

MISSOULIAN SPECIAL REPORT

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Progress '07

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WESTERN MONTANA ECONOMY

A good showing

Study says arts contribute \$34 million annually to Missoula, enhanced quality of life attracts people, businesses

By JOE NICKELL
of the Missoulian

The official population of Missoula is less than half that of the Hawaiian island of Maui, and about a sixth that of Tulsa, Okla. Yet Missoula's nonprofit arts sector generates more economic activity than do the arts in either of those locales.

Uber-hip Boulder, Colo.? It may have the larger population, but Missoula employs

almost 50 percent more people in the arts.

All told, Missoula's nonprofit arts organizations generate more than \$34 million in annual economic activity, supporting more than 1,100 full-time jobs within the city.

Those are just a few of the findings of a recent, nationwide study by Americans for the Arts, a nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C.

According to Tom Bensen, director of

the Missoula Cultural Council, the study indicates that Missoula's arts economy stands with the best small cities in America – and is growing at a remarkably robust rate.

"Missoula does very well in comparison to the rest of the nation and to other communities its size," said Bensen. "We all know we have a healthy cultural community, but now we know it helps the economics of the community."

Bensen and a group of volunteers spent almost a year gathering data from local arts organizations and patrons. They sent out detailed financial questionnaires to local nonprofit arts organizations, and handed out one-page surveys at selected arts events around Missoula.

All told, the MCC collected information from 764 event attendees and 21 arts

organizations, including such well-known entities as Missoula Children's Theater, the Missoula Art Museum and the Missoula Symphony Orchestra.

What the study found was what arts organizations and patrons have been arguing for years: The so-called "cultural economy" in Missoula is a major contributor to our community's financial well-being.

The study is the third produced by Americans for the Arts; previous studies were conducted in 1994 and 2002. Missoula arts organizations participated in those previous studies as well. The last time Missoula's institutions participated in the Americans for the Arts study, the results indicated that Missoula nonprofit arts

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organizations have a total economic impact on the local economy of \$16.7 million annually, supporting 670 full-time jobs and generating \$1.2 million in local and state tax revenues.

Given the two-fold difference in the overall results of the two most recent studies, it's probably not a good idea to take the findings of the most recent study too literally, according to Larry Swanson, an economist and director of

the O'Connor Center for the Rocky Mountain West.

But that's not to knock the assertion that the arts have an economic impact in our city. In fact, Swanson believes the study may not encompass even a fraction of the true economic impact of the arts in Missoula.

"I think it's best to look at this study as being illustrative rather than definitive," says Swanson. "The impact of arts and cultural activity, in my mind, goes well beyond the boundaries of what this study addresses."

Swanson points out that the ability of a community to attract business investment is

increasingly tied to the intangible amenities of the community.

"Our economy is increasingly rewarding cities where quality of life is high," said Swanson. "The reality is, the cities that have arts and culture and environmental amenities – cities like Missoula – are finding that those attributes are just as important as a skilled work force and business assistance and things like that in terms of economic development."

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