

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

At \$14 million, the arts are a bargain for state's budget

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As the state's budget woes drag on through the legislature, the arts continue to get no respect.

The most recent budget proposals contain zero funding for the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the conduit through which the state dribbles support to arts organizations across Pennsylvania.

At stake is \$14 million.

To most of us, that sounds like a lot of money.

But, according to the arts advocacy group Citizens for the Arts in Pennsylvania, that \$14 million costs each taxpayer a nickel per week or \$2.60 a year.

As some of you might not be aware, eliminating funding for the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts also will dry up the flow of money from the National Endowment for the Arts. That's because NEA grants require a matching grant from the state coffers.

Granted our state senators and representatives do no one a favor by not closing the gap between expenses and income. And when you're balancing concerns about education or health against arts and culture, eliminating the latter seems like a no-brainer.

Responsible people make similar budget choices all the time -- pay the electrical bill or spend an evening at the opera? Fund the kids' college fund or buy season tickets to the theater?

That's because most of us think of the arts as Cinderella waltzing in her ball gown at the palace -- fun, frivolous, pleasant but expensive and nonessential.

A more apt image would be Rosie the Riveter, the female laborer with a scarf binding up her hair, a rolled-up sleeve displaying real muscle and a "We can do it" attitude.

Hard-core arts boosters already are aware of part of that image:

- Arts and culture are a \$1.99 billion industry in Pennsylvania, says Citizens for the Arts in Pennsylvania. The arts provide nearly 62,000 full-time equivalent

jobs and generate \$282.98 million in local and state government revenue. Those jobs aren't just the glamorous ones held by dancers and actors. They also provide wages for the people who answer the phones, staff the box office windows and mop the bathroom floors.

- In 2005, arts and cultural groups in Allegheny County alone generated \$341.56 million in local economic activity, supported 10,192 full-time equivalent jobs and contributed \$33 million in revenue for local and state governments, according to an economic impact study done by the national arts advocacy group Americans for the Arts.

It should not pass unremarked that \$18.5 million of that \$33 million left Allegheny County for state coffers -- a sum far larger than the \$14 million statewide support our legislators scissored from the budget.

Arts and artists also benefit their communities in a more subtle but no less important role.

They're a primary tool in urban revitalization and renewal.

A case in point is the Bloomfield/Garfield/Friendship corridor that is undergoing a mini-Renaissance fueled not by big-box chain stores or huge government subsidized renewal plans but largely by art and artists.

If you doubt me, take a drive along Penn Avenue from 40th Street to East Liberty after 5 p.m. this Friday.

You see it in small ways, such as the murals that enliven and decorate what would otherwise be blank walls and on the sidewalks filled with people gallery and restaurant hopping during the monthly event known as Unblurred: First Fridays on Penn.

During the years between the closing of St. Francis Medical Center and this year's opening of the new Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh, small art galleries, dance studios and pottery shops have moved into previously vacant storefronts.

The neighborhood is home to bigish arts organizations such as Dance Alloy and the Pittsburgh Glass Center and smaller ones such as Pittsburgh Dance Arts and Modernformations Gallery and Performance Space.

Along with the artists have come destinations for food and drink such as the Quiet Storm Coffeehouse and Brillobox, followed by new construction -- low and moderately priced lofts and townhouses.

Artists and arts administrators always are on the lookout for inexpensive housing near bus routes.

And because they see things differently -- and are willing to substitute abundant imagination and sweat equity for scarce dollars -- they often perceive the potential in what others dismiss as an unloved, downtrodden structure.

Whether as renters or owners, they have moved into big vintage houses along the side streets and apartments in the main street.

The change didn't happen spontaneously, of course. Groups such as Penn Avenue Arts Initiative, the Bloomfield-Garfield Corporation, Friendship Development Associates and others have played prolonged and pivotal roles in re-creating and repositioning the area.

But don't discount the artists and their art.

Without them, there would be no one renting a storefront to fulfill a dream of opening a gallery or clothing store and no one to envision and create the paintings, sculptures, dresses and jackets to stock it.

Nor would there be aspiring artist homeowners rich in imagination but short on cash willing to transform bedraggled or abandoned housing into vibrant and attractive, tax-generating properties.

Without cafes and bars and stores, there would be few reasons for visitors to travel there to fill up tables, browse the galleries and stores or take classes in the studios and workshops.

All that keeps the economy flowing.

So when you consider the economic benefits artists generate, maybe \$14 million isn't so large a price tag after all.

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