

Art for art's sake and much, much more ...

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Overlooking the importance of local arts and cultural organizations is an easy thing to do. Their products are the stuff of the imagination and creativity, and they are often staffed by dedicated professionals rarely paid market wages. Even their aesthetic value is a matter of critical and popular debate.

But what hasn't been taken seriously until recently is that these performers, managers, volunteers and audiences are having a major impact — not just for the common good that the arts have provided since ancient times, but because they are an integral part of a region's economy.

The release this past week of a major study on Arts and Economic Prosperity is an enlightening perspective about the Portsmouth/Seacoast region's economic impact of the arts. Call it \$38.1 million snapshot, because that was the annual economic activity created by the arts and cultural organizations and the people who attend their multifaceted events.

The study, a collaborative effort of the national organization Americans for the Arts and Portsmouth-based Art-Speak, is worth reading by those interested in the bottom line — as in the equivalent of more than 1,000 full-time jobs, of more than \$4.3 million generated for local and state governments, and that these organizations are drawing more than 66 percent of their audiences from out of town. The audience spending of \$25.5 million is good news for a wide range restaurants, hotels, retail stores of all types and other businesses.

What this study does, said Randy Cohen with American for the Arts, is refute the misconception that communities investing in arts and culture do so at the expense of other local development.

In fact, Cohen said, what makes arts and cultural economic development unique is that most of the dollars generated stay in the region.

While the study focused on Portsmouth, it doesn't take a great leap of imagination to see how this matters for the incredible arts and cultural diversity in the Seacoast region from York, Maine, to Exeter.

We can now say that the arts matter and are worthy of our time and investment.

Sue Cobler of Art-Speak, which was created as part of the Portsmouth's cultural commission, said she hopes the data from the study will encourage local businesses to

step up and support the arts, knowing that those arts and cultural organizations are bringing dollars to the business community.

The great American novelist Henry James was understandably biased when he wrote more than a century ago, "It is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance, and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process."

We can now also say that art plays an important part in the economic health of our region — and gives pause to those who would cut arts and cultural programs from our schools without considering the long-term impact to both our educational and economic well-being.

ON THE NET

See the study at www.Art-Speak.org.