

LEVERAGING PUBLIC  
INVESTMENT IN THE ARTS

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

# THOMASVILLE



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## Thomasville: All in for the Arts

When cities roll out new way-finding signs, leaders don't usually consult with local arts organizations about how the signs should look. Then again, many cities don't have the kind of relationship that Thomasville has with its largest creative enterprise, the nonprofit Thomasville Center for the Arts (TCA).



"Signs are not art," acknowledges city Mayor Max Beverly, "but the Center for the Arts is a great resource for us. We know that what we do with the sign ordinance will have a visual impact on the entire community. So bringing in people with artistic talent is logical."

Effective sign design is just a small way Thomasville has leveraged the arts in recent years. The southwest Georgia municipality, famous as a quail hunting

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destination, has been working to develop a vibrant, creative community.

"When you look at economic development, you've really got to differentiate yourself as a community to attract outside businesses," Mayor Beverly says. "The arts is one of the things that we use to distinguish ourselves from the cities we're up against when a company is looking to move to a certain area." It's an effort that's propelled by a close working partnership among government, schools, business owners and arts organizations – most notably, TCA.

### Connecting With Community And Schools

The TCA dates back to 1986, when a group of artists sought to create a place that would enrich the quality of life for all ages through the arts. The Thomasville community came together and raised money to renovate the old East Side Elementary School into the Thomasville Cultural Center. For 25 years, the center operated as a place that offered art, theatre, dance and education. But while popular, it seemed to be missing a deeper connection to the community.

So in 2010, the Cultural Center's board brought in consultant Michele Arwood to lead a strategic planning effort. The first thing she did was to talk with the community. She met with donors, city officials and other stakeholders, asking them what they thought about the center and its future potential.

"Early on, the city was one of the stakeholders," Arwood says. "Consulting with them fostered the spirit of collaboration, as well as trust and mutual respect."

In 2011, the center rebranded and shifted its mission to make the arts more "community based" and changed its name to Thomasville Center for the Arts, reinforcing the idea of Thomasville being a physical nucleus for the arts.

"We basically started over and changed our focus externally in order to connect the community through the arts," says Arwood, who was hired as the new executive director that same year.

In the years since, TCA has added literary and applied arts programs, restructured youth education, and focused on connecting the community through festivals, which also generated revenue. Before the rebranding, TCA was a \$750,000 organization with a handful of programs.

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Today, it brings in close to \$1.3 million through 28 programs, according to Arwood. TCA also has “resident partners” such as the Thomasville Entertainment Foundation, South Georgia Ballet, the Thomasville Music Academy, and the Red Hills Players, an acting company. These groups and others lease space from the center, and offer lessons and classes to the public.

Forging stronger relationships with schools was another key aspect of TCA’s evolution. The center provides arts instruction to Scott Elementary School, located next door. Under a pilot program started two years ago, students come to the center throughout the day to learn visual arts, theatre, dance and music.

“It’s a wonderful partnership,” says Dr. Daniel Oldham, director of finance for Thomasville City Schools. “It allows us to offer quality arts instruction that these children may not otherwise get without duplicating efforts or breaking the bank.” He adds that the pilot program was so successful that talks are underway to expand and grow into other schools.

### Growing The Economy Through The Arts

The festivals TCA stages throughout the year not only bring residents into downtown but also attract people



from outside of Thomasville to visit. A good example is Flaunt!, an annual event that was originally called Summer Showcase.

The center changed the name to Flaunt!, moved the festival to September, took it outside and expanded it to include public art, music and other activities, all around a different theme every year. The 2014 festival celebrated “pop-up” art, and the event was much more than a theme. Unused storefronts along Jackson Street served as temporary homes to nearly two dozen creative businesses.

“It was astounding,” Arwood says. “Two or three of the buildings were sold with new businesses going in just by having the pop-up businesses, which is pretty remarkable for one block.”

One of those new endeavors was “Sturdy Brothers,” launched by local brothers Ben and Spencer Young. The pop-up shop, which featured handmade leather goods, was so successful, it took up permanent residence downtown in December 2013.

The Young brothers represent a changing demographic in Thomasville: a younger generation who either grew up in Thomasville and are coming back to raise families, or are settling here for what the small town has to offer. In 2009, Spencer Young and his wife Megan wanted to open a coffee shop, so they settled in Megan’s hometown of Thomasville. They were joined by partner Ed Millere, also a native. The trio opened Grassroots Coffee, an eclectic java shop on Broad Street. In 2013, they were able to buy a building and move across the street. That same year, he opened the other business with his brother.





“Seven young entrepreneurs have opened businesses here within the last several years,” says Karen Smith, Thomasville’s Main Street director. “When these people see a thriving, bustling downtown, they say, ‘this is where I want to be.’ The community embraces new ideas and supports new businesses.”

### Creative Redevelopment

While making plans to redevelop an underutilized area of historic downtown, the city, along with input from TCA, decided to designate a “creative district,” an area devoted to public art, galleries, and creative entrepreneurs such as Sturdy Brothers.

The city, in partnership with TCA, first pulled together a design charrette, a collaborative brainstorm session commonly used by architects and designers when planning a project. In March 2014, experts in economic development, landscape architecture and master planning, as well as community members, came together for a three-day meeting funded by the city, TCA and the Main Street program. From that meeting came a written plan that detailed everything the creative district could be.

“We first thought of it as an ‘arts district,’” Arwood says, “but due to input from the community during the charrette, we decided to target a more ‘creative’ group, including businesses like sign makers, landscape architects, illustrators and interior designers.”

The plan also calls for a 14-mile trail system that connects the city through all of its parks. A multi-use park will anchor the trail downtown, with a stage and lawn seating for outdoor performances — providing yet another reason for people to come downtown.

Another new development – independent of the creative district – is the old Rose’s department store, a run down building on the edge of downtown that the city now owns. Beverly says the city plans to make it

into a new events center and will work with TCA on the concept to maximize the potential of the project. With the collaboration of TCA, the creative district, the multi-use park and new businesses continuing to open up shop in Thomasville, Mayor Max Beverly is confident Thomasville is becoming a more attractive place to live, as well as a place where businesses want to come.

To demonstrate the strength of the arts in Thomasville, a copy of “Thom,” a magazine that TCA started publishing last year, is included in information packets to prospective companies and potential residents. Supported by corporate partners, the book-like publication features stories about the people and ideas shaping the creative life of the Thomasville community. “That magazine tells more of what Thomasville is than most brochures,” Beverly says.



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