeing a new home with expanded teaching capacity; the Brattleboro Arts Initiative is continuing to raise money to upgrade the 750-seat auditorium at the Latchis Theatre; the Brattleboro Museum & Art Center has become a year-round venue; Nimble Arts is looking at ways to raise funds to build a new circus-training school; the New England Youth Theatre continues to train up-and-coming performers and technicians; the Vermont Jazz Center not only trains musicians of all ages; the Brattleboro School of Dance trains aspiring dancers. All offer concerts and performances in the community on a regular basis.

While all this activity is wonderful and inspiring and has the potential for attracting more artists, more performers, more writers, more creative people, more jobs, more youthful idealism, some see it as approaching an unsupportable level without the infusion of more people in the audience.

We may be nearing a tipping point – one direction continues to see the arts flourish and grow; another that starts a decline because of insufficient support.

Even with world-class performances and presentations that continually draw oohs and ahhs and rave reviews from those attending – (one comment often heard is, “You’re so fortunate to have all of this. How do you do it?”) – an infusion of new audience is needed. Advertising dollars spent in creative ways to could go a long way in attracting new visitors from the Boston market to the east and the Massachusetts, Connecticut and New York markets to the south. Dollars that would help tip the scale in a positive direction.

That said, the arts in Vermont are what dreams are made of. Yes, we’re the memory of White Christmas, Holiday Inn and Moonlight in Vermont. But we’re also the hot jazz of southern Vermont; we’re the summer theater that helped launch the career of Meryl Streep; we’re glass artist Simon Pearce; we’re Peter Serkin and Ignat Solzhenitsyn who wow audiences in Marlboro and around the world; we’re artists Wolf Kahn, Emily Mason, Cai Silver and Warren Kimble; we’re puppeteers Eric and Ines Bass; we’re clowns Gould and Stearns; we’re Grace Potter and the Nocturnals; we’re Penn Rosen of the Beelzebubs who wowed television audiences with their a cappella stylings.

We’re the arts in Vermont and we have many a story to tell.

Help us tell that story!

As one person recently said, We have SmartGrowth Vermont; how about ArtGrowth Vermont?

If you have questions, please give me a call or e-mail:

Thanks,

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