



Investments in the arts pay off

The arts: Good for the soul and the economy!

By Natalie Gelb Solfanelli

Arts and culture represent millions of dollars of economic development for communities in the Lackawanna Heritage Valley in the form of admission fees, purchase of merchandise, food, lodging, ground transportation and other recreational activities.

In 2006, the Lackawanna County Commissioners were recognized by Americans for the Arts and the National Association of Counties for Leadership in Promoting the Arts. The Arts and Culture fee generates \$1.2 million in revenue that is used to support our major cultural institutions, creative and innovative arts programs, and grants to individual artists.

There was scant opposition to the newly enacted fee in 2004, reflecting the willingness of the people of Lackawanna County to support arts and culture. Commissioner Robert Cordaro said, "We believe that fostering arts and cultural activities is critical to our area's revitalization and growth. Supporting the arts is an important end unto itself but is also the basis for economic development in the new economy."

The City of Scranton joins Lackawanna County in recognizing the importance of artists and their work. Both entities have contributed financial support to the ArtSpace Project that will create 35 affordable live/work apartments for artists in Scranton. When the Downtown Renaissance project was launched by Scranton Tomorrow, Sally Bohlin, board member and arts advocate, suggested the possible development of a residential complex to house professional artists and their families.

She reported that other cities had been successful at transforming historic properties or blighted neighborhoods into thriving arts communities. Scranton Tomorrow invited ArtSpace, Inc., a Minneapolis firm specializing in these projects, to visit and evaluate Scranton as a site for artists' residences.

Over 100 business, government and community leaders met with representatives from ArtSpace Inc. They were impressed to learn that every dollar invested in the arts in a community brings an \$8 return.

The project won the support of bankers and others who were at the meeting. Ms. Bohlin formed a committee that went to work immediately on all aspects of this major undertaking. ArtSpace, Inc., was conducted a marketing study that concluded that hundreds of artists, both local and from outside the area, were interested in moving to work/live space in Scranton. ArtSpace Inc., agreed to

undertake the project. Although details have not been announced, the plan is moving forward with architectural design and funding sources in advanced stages of development.

First Friday events in downtown Scranton and the increasing number of venues involved are indicators that the arts community is vibrant and active. First Fridays attract scores of people to the downtown, filling restaurants and bars with patrons. In September, several retail stores and boutiques stayed open, inviting shoppers to spend their money. A fun way to promote economic activity!

Heart to Art is a design and marketing company owned by Donna Doherty and Judy Youshock. Donna, Scranton's First Lady, and Judy, an artist, formed Heart to Art, a for-profit business venture, as a vehicle to create collaborative intergenerational art experiences. They link the public, nonprofit and business sectors to the arts and to one another by creating affordable, intergenerational projects that bring art to the street. Examples are "Fish on Trees," displayed at the LRCA RiverFest this past May, the Carbondale mural produced for Pioneer Nights and a fundraiser for the Susan B. Komen Foundation.

They state, "We are firm in our belief that through the arts we can stimulate the economy. We assist cities and worthwhile causes to implement unique revitalization programs that encourage pride and empathy." Statistics prove that there are many businesses that spring up where the arts are active.

As a matter of fact, the "Arts and Economic Prosperity III Report" for 2005 prepared by Americans for the Arts, indicates that event-related spending by arts and culture audiences (excluding the cost of admission) in Lackawanna County totaled \$6.25 million. Arts and culture organizations and their audiences account for 673 jobs with a total economic impact of \$11,831,000.

There are dozens of arts and cultural events taking place every day in the Lackawanna Heritage Valley. A person looking for something to do has a wide and varied menu of performances and exhibitions from which to choose.

It is our good fortune that these activities are not only good for the soul, but they also support and strengthen build the local economy.

Natalie Gelb Solfanelli is executive director of the Lackawanna Heritage Valley Authority. E-mail her at nsolfanelli@LHVA.org.