

DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL

Friday, November 20, 2009

State, city to push cultural, creative economy

Denver Business Journal - by [Ed Sealover](#)

Denver hopes to paint a new picture for itself as a regional center of arts-centered tourism.

And the state of Colorado is thinking along the same lines: The Office of Economic Development and International Trade (OEDIT) has convened a high-level task force to attract jobs and grow the revenue base in areas such as theater, cultural heritage and music.

The rewards can be high: Arts experts say an area viewed as a creative haven can attract both cultural tourists and non-artistic companies looking for a high quality of life when deciding where to relocate a work force.

Denver can reach the level of a Los Angeles or Chicago in this endeavor, said Suzanne Blandon, associate director of the **Denver Center for the Performing Arts**.

But, she added, Denver and Colorado must invest financial and human capital. Leaders must convince Americans and Europeans who still regard the Mile High City as a cowtown that it's rich with museums, symphonies and performances too.

"I would argue that we're already there on a regional level," Blandon said. "I would hope that what the intent now is to make it on a national level. I think a lot of it boils down to visibility."

State tourism marketing campaigns have focused on the outdoor experience. But that changed some when the Visit Denver convention and visitors bureau kicked off eight days of cultural events, "Denver Arts Week," in 2007. This year, the event became a full part of its marketing campaign.

The idea, pushed especially by Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper, has been to convince visitors from cities such as Omaha, Neb., and Albuquerque, N.M., that Denver is the place to go for arts and culture.

Not enough people know that Denver has the second-largest performing arts center in the country and the fourth-most-visited museum of nature and science, Hickenlooper said.

"It's important to let executives know that this is a city that values our quality of life," he said. "It helps attract businesses and helps them to open an office here or maybe relocate here."

Some states have built culture-based marketing campaigns, and created offices and initiatives to bolster their creative economies. OEDIT Director Don Marostica said Colorado needs a similar effort, and he created the Creative Economy Advisory Panel to back it. He convened about 60 arts and business leaders from across the state in mid-November to begin work on a plan he hopes will be ready in early 2010.

Colorado has statistics to suggest it is an arts hub: It has some 186,000 employees in creative jobs, making it the fifth-largest industry in the state, and has the fifth-highest concentration of artists in the United States, said Elaine Mariner, director of the **Colorado Council on the Arts**. What it needs, she and others say, is a better way to tell the story to attract businesses and visitors.

Scott Hutcheson, Louisiana's assistant secretary for cultural development, who attended the first panel meeting, said he never would have considered traveling here for the arts. But he changed his view after hearing that one group placed nine Colorado towns on its national list of the top 100 art spots.

"You become what you tell people you are," Hutcheson said after the meeting. "I think of Colorado as a recreational state. But if you told me that [ranking], I'd suddenly think of it as an arts state because you've created that impression to me ... If you throw out that statistic to a cultural traveler like me, I'd come."

Several local art leaders said that changing the national perception of the arts scene will involve more than just fancy brochures.

Blandon said Colorado must make more effort to attract films to be shot here and give more exposure to Colorado, a plea the industry has made for years.

David Dynak, dean of the college of arts and media at the University of Colorado at Denver, said the community — especially its lower socioeconomic segment — doesn't have the deep-rooted cultural pride of other artistic cities. Denver leaders must emphasize appreciation of the arts in schools and in civic activities, so that it becomes associated with the city, he said.

Britta Erickson, festival director for the **Denver Film Society**, questioned whether the current makeup of Denver's 16th Street Mall,



Kathleen Lavine | Business Journal

Britta Erickson, festival director of Starz Denver Film Festival, which holds its closing-night event on Nov. 21.

[View Larger](#)

with its artless mishmash of curio shops and fast-food restaurants, is attractive to cultural tourists.

“We’re reinforcing that ‘cow town’ image where you can buy your cowboy gear key chains and Beanie Babies,” Erickson said of the city’s top tourist destination.

Still, Denver has taken major steps in the right direction, Erickson acknowledged. Voters’ 2004 extension of the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District tax showed how seriously the town takes its arts, and the Democratic National Convention showcased to more people than ever what the city can offer.

“I think we’re getting there,” she said. “I think in terms of getting Visit Denver to convey the message of what there is to offer, it’s educating the tourist.”

All contents of this site © American City Business Journals Inc. All rights reserved.