

Ritter reaffirms support of state's 'creative industries'

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Special to the Times

Mere hours before word began to spread that he was not going to seek re-election this November, Colorado Governor Bill Ritter joined Lt. Governor Barbara O'Brien in announcing the state's support for Colorado's "creative industries" at a press conference in Denver Tuesday.

More than 250 people heard Gov. Ritter describe the importance of arts businesses — architectural firms, video-games development, furniture and fashion design, non-profit and for-profit arts activity — to the state's economy.

"State government is thinking in new ways, by recognizing the importance of the 'creative class,'" Ritter said. "Conservatively, there are 186,250 people employed in the creative industry, making this Colorado's fifth largest economic sector."

Ritter pointed out that emphasizing this sector's poten-

tial for creativity and innovation will enable a surge of economic growth: new jobs and the attraction of creative talent, as well as sustainable, local development.

"The creative class is one key to the turnaround of our economy," Ritter said. "If there are 186,000-plus jobs now, imagine what the state's shining a spotlight on this economic cluster will do for Colorado."

Lt. Governor Barbara O'Brien and Office of Economic Development Director Don Marostica co-chair the state's Creative Economy Advisory Panel, which is drafting recommendations to expand this sector.

Meanwhile, communities statewide are starting to emphasize creativity as an economic development strategy. One attendee pointed out that Monte Vista is mounting a concerted effort to attract the "creative class." Not only is this an important basis for local, sustainable development, but O'Brien noted that visitors

seeking a cultural experience through performing or visual arts, heritage, or exploring the local "creative economy" spend 36 percent more when they visit. Cultural tourists, she said, spend \$1 million in Chaffee County alone each year.

There is even a Gunnison angle to this approach to economic development. Mike Merrifield, a former Gunnison High School choir director, is now a state representative from Colorado Springs, and he chairs the House Education Committee. He will be introducing a bill in this legislative session that will require school districts to "ensure that all students demonstrate mastery of arts education standards before they receive their high school graduation diplomas."

"My bill will reinforce what's already happening in Gunnison," he said. "Elsewhere in Colorado, only 20 percent of Colorado high school students receive any arts training. But arts training is essential in reducing the achievement gap



Gov. Bill Ritter spoke at this 'creative industries' press conference hours before the news broke that he would not be seeking re-election.

Photo by Maryo Ewell

between the economic 'haves' and 'have-nots,' in reducing the dropout rate, and in creating the most employable possible workforce."

Elaine Mariner, executive director of the Colorado Council on the Arts, pointed out that southern Colorado boasts 2.5 times the national average when it comes to density of artists living and working in a community. She believes that rural Colorado has at least the advantages, if not more so, of urban Colorado in capitalizing on this asset.

Among the many attend-

ees at the press conference was Carmen Alston, whose employer, EDI, designed the lighting system at Gunnison High School, which she helped install, "years ago."

"This is an economic development and jobs issue, of course," she said. "But suppose you had no color. No interesting fashions. No interesting architecture in your community. No creative things to do in the evening. It's about life, about making places interesting."