

THE TWO RIVER TIMESTM

The Arts Are Big Business For Monmouth County

Whether it is an evening to your favorite local theater, art gallery, or the business you may bring to a photographer or other creative professional, it makes a difference for the local and regional economy. A big difference.

The role these types of enterprises—whether in the non- or for-profit world— play in the overall Monmouth County economy and on the local level is appearing to be an important and growing one, according to a recent study published by Americans for the Arts, a not-for-profit arts and education advocacy organization.

Using data compiled by Dun and Bradstreet, a leading purveyor of business information, the study indicates art-related businesses in both the U.S. and in Monmouth County reflects a larger than anticipated influence, according to information provided by the Monmouth County Arts Council, headquartered in Red Bank.

According to the study, Monmouth County has an estimated 2,080 arts-related businesses, which employees approximately 5,803, based on data as recent as January 2014. Nationally the numbers are 750,453 businesses that have about in their employ approximately 3.1 million people, representing 4.2 percent of all U.S. businesses and 2.1 percent of all employees, as of January 2014, according to the study.

“It really is an area that creates jobs,” noted Mary Eileen Fouratt, executive director of the Monmouth County Arts Council.

“Actually, I think it is growing,” as a sector of the economy, Fouratt said.

There is a ripple effect for the initial impact, “As we know in Red Bank when the theaters are busy the restaurants are busy,” she observed.

The Count Basie Theatre, 99 Monmouth St., Red Bank, a not-for-profit performing arts venue, had 195 performances that attracted approximately 202,000 ticket holders through its doors in 2014, according to Adam Philipson, the theater’s chief executive officer. “I can’t tell you how many people ate before a show,” Philipson offered. “But I can tell you on a Monday night when we have a sold out show it’s pretty hard to get a table at a Red Bank restaurant.”

The Two River Theater, 21 Bridge Avenue, Red Bank, another major venue, has 240 performances of approximately eight theatrical productions annually, attracting roughly 55,000 people, along with relying on 250 employees (many of the equity actors will live in the community for the four-six weeks they work on a production), said Michael Hurst, the theater’s managing director. There is a recent national study that estimates each person attending an arts event spends on average \$25 per event on non-ticket prices, Hurst pointed out. That could be on anything from dinner and drinks to “even going home and paying the babysitter,” he said.

“Most obviously, it’s a draw for people,” for the theaters and other attractions to Red Bank, said James Scavone, executive director of Red Bank RiverCenter, which manages the town’s business and commercial special improvement district. “And missing that it would be very noticeable.”

Cultural tourists, Fouratt said, tend to visit a location for longer periods and spend more than other types of tourists.

But the whole picture is more expansive and diverse than simply seeing a show or band and going to a local bar or eatery, those spoken to for this story maintain.

“We’re seeing a lot of artist/entrepreneurs starting businesses,” Fouratt observed. She included such businesses as professional photographers, architects, musicians and other music-related efforts. In Red Bank, Fouratt pointed out, in recent years there has been an influx of advertising and marketing firms, which she considered as arts-related, as well, bringing with them or hiring employees. Fouratt added that appeared to be the case even when the overall economy may have been in a downturn.

Even for non-arts businesses, having a strong cultural base can be a draw, Scavone believed. Some businesses have noted they relocated to Red Bank because of the attractions, offering their employees that added benefit, “to stay after work, to come back on weekends,” to take advantage of what’s available, he said.

It could very possibly also be a factor in people relocating to a community, Hurst observed, noting recent residential developments in the area of the theaters, such as West Side Lofts, bear that out. “I think it is something that people will look at when they’re looking at communities to live,” he said. For the arts, “Monmouth County has a lot to offer,” Fouratt said. And that is the impetus for the Arts Council’s initiative to connect much of the county by its cultural attractions. The council’s MoCo Arts Corridor coordinates the offerings of around 40 communities in Monmouth County—extending from Matawan in the Bayshore section to Manasquan, on the county’s southern shore area—highlighting not only the obvious choices, such as Red Bank, Long Branch and Asbury Park, but maybe those areas not so apparent to cultural visitors, such as Belmar and Atlantic Highlands.

The arts council’s MoCo initiative was featured in a presentation at the Center of Creative Place Making, Bloomfield College, Bloomfield, made in Dublin, Ireland, and at the United Nations, New York, as an example of a innovative cultural program.

Asbury Park, a county cultural centerpiece, has had its recent redevelopment efforts benefit by its strong artistic appeal, said Thomas Gilmour, director of the city’s Office of Economic Development. City officials decided to “embrace our greatest asset, which is music, and really ran with that,” as part of the redevelopment strategy, he said.

It started with the Smithsonian Institute’s 2011 exhibit in Asbury, called “New Harmonies: Celebrating American Roots Music.” An estimated 14,000 visited the exhibit over its six-week period, with Gilmour crediting it with having “been a great factor Asbury Park’s come back.”

“I think the arts in this area are just incredible,” Gilmour stressed, believing the city’s draw of the beach in the summer and its musical and theater venues will continue to strengthen the ongoing work to attract visitors and residents to the community. “It’s working,” he said.

“Once the cultural is created it feeds off of itself and grows,” as related business look to follow a successful trend, Scavone offered. “It is something that has taken root.”