

Waterville Creates!:

Greater than the Sum of Its Arts

by Kerill O'Neill and Nate Rudy

INNOVATION AND THE HUMANITIES

Despite unique challenges of climate and remote location, we are drawn to Maine by its spacious and picturesque landscapes, the bounty of the harvest and our industrial heritage, the path of the rivers, the pull of family, meaningful social and economic pursuits, and even tiny amenities such as the illuminating, slanted light from the low-hanging winter sun. Many of these same qualities have been captured in art and celebrated in writing traditions for generations. Mainers know that innovation and hard work are essential virtues for survival in the sometimes harsh, cold place we call home. In more prosperous times, we have learned to cautiously reinvest for future growth, and in leaner times communities provide for those most in need. As we seek to become pioneers of a prosperous new Maine economy, innovative municipalities and local leaders are working to form a culture and environment that is attractive to investment from entrepreneurs and knowledge workers in the creative arts and those who seek the rugged and vital frontier spirit embodied by LL Bean boots, lobster boats, and lighthouses. As stewards of the state's burgeoning creative economy, we share a drive to foster regenerative and sustainable local economies and communities for businesses, artists, and families.

Maine's current economic development model focuses on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) as the key to the state's economic future. What's lost in the clearly important STEM education initiative is an explicit statement that the creative mind—the artful mind—lies at the center of these disciplines. Creative communities have informally embraced the study of art as the essence of a STEAM-based model for durable long-term economies as well as the core curriculum for immediate educational and youth outreach programming. The essence of all of the STEAM disciplines is human creativity and the discoveries of past generations, both of which are celebrated by the humanities. A new local arts initiative, Waterville Creates!, seeks to exemplify the roles of the arts and humanities in people's daily

lives. It straddles the imaginary line between artistic and economic creativity to question the false choice between community and economic development and the unnatural bifurcation of business interests versus essential community investments that has slowed and stymied conversations about Maine's economic future.

WATERVILLE CREATES!

The Waterville Creates! partnership exists to uphold and exemplify the artistic, creative, and cultural energies that enhance and strengthen the city. At the heart of this initiative is a desire to promote Waterville as a major arts destination for Maine residents and visitors to the state. Through Waterville Creates!, the city's largest arts and cultural entities—Common Street Arts gallery and studio, the Maine Film Center and Railroad Square Cinema, the Waterville Public Library, Revitalizing the Energy in Maine (REM), the Waterville Opera House, the Colby College Museum of Art, and the Waterville Main Street program—have committed to increased collaboration. Waterville Creates! acts as the coordinating entity for arts programming and cultural collaborations that will foster greater public awareness of and support for a robust creative economy in Waterville. It also serves as an advocate for Waterville as the city builds recognition as a destination for art, culture, and innovation in Maine. The mission outcomes of Waterville Creates! include meaningful, inclusive, and emotionally intelligent marketing messages to inspire creators, innovators, entrepreneurs, and small business owners to become part of an engaged and aesthetically centered community.

Each of the Waterville Creates! partner institutions offers unique strengths, and each has made substantial investments in programming and infrastructure within the last five years. The Waterville Public Library underwent a \$3 million renovation and expansion project in 2011, highlighting the fine architectural features of the original 1905 Carnegie-funded structure while also adding vital space and modern amenities to promote creativity, discovery, and learning. New library programs

and services include a business and career center, an art gallery for local fine and craft artists, a local history/genealogy room, computer labs, STEAM education programming for youth, and permanent exhibits of natural history as well as Maine artists.

In 2012 the Waterville Opera House underwent its own \$5 million renovation, preserving its historical integrity while bringing the 110-year-old facility up to date with new sound and light systems, seats, dressing rooms, and other amenities resulting in higher-quality productions and a more pleasurable experience for performers and audience members alike. The Opera House is now an 810-seat architectural treasure that welcomes over 30,000 visitors every year. That so much of the fund-raising for the library and the Opera House was driven by local support is a measure of Waterville citizens' commitment to the humanities and performing arts.

In December 2012, the Maine Film Center purchased Railroad Square Cinema and subsequently renovated and expanded the lobby to establish a gallery space for local art exhibitions, thereby greatly expanding the opportunities for additional film and arts programming, ensuring its mission to enrich, entertain, and educate people through film and art, and claiming a permanent home for the Maine International Film Festival (MIFF). The film festival draws an average of more than 8,500 people to its annual 10-day celebration of American independent and international cinema. In a 2011 economic impact study, the Maine Arts Commission estimated that MIFF generated over \$750,000 for the region, and the festival has grown significantly since then.

The Colby College Museum of Art opened the Alfond-Lunder Family Pavilion in 2013 to enhance an already substantial museum by adding a light-filled entrance, a gracious lobby, and an additional 10,000 square feet of exhibition space. The Colby Museum, now the largest art museum in the state of Maine, serves as a primary curricular resource for Colby students and faculty and provides a world-class asset for community members and national and international audiences. The media attention generated by this expansion pushed the annual number of museum visitors to 50,000 in 2014.

To enhance local arts education and outreach efforts, the Waterville Main Street program received crucial early funding from a Maine Arts Commission's Creative Communities = Economic Development grant in 2012 to start the Common Street Arts (CSA) project. Waterville Main Street, a locally funded organization devoted to promoting grassroots economic development

of the downtown area, recognized that the city has world-class arts offerings through the Colby Museum, Maine Film Center, and Waterville Opera House. Now, through CSA, it seeks to bring together art-seeking visitors, art-loving customers, and art-making sellers in a welcoming environment at the center of downtown Waterville. The CSA program offers studio art and gallery space to educators and artists. It emphasizes collaboration around major arts events held in and around the city including MIFF, art exhibitions at the Opera House and Colby Museum, and the Maine Open Juried Art Show, held at the Waterville Public Library and sponsored by Waterville Main Street and the Waterville Area Art Society.

Alongside the community-building efforts that went into envisioning and realizing the CSA project came recognition that expanding and revitalizing each individual component of the arts and culture landscape would open venues for everyone in Waterville to participate in an aesthetically centered civic and cultural life. The art community's decision to form a collaborative consortium, Waterville Creates!, signifies a deep and lasting commitment to that goal and inspires confidence that these gains in community arts assets will be carefully stewarded for the future. By working toward a shared vision, combining resources, and planning for efficient use of all their assets, Waterville Creates! will make the city even greater than the sum of its *arts*.

CREATIVITY AS AN ECONOMIC DRIVER AND SOCIAL CHANGE AGENT

The idea of using arts and culture to engage a community and contribute to economic growth and development has an impressive record of success across America, from Roanoke, Virginia, to the Hyde Park neighborhood in Chicago, to Bangor, Maine. In Bangor, the Waterfront Concerts Series generated around \$30 million of revenue in just the first three years and has spurred real estate and tourism investment including several hotels and a conference center (*Bangor Daily News*, January 14, 2013). In Virginia, the Roanoke Arts Commission reports that in 2012, arts and culture added \$24 million to the local economy (Roanoke Arts Commission 2014). Roanoke now hosts a yearly CityWorks(X)po conference to convene activists, policymakers, artists, and political leaders around the message of Big Ideas for Small Cities (*New York Times*, July 24, 2012).

Here in Waterville, Colby College's recently inaugurated president, David Greene, hopes to play a significant role in rejuvenating the city's downtown, as he did in the 53rd Street renovation in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood. From the first day on the job at Colby, Greene has made clear his desire to have the city and college work together on economic and cultural projects that will make Waterville a more vibrant and attractive place for future collaborations and creative spaces (*Morning Sentinel*, July 6, 2014). Moreover, Colby's two-year-old Center for the Arts and Humanities has already been partnering with the Maine Film Center, CSA, and other Waterville arts institutions to sponsor

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screenings in the Opera House, musical performances and art shows in the CSA gallery, and student engagement in arts and humanities lab classes that benefit both the city and the college. These labs position Colby students to, for example, research Waterville history, work with local fourth-graders, or document musical traditions of the various ethnic and racial identities that make up the rich tapestry of Maine's soundscape. The center has now embraced the opportunity to collaborate with Waterville Creates! A similarly supportive attitude emanates from Thomas College and Kennebec Valley Community College, both of which are located in greater Waterville.

The arts, and the celebration of human discovery they represent, act as an axis for the flow of energy in a healthy community and as a guidepost for policy making. Community development organizations such as the state's Main Street programs and the academic centers around Maine have embraced a people-centered outreach model that includes family friendliness, age and gender diversity, and a vital citizenry as part of the marketing message, as well as profiles of local and family-owned businesses that have grown here and made investments in a prosperous local economy.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The humanities identify the role of downtowns as a place that gives structure and orientation to humankind, a place where civilization flourishes and around which a society forms. Two roads meet at a crossroads, and at that meeting grows a downtown. Perhaps on one corner rises a place of business; on another a house of worship; on the third a public gathering place; and on the last, a bank. Around this hub forms a neighborhood of houses, other businesses, retail shops, warehouses, artist studios, civic forums, and restaurants. The neighborhoods that eventually surround that downtown feed it and are nurtured by it. To be part of an evolving gathering of people and interests is the essence of human experience, and the subject of the humanities as a discipline.

Humanistic models of community economic development embrace urban infill and reuse development strategies over new construction, thus reinforcing the value of existing places and people, reusing and renewing these valuable resources as any good Yankee might have done throughout Maine's history. Aesthetically envisioned urban settings provide context for otherwise-unused open spaces, thereby giving developers an incentive to invest in existing buildings, preserving continuity, history, and a sense of permanence for downtown residents. Initiatives such as Waterville Creates! seek to enliven these downtown spaces with music, dance, art, family-oriented civic life, and educational opportunities. The humanities provide the vocabulary that is used to define shared values, a common vision, and compelling marketing messages that are not only effective, but true to who we are as a people. Furthermore, the humanities lead to investment of money, time, and passion from members of the community and to newcomers eager to realize a vision for the future. The humanities are at the core of this shared vision in an aesthetically tuned civic life.

As for the future, the forces at work shaping Maine's economy will tend to drive people toward urban centers, toward the coast, and toward each other in denser, older communities. Leading businesses and organizations have made major investments in mid- and central Maine, including a \$306 million state-of-the-art hospital in Augusta and many millions in public and private sector investments in manufacturing, high-tech businesses, and infrastructure. To their credit, many of the same visionaries behind these investments also serve on the Waterville Creates! board of directors and on the boards

of local and state arts, community, and economic development nonprofits. Maine's charitable organizations and the partner organizations themselves have also taken on the challenge of helping us to find a way forward. The Unity Foundation has played a critical role in bringing together the different arts institutions in Waterville, moderating a substantive dialogue, and offering guidance and experienced mentorship to Waterville Creates! A combination of private foundations, the City of Waterville, and two local hospitals—Inland Hospital and Maine General Medical Center—also saw the potential of this fledgling organization to benefit the city and the region. These organizations provided generous start-up funds that have allowed Waterville Creates! to design a coordinated marketing program that celebrates the arts as one of the city's key assets.

AFTERWARD

Imagine the heart of Waterville bustling with people walking down Main Street to catch the bus to Thomas College for an entrepreneurial symposium and Pecha Kucha presentation. Some out-of-town visitors have spent the afternoon touring contemporary and American art exhibitions at the Colby Museum. A father is picking up his kids from a pottery class at Common Street Arts while a drum circle forms on the amphitheatre in Castonguay Square. Another group has just emerged from the public library where a poetry reading finished a few minutes earlier. Now many people are heading to one of the nearby cafes to get a snack and a coffee. Other visitors are trying to squeeze in some shopping before an early dinner in one of several fine restaurants downtown. The pottery class father meets his partner in the Square, who is emerging from her office in the downtown business incubator. Together they will enjoy an early food truck meal with the kids, and play in the Head of Falls riverfront park. Later the couple will leave the kids at home with the sitter and see a theatrical performance in the Opera House. Not everyone is quite so rushed, however—they may be going to a later movie at Railroad Square, or catching a band at the venue down the street. They will have time for a drink and a lingering chat with work friends over a meal. In other words: Maine: the way life should be.

This picture of downtown Waterville resonates because the process of “artification” is already underway—many key elements are in place, and recent developments have transformed this central Maine city. Speaking

about the role of humanism in modern life, sociologist and historian Richard Sennet said, “looking back to the origins of [humanism] is not an exercise in nostalgia; it is rather to remind us that we are engaged in a project, still in process, a humanism yet to be realized, of making social experience more open, engaging, and layered” (2011: 30). The arts and humanities provide the venue, the language, and the history that contextualize this project, and it is only through participation from all of these members of the community—artists, patrons, students, policymakers, developers, and government—that a lasting, authentic, and regenerative solution will be reached and sustained in Maine. 🐘

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