

Opinion: Jan Burton: Culture is an investment that returns

By [JAN BURTON](#) | Jan.burton111@gmail.com | For the Camera

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There are many reasons to support arts and culture in Boulder. Decades of research demonstrate that the arts help build social cohesion, promote civic engagement, foster cross-cultural understanding, improve mental and physical health, enhance educational outcomes for our youth across all socio-economic backgrounds, attract and retain the workforce our businesses need, and make communities more welcoming to all.

For the purposes of this column, I will focus only on the economic impact of arts and cultural activities, which can be measured in two ways: 1) directly, by cultural organization expenditures, and 2) indirectly, by attracting patrons and attendees from inside and outside of the city, who spend money in restaurants and shops.

Let me illustrate an example for the Colorado Music Festival, one of Boulder's cultural treasures which I know well. Last summer, I provided free housing for three of their musicians and attended many of their concerts. Colorado Music Festival (CMF), with an annual operating budget of \$2.2 million, receives \$50,000 per year in grants from the City of Boulder. The city's grant, representing just 2.3% of CMF's expenses, barely touches their payments to Chautauqua for auditorium and box office fees, musician salaries and housing, production staff, marketing and PR, printing costs, HOP fees, etc. All of these expenses get re-paid by their vendors in salaries and turned over several times in the Boulder economy. CMF's payments to musicians are spent on groceries, meals out, hiking shoes, golf fees and retail purchases, which also turn over several times in our economy.

According to the Boulder Arts & Economic Prosperity calculator (on the city's own [website](#)), Colorado Music Festival's *direct* expenditures return an estimated \$67,650 to city coffers in sales taxes. So, the city actually makes a *profit* of \$13,650 on their small grant of \$50,000.

CMF's *indirect* economic impact can be measured by the behavior of their concert attendees, many of whom buy dinner or a picnic before the concert or shop at one of our many retailers. One of my friends comes from Denver to attend concerts with me, and we go out to dinner beforehand, spending over \$100. With total CMF season attendance over 15,000, the total revenue impact could be well over \$500,000, with sales tax receipts funding the City's Open Space, human services, transportation projects, parks and innumerable other general fund expenses.

Contributions to city tax receipts get multiplied hundreds of times each year with the cultural festivals, performances, museum openings, viewings and educational offerings by more than 40 Boulder non-profits. Yet, these same organizations struggle to make ends meet.

As I gathered signatures for the upcoming sales tax ballot measure 2A, I noted that more than 70% of attendees to our local arts events came from out of town, and many of them referenced shopping and eating out in Boulder during their visit.

A budget-conscious City Council member might think seriously about these numbers. The more money we invest in the arts, the more we get in return! Sadly, our City government spends \$17 per person on cultural affairs as compared to an average of just over \$45 in comparable cities.

But we have a chance to change that. In the upcoming election, City of Boulder Ballot Measure 2A (for which I am an organizer) will ask voters to extend, without raising taxes, a sales tax that was originally approved by voters in 2003. This tax, costing 15 cents on every \$100 of purchases, will be split 50% to the city's general fund, covering fire and police protection, human services and homeless solutions, transportation, and other city needs; and 50% to arts, culture and heritage for non-profit and artist support, programming and venues.

The 4,000 Boulder residents who signed the petition for this ballot measure see the benefits of funding the arts more fully. Two of our mayoral candidates, Aaron Brockett and Bob Yates, have expressed enthusiastic support for Ballot Measure 2A and have reassured us that this funding will not cause shortfalls in other departments.

When considering the economic benefits gained from our cultural institutions and artists, it's clear that our investment in them creates a positive return for the City and many of its budget priorities. This, without even considering the myriad of other benefits from cultural programs.

Boulder won't become a world-class and welcoming city without a robust and healthy arts and culture sector. NAACP Boulder County messaged this clearly in a letter to the Council this summer, "When a city embraces cultural awareness and art, the result is revenue, vibrancy and prestige." I recommend "yes" on 2A!

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