

MFA states its key role in economy

By Geoff Edgers, Globe Staff, 5/23/2002

With a rich collection of paintings and antiques, the Museum of Fine Arts has long been considered one of the country's most impressive cultural institutions. But an economic impact study to be released today backs up another argument its leaders have been making: The museum is not just a place for pretty pictures; it's also a moneymaking machine.

Among the findings: MFA attendance equals that for the Bruins and Celtics combined; it employs more workers in Boston than Stop & Shop, Faulkner Hospital, and a host of city corporations; and it creates enough direct business to pump \$221 million into the state. An estimated \$148 million more is generated by spinoff spending.

The report, prepared by Mt. Auburn Associates and the Economic Development Research Group, is meant to position the museum as it tries to raise \$425 million for its expansion. The study includes projected benefits from construction, including nearly 1,000 jobs a year. It predicts that new visitors will spend, on average, \$30 million a year starting in 2007, when the first phase of the expansion is complete.

"You can talk about social amenities until you're blue in the face but when you're asking for dollars, you've got to show dollars," said Patrick Rishe, a professor at Webster University in St. Louis who specializes in economic impact studies.

The MFA director, Malcolm Rogers, said that he hasn't made plans to visit Beacon Hill. But he intends to use the study with potential private donors. "We're seeking people to invest in that project and I think people want to know that there is a return on their investment," he said.

The study's authors used visitor surveys and the museum's books to make calculations. The report states that the MFA is often overlooked when the region's economy is examined. For example, when the Boston Redevelopment Authority compiled a report of the city's 66 largest employers, it listed hospitals, universities, and WGBH. It didn't include the MFA. With 1,351 employees, it would rank in the top half.

"Often people in positions of influence don't realize how much we contribute to the life of the community, not just the spiritual life of the community but also the economic life," Rogers said.

At the moment, it's doubtful that the study will bring more public support. The MFA gets less than 1/4 of one percent of its \$139 million annual budget from state and federal sources. That's considerably less than the nationwide average of 15.6 percent for art museums, according to the American Association of Museums.

Samuel R. Tyler, head of the Boston Municipal Research Bureau, a business-funded watchdog group, says the MFA study makes a case for increased funding from those sectors.

"It really is a message about how it's an important investment for Massachusetts and for Boston to basically provide public support because of the payback," he said.

Still, it's unlikely that more state money will be heading down Huntington Avenue anytime soon.

House Speaker Thomas M. Finneran, traditionally skeptical of economic impact studies, and Senate President Thomas F. Birmingham both declined comment on the study. State Senator Stanley Rosenberg, chairman of the Joint Committee on Education, Arts, and Humanities, said he was impressed by the report, but added: "It's hard to think about in the middle of a fiscal crisis."

Rosenberg, who says he's an advocate for the arts, said the study alone won't change the way cultural institutions are viewed. In the 1990s, while chairing the Ways and Means committee, Rosenberg said, he didn't get a single visit from a local arts institution leader.

"Out of sight, out of mind," he said. "If there's no one building the case for something that's viewed as marginal, then you're never going to move it from being marginal to being more serious."

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