

EDITORIAL | FUNDING THE ARTS

Dollars make sense

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Not many investments return \$5 for every \$1 put up - at least, not many legal investments.

That eye-popping \$5-to-\$1 calculation comes from a new study of the impact of arts and cultural groups on the economy in Philadelphia and its Pennsylvania suburbs.

Commissioned by the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, the study shows that local governments see a five-fold return in tax revenues for each \$1 of support to arts groups. Every dollar in state aid to the arts returns \$2.50 to Harrisburg.

Given the chance to reap such handsome returns while boosting a key asset to the region, state and local government officials should be more bullish than they are on the funding of arts and culture.

But an earlier study from the cultural alliance showed that the region lagged well behind others in both government and corporate support for the arts. In fact, less than two cents of every dollar invested in the cultural sector came from these sources.

The cultural alliance study released on Monday should jump-start a discussion with local and state elected officials on a long-simmering issue. That is, how can this region - like Pittsburgh, Denver and others - create a robust and stable funding source for its cultural assets, including its cutting-edge science museums and the Philadelphia Zoo?

This should be a conversation about building on success. All told, spending on arts and cultural programs generates \$1.3 billion for the region, including 40,000 jobs in the city and suburbs, and \$158.5 million in local and state taxes annually, the cultural alliance study said.

The other side the ledger, of course, shows that many arts and culture groups in the Philadelphia area are just squeaking by on what revenue they generate from ticket sales. So without public funding, much of the region's cultural energy could be sapped.

It's good that both mayoral candidates pledge to boost the city's cultural fund. Democrat Michael Nutter hopes to grow the \$2.1 million fund by \$1 million within a year of taking office, and then double that total by the end of his first term.

That's roughly 10 percent of the \$60 million that the cultural alliance estimates is needed for the region, so it would be a substantial demonstration of the city's leadership on funding the arts. But it's only a start.

As much as the idea of raising taxes gives elected officials the jitters, opinion polling by Temple University shows that more than half of Philadelphia-area residents would back higher taxes for arts and cultural organizations.

Good to hear, also, that a House leader, State Rep. Josh Shapiro (D., Montgomery County), is crafting legislation that would tap state and county funds for a cultural fund administered by officials for the five local counties.

The cultural alliance study shows that it makes financial sense to invest more heavily in culture. It's long past time to figure out how state and local governments can do more to get in on a good thing.