

My Passion: Oregon Cultural Trust tax credit must continue

Written by Peter MacMillan Booth *My Passion*
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Peter Booth, executive director of the Willamette Heritage Center at The Mill. Photographed Dec. 19, 2011. / Barbara Curtin | Statesman Journal

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It is exciting when something works — and for a decade, it has worked well. Oregon has enjoyed the benefits of the innovative state-wide Oregon Cultural Trust that encourages neighbors and friends to support culture.

This relatively young entity has awarded \$12.8 million in grants statewide since 2003. More important, it has inspired 21,000 Oregonians to invest over \$28 million in their community's arts and heritage.

I had the pleasure of witnessing the Trust's great work first-hand. While I was executive director of Mission Mill Museum and then the Willamette Heritage Center at The Mill in Salem, the Trust provided key support as our organization merged with the Marion County Historical Society and expanded our mission and focus. In addition to strategic grants, they provided advice and encouragement along the way.

However, Oregon culture is at a crossroads. The 2013 Oregon Legislature is currently considering the reauthorization of the 10-year-old tax credit that embodies the Oregon Cultural Trust.

The Trust has been a wonderful program that has helped build a stronger and healthier Oregon. It would be a serious blow if this tax credit reauthorization failed.

From the beginning, the unique tax credit incentive (which allows donors to match a gift to any of 1,300 participating cultural non-profits with a gift to the Trust, and then get the matching tax credit back) generated an unprecedented level of support for its budding permanent fund, grantmaking mechanism and partner non-profits. And the successes went up from there.

The Oregon Cultural Trust relies on partnerships that cross disciplines as well as geographic lines. The Trust works directly with five cultural partners: Oregon Arts Commission, Oregon State Historic Preservation Office, Oregon Humanities, Oregon Heritage Commission and Oregon Historical Society. In addition, the Trust reaches out to the entire state by supporting 36 county cultural and six tribal coalitions.

The benefits to our state are tremendous. From the Oregon Symphony to the Friends of Sumpter Valley Dredge, from the Oregon Shakespeare Festival to the Coos Art Museum, from Clatsop Community College to my beloved Willamette Heritage Center at The Mill.

Now Oregonians need to decide, in considering the re-authorization legislation, how important it is to promote culture in our community.

The first question to be answered is, “What is culture?”

To me, culture is the knowledge and creativity that authentically embodies a community — all its heritage, arts, music, literature, dance, preservation and more.

The second question could be, “Why does culture matter?”

It matters for:

- **Quality of life.** Culture captures the essence and values of the community. Six million people a year participate in a cultural experience in Oregon, much of that assisted in some way by the Trust.
- **Education.** Art and heritage instruction has declined recently. As a result, schools are turning to cultural institutions to be the caretakers and disseminators of this knowledge. Every year, over 500,000 students enjoy a cultural experience, much of it made possible in part by the Cultural Trust.
- **Economy.** In 2011 alone, \$8 billion was spent in Oregon by tourists, a 4.6 percent increase over the previous year. Tourism is a huge economic driver in our economy and culture is a key component in attracting visitors.
- **Community well-being.** The job of cultural institutions is to nurture the artistic and historic fabric of a society and encourage younger generations to learn about their community. Through understanding one’s heritage comes an understanding of who we are, where we come from and how to view our future. This knowledge is what will help us to make critical decisions for our future.

The Cultural Trust has raised our quality of life, enriched our education, helped spark our economy and contributed to our community’s well-being. For a decade, it has been a tremendous success; let us not let it sunset this year.

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