

BOZEMAN DAILY CHRONICLE

TOP STORY

Music to Bozeman's ears: City's music scene impacts growth, economy



First came the Ellen, then the Rialto. Now, the ELM is the latest venue expected to ramp up the music scene in Bozeman.

With the 1,500-capacity concert hall slated to open in January next year, there's been much buzz about the impact it could have on Bozeman's growth and the economy. Its arrival also calls to attention how recently-renovated downtown theaters like the Ellen and the Rialto have helped revitalize downtown and shape its future.

The arts and cultural sector contributed over \$763.6 billion to the U.S. economy in 2015 — more than the agriculture, transportation, or warehousing sectors, according to U.S. government data released by the Bureau of Economic Analysis and the National Endowment for the Arts.

The study looked at a wide variety of areas within the arts, including broadcast, fine art, music and theater, with the arts in Montana contributing \$1.4 billion in value added to the economy and around 15,000 jobs.

In the past few years since the study was published, the concert scene in Bozeman has gained quite a bit of momentum.

After months of renovation, the Ellen Theatre was one of the first revitalized venues to come to downtown, reopening its doors in 2008. The theater is set to finish the last phase of the restoration project this summer by remodeling the building's exterior.

The Ellen has about 250 shows a year, with 75 to 100 of them being musicals or concerts, said John Ludin, executive director of the Ellen. And that number hasn't gone down since the Rialto set up shop across the street.

"Frankly, we've been busier since they opened" Ludin said.

Vacant since 2006, it took a while to get the Rialto up and running again. In 2010, Mary Kay Duffie signed a contract to purchase the building, but was [sued after failing to make promised payments](#). The Rialto was later [purchased in late 2015](#) by the investment group behind the Lark Hotel.

The building has a storied past, once a home to a post office, a farm equipment company and a peanut stand. The site's return to a concert hall signals an upsurge in live music in Bozeman.

Dalton Brink, artistic director at the Rialto, said it was hard for him to imagine staying in Bozeman when he moved here 10 years ago because of the lack of music venues. With the revitalization of the Rialto, that's changed.

As more people look at moving to Bozeman, he thinks having a music scene with national and international acts it will be a deciding factor for many.

“Most of the impact we’re going to have on the community is we’re going to be a catalyst for people wanting to move here,” he said.

Having the Rialto and Ellen downtown has also had an economic impact on nearby restaurants and bars. Ross Franklin, co-owner of Whistle Pig Korean, said he has to print out the Rialto’s schedule to put next to the restaurant’s schedule. On a weeknight when the Rialto has a show, he said his profits go up 50 percent.

Emily Hamburg, a bartender at Burger Bob’s, said that when there’s a Rialto show, she makes twice as much money. She said it’s also busier when the Ellen has shows.

A Missoula promoter expects the same to happen in Midtown. Logjam Presents, the same company behind Missoula’s Top Hat and Wilma Theater as well as the Kettlehouse amphitheater, broke ground on the ELM concert venue on Seventh Avenue and Short Street last month.

With Midtown being in an urban renewal district, meaning new developments are eligible for TIF funds, many new businesses have filed plans with the city to build in the area. Logjam owner Nick Checota said having a music venue is a plus for potential new business owners.

“As Midtown continues to develop, this type of venture is a great catalyst for that,” Checota said. “It starts to help people understand how they might be able to open a restaurant, brew pub or hotel in the area.”

Checota said Logjam chose to come to Bozeman because it’s a Montana-based company, and it made sense to expand somewhere else in Montana.

There seemed to be a need for a 1,500-capacity venue in Bozeman’s market, with the Rialto having a max capacity of around 450 people and the Brick Breeden holding around 8,000. He said Logjam will be in communication with the Rialto to make sure the two venues don’t host shows of the same genre on the same night, and he doesn’t expect the venues to be in competition with each other. For comparison, he said the Top Hat and the Wilma in Missoula have complemented one another, and it helps grow an artist from one venue to the next.

He said Logjam also chose to come to Bozeman because it saw a good number of ticket sales coming from the area. He pointed out that Logjam advertises in cities with direct flights to Missoula, and many people will come to Montana from other cities and make a weekend out of it. Seven to 10 percent of ticket sales come from buyers living more than 250 miles away, he said. Two to 3 percent of ticket sales come from Dallas alone.

With Bozeman having the busiest airport in the state with new direct flights all the time, it made sense to come here.

The ELM will hire 30 to 35 people to start with, Checota said, putting on about 90 shows a year, or an average of two shows a week. If attendance averages around 1,000 to 1,200 a night, that comes out to about 90,000 a year.

Amid all the hubbub surrounding larger venues taking off, though, there's a more underground music scene in Bozeman that's also growing.

Chrys Kirkwood, who's in local bands Panther Car and Wire Rider and has his finger in a lot of the live music that's going on around town, is the CEO, founder and booker for local DIY production company Lotus Eaters.

For a while, he said the local music scene has been centered in bars. With Lotus Eaters, which is gearing up to become a nonprofit, the goal has been to host more all-ages shows and get local music beyond the bar scene.

That part of local music isn't so much about making money, he said. It's about giving people a creative outlet and some exposure. He wants to push back against the idea that an artist's music is only good if it makes money, he said.

With new music venues popping up in Bozeman, Kirkwood said he's optimistic about the impact on local artists. More exposure to music culture is a good thing, he said, and it can help inspire people to create more. He isn't worried about it taking people away from local shows.

"I like the expression, 'With rising tides, all boats rise,'" he said.

