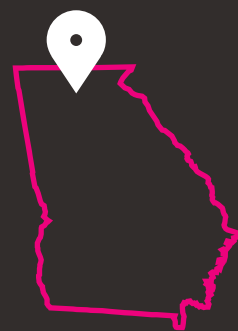


LEVERAGING PUBLIC
INVESTMENT IN THE ARTS

The Role of Arts-based Economic
Development Strategies in
Georgia Communities

BLUE RIDGE



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The Artistic Rise of Blue Ridge

For as long as anyone can remember, the outdoor majesty of Blue Ridge has beckoned people to escape from hectic everyday life. Vacationers and weekenders alike have been drawn to its picturesque mountains, National Forest and lakes and streams.

Downtown was another story. Twenty years ago, only a handful of businesses occupied buildings; the rest of the town was a mix of empty shops and plywood storefronts. While Blue Ridge offered breathtaking views, downtown didn't have much for visitors to see or do.

Bo Chance exemplifies how all of that changed. He'd been coming to Blue Ridge for several years after his parents had retired in the area. Tired of the frenetic pace of traveling with his job as a software developer and the congestion of Atlanta, he and his wife decided to pull up stakes and move to Blue Ridge in 1995. They also bought and renovated a building downtown, opening it as High Country Art and Antiques.

When Bo Chance looked at the city's core, he saw opportunity. "And I wasn't alone," Chance says. "There were about five of us who took a leap of faith at that point. It was really a collective, unorganized effort."

Around the time Bo Chance and others decided to open a few businesses downtown, other efforts were being made to draw more people to the area. In 1996, Fannin County approved a hotel/lodging tax to support and promote tourism.

A separate grassroots effort proved just as important. In 1998, a group of citizens from Blue Ridge and McCaysville approached the Georgia Northeastern Railroad about running a train between the two cities, starting and ending from a depot in downtown Blue Ridge. The railroad agreed, and that train became a reality.

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– Nichole Potzauf, Executive Director,
Blue Ridge Mountains Arts Association

“The Blue Ridge Scenic Railway was the catalyst for development of downtown Blue Ridge,” says Jan Hackett, president of the Fannin County Chamber of Commerce, “along with the increase in destination tourism stimulated by the Chamber’s promotional efforts.” Hackett estimates the train now brings in about 40,000 tourists a year.

To demonstrate how much the area has grown, in 2002, the county collected \$91,000 from the hotel/motel tax. In 2013, the number skyrocketed to \$1 million. The Chamber now receives 5 percent of the tax collected for marketing efforts, which includes promoting all of the arts venues.

Allure of The Arts

The attraction of new visitors to Blue Ridge sparked new enterprise in the arts. In 1998, a local writer worked with the well-established Blue Ridge Mountains Arts Association (BRMAA) to bring a regional writers’ workshop to town, a now-annual weekend of guest speakers, work sessions and networking events. The Blue Ridge Community Theatre, which began as an entity of BRMAA before growing into its own nonprofit, put on plays in public school cafeterias, open air parks or anywhere else they could find a space.

In 2004, BRMAA found its first permanent home when the county suggested it take over the historic Fannin County Courthouse, which had been vacant for years. Not only was it a beneficial way to make use of a dormant building, but it also allowed The Art Center to expand its programs and have a presence downtown. Fannin County paid for a new roof on the building, and through the years has provided matching funds for renovations and structural improvements. The county also supports the BRMAA by leasing the organization the building in exchange for maintenance and upkeep, and paying the salary of the executive director and another staff person.



From these efforts sprung the creative community that Blue Ridge is today, and its success is nothing short of remarkable. BRMAA now has more than 1,000 members. The Art Center houses studios, a pottery and kiln studio, five artistic guilds, five galleries and an artist-in-residence program. It also sells art supplies. Classes in visual arts, music and dance - for all ages and skill levels - draw people from Tennessee and North Carolina, and all over Georgia.

BRMAA also co-sponsors the Fall Plein Air Festival, part of the International Plein Air Painters Artists Organization. Each year, 40 or more artists venture to Blue Ridge to render its outdoor beauty on canvas. "Nature is our biggest asset," says Nichole Potzauf, executive director of the Art Center, "and nature is also the defining factor of Plein Air."

“ It’s a different retail customer here every day of the week. We have some locals and lots of tourists. Blue Ridge is one of a kind. I couldn’t have this business in Atlanta. ”

- Lynn Kemp, Owner, Gawdy Bobbles and Canoe Bags

As with BRMAA, the acquisition of its own building in 2009 spurred the Blue Ridge Community Theatre to new attendance and acclaim. "The permanent location gave us credibility," says Mike Lacy, who has been involved with the theatre since 2001 and now serves as a vice president of its board. "We're proud of what we've created; it's been a group accomplishment." He says the theatre performs a major production almost every month, along with providing acting classes and summer camps for children. The theatre has also expanded into live music performances. "We were looking for a way to fill those 'dark weekends' between productions," says Lacy. "We've invested in new sound and video equipment to draw bigger talent as well as a more regional audience."

Other developments have added fuel to the growth of the arts in Blue Ridge. Artists from around the country participate in a national juried art show staged by the Southern Appalachian Artist Guild, which is housed at The Art Center. Their works draw crowds to the gallery housed in the former courtroom in the Center during the fall. Arts in the Park, a small festival started back in 1976, and now supported by the Center, has grown into two events, one in the spring and one in fall, attracting hundreds of artists and vendors and thousands of visitors.

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Downtown: Home To Creative Businesses

The entrepreneurship of business owners - led by the efforts of Bo Chance - has played an equally pivotal role in Blue Ridge's development. Chance sold his High Country Arts and Antiques business several years after he opened it, but kept the building. Over the years, he acquired 19 other buildings downtown, forging a new career in property management.

He has always had a clear idea of what he wanted Blue Ridge to be and that philosophy and practice set him apart from typical landlords. He carefully curates tenants, making sure each is a good fit for the area – and has the potential to succeed.

“If a business owner requires a lot of foot traffic, I’m not going to rent them a building that is off the beaten path,” he says as an example. “I also won’t locate a competitor near an existing business if I can help it. My philosophy is ‘your success is my success.’ I want each business to thrive.”

One of those thriving businesses is owned by Lynn Kemp, another Atlanta transplant and former Macy’s buyer who moved to Blue Ridge with her husband and started making her own jewelry. In 2011, Kemp rented a building from Chance and opened Gawdy Bobbles, a design studio and shop that sells handcrafted jewelry with an artistic flair, made on the premises. “It’s a different retail customer here every day of the week,” she says. “We have some locals and lots of tourists. Blue Ridge is one of a kind. I couldn’t have this business in Atlanta.”



“A lot of people come up here to Blue Ridge to reinvent themselves. It’s been exciting to see that over and over again. The creative energy just draws people to this town.”

– Mike Lacy, Owner, Multitudes Gallery



Kemp’s success led her to buy her own building and open a second business, Canoe Bags, last year. The handbags are designed by Kemp and hand-sewn locally.

“We have an environment that’s conducive to someone who is successful at selling a form of art,” says Chance. Indeed, downtown Blue Ridge is now home to an array of crafted and creative enterprises. Bill and Shannen Oyster own Oyster Fly Rods, in which they not only custom make and sell hand-crafted bamboo rods with shotgun-steel engraving, but teach others how to do it in their six-day classes. Fly fishing enthusiasts come in from all over the country to create their own custom made rods in these classes, which usually fill up six months in advance.

Mike Lacy of the Blue Ridge Community Theatre also owns Multitudes Gallery, which features hand-blown glass and other fine art.

A stroll along the streets of downtown Blue Ridge turns up many other examples – artistic businesses and shops that reflect a love for the aesthetic as well as a second life for their proprietors. And visitors would be hard-pressed to find an empty storefront. Chance says occupancy is near 100 percent.

“A lot of people come up here to Blue Ridge to reinvent themselves,” says Lacy. “It’s been exciting to see that over and over again. The creative energy just draws people to this town.”