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Arts communities generate 'wealth'

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Published: Saturday, January 28, 2012 1:07 AM CST

The DeSoto County arts community, like its sister regions across the state, is poised to reap financial reward from its creative exploits with an enhanced sense of awareness and better marketing and promotion.

That's according to a nationally recognized economic consultant who visited the state's fastest-growing county during a recent two-day trip.

"Mississippi is extremely strong in the arts," said Stuart Rosenfeld, principal with Regional Technology Strategies who is developing a "creative economy" study for the state Arts Commission and the Mississippi Development Authority.

However, Rosenfeld said the challenge to Mississippi's arts community is to how to better harness that creativity and help artists actually turn a profit.

"I still think there is still a certain percentage who make it, whether it's those who make high-end furniture or hand-crafted items," Rosenfeld said.

Rosenfeld said "creative economies" not include not just visual or musical artists but culinary artisans as well.

Bakers whose specialties include homemade bread to chefs who feature local, fresh food on their menus help comprise a creative economy.

MDA officials point out the Magnolia State is rich in artistic talent.

"From Mississippi's artists, artisans, writers, architects and designers, to its museums, art galleries, bookstores and advertising agencies, the state's creative people and institutions generate significant wealth for the state's economy," MDA spokesperson Tammy Craft said.

The creative economy topic has also been touted by Mississippi Economic Council officials during the organization's road shows across the state.

Rosenfeld toured the DeSoto County Museum, talked with DeSoto Arts Council and Hernando Main Street/Chamber of Commerce officials and DeSoto County Tourism Association officials.

Vicky Neyman, executive director of the DeSoto Arts Council, said DeSoto County was not included in the creative economy study that was completed last year.

"We have so much going on up here," Neyman said during a visit with Rosenfeld to the Hernando Chamber.

She contacted Mississippi Arts Commission executive director Malcolm White who in turn helped bring Rosenfeld to DeSoto County.

Rosenfeld also spoke with DeSoto County Greenways officials and community leaders like Tom Pittman with the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi. Art is a very special commodity, according to Pittman.

"All of us, young and old alike, are influenced by videos, slogans and the way things are packaged and presented," Pittman said. "He (Rosenfeld) has done studies throughout the United States on how regions can embrace their creativity to improve the economy and quality of life."

Pittman said he shared with Rosenfeld the fact there is so much musical history in the region.

From the Zebra Ranch where legendary producer Jim Dickinson worked and the studio where sons Cody and Luther cut records to influences by iconic bluesmen like Gus Cannon and Robert Wilkins, DeSoto County and the Mid-South have a wealth of music history to offer.

"The kinds of creativity which a creative economy can be built around can include everything from blues to duck hunting," Pittman said. "He (Rosenfeld) is a practitioner of what so many people have written about, which is the rise of the creative class, and how young people, in particular, want to live in areas which embrace creativity."

Pittman said he and Rosenfeld specifically talked about the importance of the culinary arts.

"With our work on reducing childhood obesity over the last seven years, we feel young people need opportunities to eat fresh fruits and vegetables," Pittman said. "We've been working to find ways to make locally fresh food more available."

During Rosenfeld's stay he dined at Blue Daze Bistro and Memphis Street Cafe, eateries which frequently feature locally grown food on their menus. Rosenfeld was also given a tour of the Banks House, the new home of the DeSoto Arts Council.

Economically sustainable locally grown food products can become a mainstay of the community with focus and direction, according to Pittman.

Rosenfeld's firm, Regional Technology Strategies Inc. is based in Carrboro, N.C. and assists governments, foundations and other groups in evaluating and implementing economic development strategies.

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