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Christopher McMahan/Randall Rosenbaum: Arts can help Rhode Island recover

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THE STRESSES on our state and local budgets are serious, and unemployment is high. While it is important for our elected officials to attack these problems on many different fronts, there is one easy and inexpensive solution we have yet to explore. It is in a domain where Rhode Island can succeed more than most other states.

We refer to the creative economy.

The return on arts investments is not a secret. In fact, our neighboring states have already made a significant investment in time, planning and other resources to support those aspects of their local economy that depend on inventiveness, innovation, imagination, inspiration and ingenuity.

Maine's economic plan concentrates on creating opportunities for creative workers and creative entrepreneurs through investments in education, cultural resources, technology and downtowns. In Vermont the newly created Vermont Council on Culture and Innovation supports the growth of creative enterprises as the state moves from being a leader in the production of "things" to a leader in the production of "ideas." And in Massachusetts, the governor has appointed a "Creative Economy Industries Director" and invested time and money into growing the over 14,000 arts-related businesses that currently employ close to 80,000 people in the Bay State.

Rhode Island is uniquely positioned to surpass all of these efforts.

If we view the arts as the true economic generator that they are and continue to invest in them, we as a community will benefit — economically and culturally — in return.

What will it take to catch up with and surpass our neighbors in growing Rhode Island's creative economy?

First, we must keep our own cultural community alive. Arts leaders should be at the table during high-level economic discussions, and investments in the arts must continue. As Governor Carcieri gathers business leaders to plan for the future of the state, arts institutions should be contributing to the conversation. As the Obama administration shapes its small-business policies, let Rhode Island arts entrepreneurs contribute to the discussion.

Next, we must continue to provide seed money for the arts community to grow so that we as a community can prosper. As a point of reference, if you examine the last fiscal year spending, the arts represented only 8/100ths of 1 percent of the state budget. Yet according to research done by economists at Northeastern University and information from the federal government, cultural nonprofits paid over \$356 million in payroll to these creative workers, and their efforts resulted in over \$750 million in economic activity in our state. We invest \$3 million in state and federal money, and get a quarter of a billion dollars in return. That is a great return on investment.

It's time to acknowledge the true value of our creative businesses, and make it an economic priority to help young arts entrepreneurs start new businesses, to help established companies discover new markets and to support projects that create jobs and income, revitalize downtowns and draw visitors to our communities. The arts are second only to nature in attracting tourists to the state, and our state is rich in both resources. We should be doing more to connect the exciting things that artists and creative workers are doing in this state with the people who will travel long distances — and spend much money — to experience those creative endeavors.

We have a great foundation upon which to build a culturally rich and economically vibrant Rhode Island. Rhode Island School of Design and such creative businesses as Hasbro already call Rhode Island home. We also possess a wealth of world-class art museums and theater companies, visual artists and performing-arts ensembles that contribute to a culturally vibrant environment that can (with help) continue to attract and keep the most creative and imaginative workers here.

During this difficult economy, let's focus on our strengths, while shaping a new vision for the state. Let's invest in the creative businesses that have been paying significant dividends. Our rich culture and the over 25,000 Rhode Islanders employed in our state's creative sector, along with countless more artisans in the future, are depending upon it.

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