



Culture & Rural Development

The Arts & the Challenge of Rural Renewal

CULTURE, RURAL REVITALIZATION and economic development — are they, or should they be, linked?

Based on applied research carried out by Des Moines Social Club founder Zachary Mannheimer, the International Amenity Migration Centre, Heritage Canada, the Creative City Network of Canada, and others, the answer would appear to be *yes*.

To begin the task of revitalization & economic renewal, rural communities must first decide what sets them apart. Too often the answer is, “we’re on a river,” or “we have a particular historical building.” A more compelling answer, rooted in some combination of culture and entrepreneurialism, is called for, an answer that must address at least some of the things most people (especially Millennials) are looking for in the places they choose to live.

Intriguingly, the factor most likely to entice younger people to move to a rural community is not the availability of jobs (many have the ability to bring their work with them), or access to health care. The two most commonly cited “wants” among Millennials looking to relocate to a rural community are an active cultural scene and access to high-speed internet.

Given this, municipalities that treat culture as an economic driver reap positive benefits. Cultural activities create job growth, turn ordinary cities into “destination cities,” create interconnections between arts and business, revitalize urban areas, attract skilled workers, and create spin-off businesses.

This was certainly the experience of New York Mills, Minnesota (pop. 1,225). Using art as an economic development tool, New York Mills has made remarkable strides since 2000, as demonstrated in the table below.

NEW YORK MILLS & THE ARTS (2000 — 2015)	
Population (2015)	1,225 — 5.8% increase
Median Household Income	\$40, 115 — 56% increase
Unemployment	3%
Median Home Value	\$93,340 — 65% increase

IN A STUDY of 97 Ontario festivals and events prepared for the Ontario Trillium Foundation by Hill Strategies in 2003, it was found these cultural activities provided significant economic benefits for their host communities and the province.

The overall impact of the 97 culture, sports, recreation and community festivals and events studied amounted to nearly \$80 million in economic return to the province's GDP. They also generated over \$30 million in taxes for all levels of government, and helped create 2,600 jobs and over \$50 million in wages and salaries.

The table below highlights the breakdown of these key economic impact figures for small, medium, and large festivals and events. Most of the small and medium-sized events took place in rural Ontario, generating \$40.4 million in GDP impact, and \$26.7 million in salaries while creating 1,320 jobs. Respective festival & events sizes are determined by expenditure.

	SMALL < \$75,000	MEDIUM \$75,000 to \$300,000	LARGE > \$300,000	TOTAL
# Festivals & Events	39	37	21	97
GDP Impact	\$12,900,000	\$27,500,000	\$38,200,000	\$78,700,000
Wages & Salaries	\$8,500,000	\$18,200,000	\$25,500,000	\$52,200,000
# Jobs Created	420	900	1,250	2,570
Taxes	\$5,200,000	\$10,900,000	\$15,000,000	\$31,100,000

“The key is so fundamentally simple. You must make arts accessible to the 80-year-old woman and the high school student. It’s a meat-and-potatoes approach and can be stated in three words: cultivate the arts.”

— **John Davis, Lanesboro Arts**

John Davis, who has helped completely turn around the fortunes of two small rural Minnesota towns, offers these six ingredients for success for small communities wishing to use local art and cultural assets to help revitalize their economies:

- **Vision:** Start with the big picture — how does local culture mesh with the community?
- **Philosophy:** What are the principles that guide you?
- **Local Creativity:** Don't rely on “the cavalry”: use “local smarts” to solve problems.
- **Strategy:** Don't go too far without out a clear plan in place.
- **Will:** Determination & patience will be required!
- **Presentation:** Know your audience(a), refine your story & pitch accordingly.

For more information on the arts & rural revitalization see our recent publication, [The Arts & Rural Revitalization: 10 Communities Where Culture Matters](#). Or visit our website.

<https://www.bcruralcentre.org/focus/population-attraction/>