

The Arts are big business in Beaufort County... and getting bigger.

By Mark Shaffer 

Some years ago when this reporter was working in a small town in the midlands of South Carolina, the city leaders decided to commission a study on just how to go about attracting industry to the area. Faced with tough economic times and an industrial park that was more park than industrial, they wanted to know what top companies and their employees most valued when considering a move to a new area. As the research was compiled there was much discussion and conjecture about what might top the list. Things like infrastructure, the local school system, airport and interstate access were heavily favored. But when the high-priced consulting firm finally released the finished result, they were all stunned at what topped the list: Quality of Life. To complicate and confuse things further, this engendered an entire sub-category with yet another unforeseen heading at the top of the list: The Arts.



Twenty years later in an American age which can at best be described as economically challenging, the arts have emerged as a major – and perhaps more importantly – growing economic force, a fact the Arts Council of Beaufort County fully intends to develop as it enters what Executive Director J.W. Rone hopes will be a new Golden Age of the arts in the Lowcountry. “We’re constantly reaching out and trying to find ways to make people see this and see the value of the arts in the community,” says Rone. Part of Rone’s optimism is built on two things, the ACBC’s huge new space in Beaufort Town Center and a new regional economic impact study with some hefty numbers attached.

A recent national study puts the total domestic economic impact of the nonprofit arts and culture industry at more than 166 billion dollars per year. Last year that included a growth factor of at least 12 percent. A local independent study commissioned by the ACBC and the Beaufort Regional Chamber of Commerce indicates Beaufort County’s slice of that pie is a whopping \$250 million per year.

Growth in the regional arts scene is mirrored by the ACBC’s own need for space. As the 2400 square feet at the 1111 Boundary Street facility were pushed to the limit, the search was on for a new home. The town of Port Royal hoped to woo the Council with the Shed, a refitted warehouse in the heart of the community. Ultimately, the project seemed impractical and costly. Enter 303 Associates and local developer, Dick Stewart.

“He understands the value [of the arts] and I appreciate his vision in the community as a developer and how he takes pride and care in putting together the things that he does,” explains Rone.



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