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Missouri ranks 49th in arts funding

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Reporter

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That Missouri outspends California on the arts may come as a shock.

Compared to other states, though, the 49th-ranked Show-Me State doesn't show the arts much at 8 cents per person.

Missouri and California, which rings in at 6 cents, are the only two states with per capita spending in the single digits, according to a January study by the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies.

"The arts just have not risen to the top," said St. Joseph resident Charles Salanski, who explained the findings recently to fellow Missouri Arts Council members.

It's not that Missourians don't appreciate a good opera or abstract sculpture.

Both St. Louis and Kansas City were among the top 30 cities with the most arts-related businesses, institutions and organizations, according to a 2005 study by Americans for the Arts.

Nonprofit arts in St. Joseph are an \$8.3 million industry, said Teresa Fankhauser, executive director of the Allied Arts Council, quoting a 2001 study by Americans for the Arts.

Yet, in spite of a state-funding program once praised as groundbreaking, arts organizations here say they're being choked.

The budget for the Missouri Arts Council, which distributes grants to art organizations across the state, has slipped from \$4 million to \$5 million annually in the 1990s to less than \$500,000 today.

That means local arts groups suffer, too.

Ms. Fankhauser said her staff has shrunk from five to three.

"We do our darnedest to keep our services at the same level, but let's be honest," she said.

A lack of funding prevents Allied Arts from handing out as many arts scholarships or bringing as many artists into local schools as it once did.

Trouble for the arts started with a budget crisis about four years ago, when then-Gov. Bob Holden redirected money from the state's cultural trust to the general revenue fund, said State Sen. Charlie Shields, R-St. Joseph.

Founded in 1993, the Missouri Cultural Trust was based on taxes from the wages of visiting professional entertainers and athletes. The beauty of the concept, Mr. Shields said, was how it avoided the perpetual battle between arts and public issues like mental health and safety.

"Unfortunately," Mr. Shields said, "we got thrown right back into that argument, and the arts lost."

Mr. Shields supports arts funding because he said aesthetic investments lead to economic development.

"It ultimately gets down to the arts are what make a community livable," Mr. Shields said. "And livable communities are important in terms of businesses looking to either expand or relocate."

Gov. Matt Blunt has recommended a \$2.7 million increase in arts funding for next year's budget.

And as long as Kansas City's pro sports teams don't move out of state, Mr. Shields has faith that the cultural trust will bounce back.

"I think we'll eventually get back there," Mr. Shields said.

Not everyone, however, is so optimistic about depending on the state.

Locally generated funds can help offset the hardships arts organizations face when state money disappears, which is why Mr. Salanski and Ms. Fankhauser hope St. Joseph voters say yes to the Buchanan County Cultural Heritage Tax on April 4.

Ms. Fankhauser said there is a parallel between the proposed tax and the visitor-tapping cultural trust. She said 31 percent of the people who attend local art events come from outside Buchanan County.

"They spend more money than the people who live in St. Joseph," she said.