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## 'Economic gardening': Project aims to cultivate artistic commerce

Effort would focus on Glenwood, Carbondale

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GLENWOOD SPRINGS, CO COLORADO,

The city of Glenwood Springs may partner with Carbondale on a unique approach to economic development aimed at growing existing local businesses rather than recruiting new businesses to move in.

Initially the effort would be oriented toward the arts, including traditional fine arts, music, theater and film, and artistic trades such as architecture, graphic design, interior design, wood working and clothing design.

Called "economic gardening," the pilot project being proposed by Randi Lowenthal of the Roaring Fork Business Resource Center would establish what's called a "creative

industries cluster."

That could then serve as a model for other types of industry clusters in the future, such as such things as health care or technology.

"The idea is to take a close look at what you already have and build on what's here, which is a more cost-effective way to grow the economy," Lowenthal said during a recent presentation to the Carbondale Board of Trustees.

"Arts, design and culture represent not just a measure of quality of life, but also business opportunities, competitive niches and local amenities," according to a written introduction of her proposal. "They create jobs, attract investments, generate tax revenues and stimulate local economies through tourism and consumer purchases."

The Carbondale trustees agreed to contribute \$20,000 to the eight-month effort. Lowenthal is scheduled to appear before the Glenwood Springs City Council on Feb. 3, seeking the same level of support.

She is also writing a grant proposal for up to \$10,000 from the new Colorado Creative Industries Council to assist with the project.

### Nothing new but the name

While using the arts as an economic generator is not a new concept, Colorado state government has begun to more formally recognize that the arts and artistic trades are a cornerstone of the state and local economies.

Just last year, former Gov. Bill Ritter started Colorado's new Creative Industries Division, which merged three state efforts — the Colorado Council on the Arts, Colorado Office of Film, Television and Media, and Art in Public Places — under the state Office of Economic Development.

The goal is to promote, support and expand the creative industries as a means to drive Colorado's economy, create jobs and enhance the quality of life in local communities.

A recent report generated by the state reveals that "creative enterprises" are the fifth largest sector of Colorado's economy, accounting for more than 186,000 jobs. Colorado also ranks fifth among all states for its concentration of artists, according to the report.

Glenwood Springs Chamber Resort Association executive director Marianne Virgili has been a longtime member of the

former state arts council, now the Colorado Creative Industries Council (CCI), working with the film industry.

"Finally, the arts, film and related industries are being recognized as economic drivers for the state of Colorado," said Virgili, who has also had meetings with Lowenthal on ways to apply the concept locally.

"It is a good fit for the communities in our region," she said. "Typically, artistic people aren't joiners. This is something that can provide more incentives for people to get their names and their work out there."

Glenwood Springs Mayor Bruce Christensen said he also supports the effort, though it will be up to the full City Council whether to support the project financially.

"The concept is great," he said. "It's a nice, clean, low-impact industry, and anything we can support that has a high intellectual involvement is good for the community."

Lowenthal said the idea to bring Glenwood Springs and Carbondale together in the effort had to do with the fact that the communities have a lot in common in the creative industries realm, from major events that focus on the arts, including Mountain Fair and Strawberry Days, to active arts councils that support local artists.

"I see this as strengthening Carbondale and Glenwood Springs, and creating growth for both communities," she said.

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### **Pulling it together**

If the funding comes through, between mid-February and next October, Lowenthal would spend half of her time in her capacity with the Business Resource Center to facilitate the economic gardening project. Among the tasks will be to:

- Appoint a steering committee made up of representatives from both towns and industry representatives.
- Use information from both the Carbondale and Glenwood Springs comprehensive plans.
- Learn from the collaborative effort to establish the Third Street Center in Carbondale, which now houses a number of both nonprofit and for-profit artistic businesses.
- Research regional and national efforts around promoting the arts.
- Inform the general public about regionalism, collaboration, business clusters and creative industries.
- Identify and take advantage of economies of scale and ways to leverage resources.

By working together, similar types of businesses can share marketing efforts, seek out long-term funding, and take advantage of business coaching and mentoring, Lowenthal said.

Colorado Mountain College would also be a part of the effort by creating curricula aimed at supporting creative industries.

"Results will depend on participation," Lowenthal advises in her written proposal. "We will only obtain results if we find the right people to participate and sustain their interest."

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