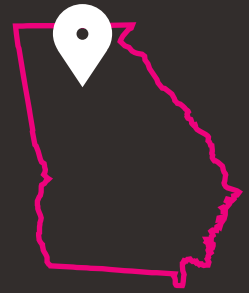


**LEVERAGING PUBLIC
INVESTMENT IN THE ARTS**

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

DULUTH



A division of the
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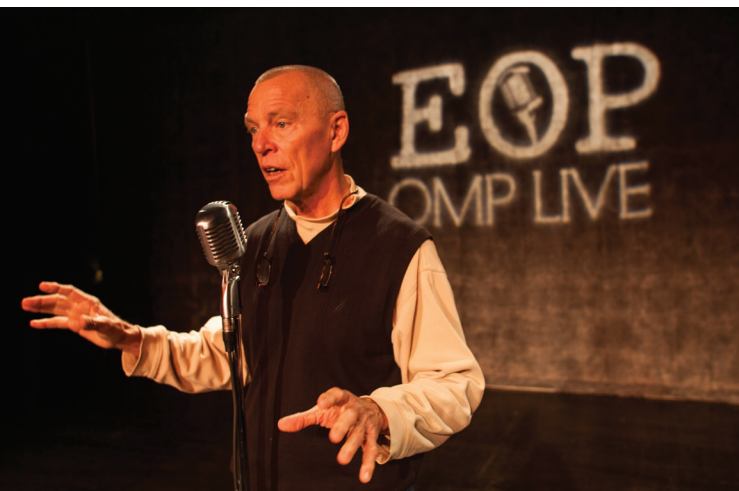


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Duluth: Music as a Magnet, Arts as an Attraction

When Eddie Owen first stepped inside the Red Clay Theatre in downtown Duluth, he had a sense he was in the right place at the right time.

“A friend told me I needed to go up there and look at this theatre, but I wasn’t even sure how to get to Duluth,” Owen recalls. “I was blown away by the set up, by the incredible sound and lighting equipment and by the theatre itself. I saw its potential, and my mind started clicking.”



It was the fall of 2011. Owen, the former proprietor of the famed Eddie’s Attic music club in Decatur – and a man who has been credited with helping to launch the careers of musicians John Mayer, the Indigo Girls and others – was looking to launch a new enterprise.

But the Red Clay Theatre represented more than a next act in Owen’s career. The 260-seat venue was the centerpiece of a new vision and strategy for bringing people to the city, one built around the concept of “arts infrastructure.” Today, the final pieces of that strategy are being put in place, and there’s good reason to believe that downtown Duluth soon will be teeming with visitor activity, day and night.

“We knew that making Duluth an attractive place to live, work and visit was key. And that starts with the arts.”

– Nancy Harris, Mayor, Duluth

It’s been a long comeback for a city that began losing downtown businesses 30 years ago, after the 1984 opening of Gwinnett Place Mall a few miles away.

“The leadership is the most critical component of this whole formula. If you don’t have leadership with a vision, you won’t get anywhere.”

– Chris McGahee, Economic Development Manager, Duluth

Since then, Duluth has taken a series of steps to revitalize its core. In 1999, Taylor Park, was built on a small plot of land next to City Hall. The next year, the city rolled out Duluth Town Green, an expanse of community lawn that has since added an amphitheater. Both brought more people downtown, but the district still lacked the regular foot traffic that sustains businesses and restaurants, especially in the evenings.

After Nancy Harris became mayor in 2007, the city embarked on a new effort to create an infrastructure that would attract businesses and people to downtown Duluth. “We knew that making Duluth an attractive place to live, work and visit was key,” says Harris. “And that starts with the arts.”

“It became clear that the city needed to take an active role in creating an infrastructure in the arts just as it does with water, sewer and roads,” says Chris McGahee, the city’s economic development manager. “It’s the government’s responsibility to make that infrastructure attractive so we can attract chef-driven restaurants and more shops and art galleries.”

With the local government taking that lead, and persevering through the criticism and doubts, the city



embarked on a plan to turn the downtown around using the arts.

Bringing Live Music Downtown

The lynchpin in those efforts was the Red Clay Theatre. Once a bank and later a church, the theatre was acquired as city property in 2004 and leased to various theatrical outfits that staged Broadway-style performances. The last of the troupes left town in 2011, and city leaders had to figure out a new plan for the theatre. Their solution: live music.

Eddie Owen's interest happened to be a stroke of good fortune. In October 2011, Owen signed a lease agreement with the city of Duluth and put on the first show that December. Despite featuring national acts and emerging artists alike, the theatre had uneven attendance, a reflection of what Owen terms as the "feast or famine" nature of concert going.

But the city wouldn't give up on Red Clay – far from it. The model was changed from a lease agreement to a venue operation contract to support Eddie Owen's vision. In fall 2013, city leaders brought in an outside consultant to study the theatre's business model and potential impact on the economy.

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– Nancy Harris, Mayor, Duluth

The findings were encouraging. The study showed that the venue had brought in 50,000 nighttime visitors after 7 p.m., most of whom would not have otherwise

visited Duluth. It also found that downtown stores had an increase in sales on the nights the Red Clay featured a concert.

“The local pizza place made an extra \$400 in cash when people came to the theatre,” says McGahee. “The [study] determined there was a direct correlation with the city's investment in this space and economic return. It also made us appealing to potential business owners looking to invest in Duluth.”

“Red Clay creates the ambience we were looking for,” agrees Mayor Harris. “The study really changed our thinking. It was independent validation of our plan, and it was a fabulous resource that convinced the council to step up to the table and support the venue.”

As a sign of that support, the city signed a five-year contract with Owen in August 2014. Two months later, Owen extended the brand, changing the name to Red Clay Music Foundry after he formed a partnership with the Gwinnett School of Music. The basement of the Foundry has been converted into a music school, offering private instruction in an array of instruments as well as voice lessons, songwriting workshops and training on how to use the sound and lighting boards.

Downtown as a Destination

The city has worked to give people other reasons to come downtown. On “Thirsty Thursdays,” shops and restaurants offer specials and discounts to patrons. In conjunction with the Summer Concert Series held on the Duluth Town Green, “Food Truck Fridays” offer lots of food choices from local Atlanta vendors from June through October. Art walks – with artists and live music – take place during the summer. During special events, the alcohol ordinances are relaxed to allow open containers in the downtown area.



“We want to be the city in Gwinnett where people come for performances and to be entertained,” says Harris. “Red Clay and the Town Green are part of that.”

But the arts infrastructure doesn’t end with music. Other arts experiences factor prominently into the city’s plans to strengthen community and make downtown a destination point.

One example is the Duluth Public Arts Commission (PAC), formed by the city council in 2013 with the purpose to support performing arts, promote public art projects and encourage developers to install public art in the city. The commission’s first significant task is to create a public art master plan. The Commission is collecting input from the community to shape short- and long-term goals for public art. “We are looking to you to help fill Duluth’s canvas with art that tells our one-of-a-kind story to the region and the world,” invites a special website set up for the effort.

“We want to create an identity that’s in line with the mayor’s goal of Duluth being a destination,” says G.G. Getz, director of the PAC. “One of the things we are committed to is functional art – such as bike racks and crosswalks – so you feel you are in a unique, wonderful place.”

In 2014, the city unveiled “Ascension,” a three-ton sculpture that was commissioned and donated to the city by AGCO Corporation, a global manufacturer of agricultural equipment headquartered in Duluth. It’s located at a roundabout on McClure Bridge Road and faces the heart of the city.

The Duluth Fine Arts League, a nonprofit organization established in 2008, sponsors Art Walks, fundraisers and other events and activities that support all forms of art.

Every September, the Duluth Fall Festival takes over the Town Green with vendors selling arts, crafts and food, as well as entertainment and carnival type activities. The Festival, started in 1983, now brings in hundreds of vendors and thousands of visitors to Duluth. “Everything we earn goes back into improving downtown Duluth,” says Kathryn Willis, Festival chairman and one of the founding members.

She adds that \$2 million has been raised since the event’s first days, which helped build Taylor Park, the festival center and a courtyard on Town Green, and supported landscaping all around the city.

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Adding to Duluth’s arts infrastructure is the Hudgens Arts Center, located near Gwinnett Arena. The Center offers exhibits and art classes for all ages and can be rented for private events. While the city does not have a direct relationship with the Center, Mayor Harris sits on the Hudgens board, and the two entities are currently working on a joint art installation in downtown Duluth.

In addition, Duluth’s first fine arts gallery, 2 Smith Gallery, opened last year in downtown, and features original artwork from regional and national artists. The owners also offer art classes.

Arts Brings Results

While a steady flow of day-and-night downtown traffic is still a bit more pending than present, Duluth is clearly seeing the results of its efforts. Case in point: In January, two investors purchased a pair of buildings downtown solely because Eddie Owen was there. The plan is to convert the spaces into chef-concept restaurants.

Two big residential developments are in the works, which will support downtown activities. Fuqua Development is planning a mixed-use complex close to downtown that will have 330 apartments. The city is assembling downtown properties to create the opportunity for a planned residential community. Developers believe the city’s commitment and investment in providing an appealing cultural life is conducive to adding housing near downtown. As the plan all starts to come together, McGahee credits the mayor.

“The leadership is the most critical component of this whole formula,” says McGahee. “If you don’t have leadership with a vision, you won’t get anywhere. Nancy’s drive to make art a part of the daily life in Duluth has been the key to making this work. She has had the perseverance and the courage to listen to naysayers and take criticism, but still stay true to the vision.”