

Chapter 19

Arts & Culture

A. OVERVIEW

The Arts and Culture are defining characteristics of civilizations, regions and cities. The differences can be distinguished in architecture, music, and dance to name a few. The connection between culture and civilization is so close that they were almost synonymous terms during the early history of the U.S. The eastern cities were more culturally developed and therefore more culturally aware than the frontier towns or western boomtowns. Early in our history and in frontier towns, traveling performers would provide entertainment wherever large groups could assemble. As the nation's cities grew, investment in cultural venues and facilities symbolized their prosperity and boosted their metropolitan status. Throughout our history a city's coming of age could be dated by the cornerstone of their opera house, museum or library. Fairmont hosted traveling performers in the "Town Hall Theatre" on Adams Street in the 1870's. The venue was improved at "The Rink" on Madison Street from the 1880' to 1900. Then the city came of age with the completion of the "Grand Opera House" on Monroe Street in the early 1900's. Touring shows brought the Best of Broadway to Fairmont. At this time touring shows throughout the nation inspired community theatres and the Fairmont Community Theatre inspired the organization of the national collegiate drama honoraries Alpha Psi Omega, and Delta PSI Omega at Fairmont State Normal School in the 1920's. They in turn created the National Thespians , a drama honorary for high schools which among the first troupes admitted included Fairmont Senior, East Fairmont High, and a high school in Casper Wyoming. Investment in the arts still tends to be a somewhat accurate barometer of a cities economic well-being. The arts seem to be considered a luxury reserved for the elite. However, art and culture are found at all levels of a community, and all levels of a community should benefit from the arts. Elizabeth Strom points out in her paper "Strengthening Communities Through Culture" that the Arts and Culture can be used to revitalize and improve local economies, help achieve educational goals, help reduce social tensions, and help at risk populations. Ms. Strom offers the following points to support her argument:

Community Identity – As stated above Arts and Culture have defining characteristics that differ significantly form region to region. Communities can exploit these differences to create their own cultural identity.

Community and Economic Development – Art and cultural activities in and of themselves can give a community a certain appeal by adding to the overall quality of life of the community. An appealing community can elicit investment, attract residents and increase tourism. There is also a certain amount of spin-off business associate with the arts. Obviously one thinks of the specialized purchases of the artists, however set builders need lumber and building supplies, audiences pay for parking, food and other travel related expenses. Another aspect of economic development the arts bring to a community is based on the globalized economy and the reduced the need for ports, train access and natural resources for businesses. New economy businesses are now looking for locations that will provide their managers and skilled workers with an active cultural life. It should be noted that a community should not look to the arts and culture as their sole economic engine, however communities are feeling real economic benefit from the arts.

Education and Cultural Literacy – Research among educators is demonstrating that students who are exposed to the arts or participated in arts programs are not only more well rounded, they score higher on scholastic aptitude tests, and are more likely to win awards for academic achievement, community service, or participate in math or science fairs. The positive effects of arts programs on youths crosses all socio-economic levels. Large scale “arts based “ or “arts infusion” pilot and magnet programs are showing promise as alternatives to traditional teaching methods.

Social Benefits – Many communities are successfully using arts based program to reach at risk youth, and other disenfranchised members of society. San Francisco’s Midnight Shakespeare program has been so successful at reducing teen truancy, and delinquency it has been replicated in cities across the nation. The Justice Department has found that participants in these programs are significantly less likely to become involved in criminal activity than those who don’t participate.

While the arts alone cannot reverse downward trends in a communities economy they can play a strong role in improving the quality of life in a community. As pointed out above the arts are much more than understanding or improving the aesthetics of a community, they can have social, educational, and economic impacts on a community.

B. GOALS AND ACTIONS

The goal and actions pertaining to Arts and Culture have been developed to enhance the quality of life by creating venues for artistic and cultural education and expression.

Goal:

Establish and promote Fairmont’s Artistic and Cultural Identity.

Actions:

- Support arts and culture curriculum in the local school system.
- Support art and culture education for adult and alternative learning programs.
- Support existing arts and cultural venues within the city.
- Develop projects and programs that create new venues for arts and culture in the city.
- Foster partnerships among community development organizations, social service organizations and arts/artists groups.

C. EXISTING CONDITIONS



There are opportunities to experience or participate in arts related activities in Fairmont. The following is a list of organizations and businesses that offer arts and cultural services within the City of Fairmont:

- A. Town and Gown Players-Community Theatre**
- B. Fairmont Community Orchestra**
- C. Silly Strings- Stringed Instrument Instruction**
- D. Friends of the Symphony- Non profit organization that brings Symphony to Fairmont**
- E. Fairmont Community Chorus**
- F. Fairmont Chamber Music Society**
- G. Movements in Dance- Dance Instruction Studio**
- H. Fairmont Studio of Dancing - Dance Instruction Studio**
- I. Mandy's Art Works – Art Instruction**
- J. Marion County Historical Society Museum**
- K. Johnnie Johnson Blues and Jazz Society**
- L. Fairmont State University**
- M. High Gate Carriage House**
- N. Prickett's Fort State Park**

D. BASIC ISSUES

The City of Fairmont is no different than many Cities of the same size in North Central West Virginia. Currently there is a shortage of public funds to support the arts. The City is investing its financial resources in providing improved municipal services and infrastructure. However the city leadership recognizes the importance of the arts and has provided other means of support to cultural activities in the city. The City of Fairmont has provided permits for many annual fairs, festivals, and concerts held at city parks.

The City has also recognized the importance of the arts and culture by including this chapter in the City of Fairmont Comprehensive Plan and other plans. The Downtown Revitalization Plan references the need for a Performing Arts Center in Fairmont. The Riverfront Master plan includes an amphitheater for concerts and other outdoor performances.

The City also has an active Arts and Humanities Council that is charged to:

- a. Advise the City Manager and Council on steps it may deem appropriate to stimulate and encourage the study and presentation of the performing and creative arts, and to foster public interest and support of the arts in Fairmont.
- b. Makes surveys of public and private institutions engaged in the performing and creative arts, and to make recommendations for appropriate action to enlarge the City's resources in the performing and creative arts.
- c. To encourage the freedom of expression in the performing and creative arts.

- d. To encourage the use of local resources for the development and support of the performing and creative arts.
- e. To promote and stimulate public understanding and recognition of the importance of cultural institutions.
- f. To encourage and foster the growth and development of local cultural institutions and agencies, both public and private.
- g. To encourage and develop performances and exhibits of the arts by teachers and students, and to encourage the practice as well as the teaching of the arts.

E. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Short Range (2005-2008)

- Recommend a comprehensive arts survey be conducted under the guidance of the Arts and Humanities Commission
- Continue to support existing arts and cultural events and organizations.
- Undertake a feasibility study for the construction of an Arts and Cultural Center in Downtown Fairmont.
- Implement improvements to Palatine Park for utilization as an arts and culture venue.

2. Medium Range (2008-2011)

- Act upon the Arts and Cultural Center feasibility study.
- Continue to support existing arts and cultural events and organizations.

3. Long Range (2011-2015)

- Review and revise the comprehensive arts survey.
- Continue to support existing arts and cultural events and organizations.