

Sample Tourism Op-Ed

Cultural Tourism: Economic Driver

OPINION

By Timothy D. Armbruster

Imagine a public-sector investment where every dollar expended returns \$55 in new economic activity.

As unbelievable as it sounds, that's exactly what our neighbors in Philadelphia have accomplished through their investment in the burgeoning industry of cultural tourism. Baltimore business and civic leaders – and especially mayoral candidates – interested in economic development and job creation should take notice.

Our neighbor 90 miles north has demonstrated that the arts and the thousands of tourists they attract are a powerful economic engine that creates jobs.

In early March, the Baltimore Community Foundation and the Mount Vernon Cultural District invited a panel of representatives from Philadelphia's successful cultural tourism effort to address officials of Baltimore's cultural institutions and others interested in promoting our city's cultural treasures.

At that event we learned that through a focused effort designed to lure visitors to Philadelphia's cultural and historic attractions, and championed by Mayor Ed Rendell, the City of Brotherly Love has refashioned itself as an emerging mecca for free-spending tourists. Nowhere is this more evident than on Broad Street in Philadelphia's center city.

This major thoroughfare – grimy and run-down just a few years ago – has been transformed into the city's Avenue of the Arts, attracting new cultural attractions, restaurants, and businesses along the way. Aggressive marketing has helped turn an area that attracted few visitors in the early 1990s into another must-see stop for tourists visiting Philadelphia.

How did Philadelphia do it? By creating an independent tourism marketing corporation, Philadelphia has seen the number of visitors and the dollars they spend skyrocket.

When the Philadelphia Museum of Art hosted a Cezanne exhibit in 1996, optimistic museum officials expected 500,000 visitors during the show's 13-week run. But a trend-setting marketing campaign brought nearly 800,000 attendees, 59 percent of whom came from outside of Philadelphia. Seven of 10 out-of-towners stayed the night. Independent analysis of Philadelphia's marketing program has demonstrated that for an investment of less than \$2 million expended on advertising and promotion, Philadelphia has realized a total return of nearly \$100 million in new expenditures by visitors. Too often in Baltimore, the arts are dismissed as peripheral concerns given the challenges our community faces.

Unemployment, a stubbornly high homicide rate and failing schools are issues guaranteed to grab the headlines -- and rightly so. They are problems we must solve. But we risk much as a community if we preoccupy ourselves only with the problems we face.

Blinded by our problems, we risk ignoring the opportunities uniquely afforded us by our geography, our history and our culture. The arts and the cultural tourism they support are an opportunity too big for Baltimore to ignore. We need only look to Philadelphia for proof.

Although Baltimore's Inner Harbor and convention attractions are powerful lures, tourists and conventioners too often fail to find their way to our city's cultural attractions, even those located just blocks from the harbor. As the Philadelphia example has demonstrated, the fault is ours, not theirs. Cultural tourists are eager to sample our riches, but only if we attract them through marketing.

Baltimore's marketing efforts are largely focused on securing conventions. Philadelphia's example demonstrates that the cultural tourist market is sufficiently lucrative to be addressed -- and funded -- separately.

Philadelphia has realized success through a coordinated effort among government, hotels and arts institutions, funded largely through public and private investment and an increase in the hotel tax. Baltimore's mayoral candidates would do well by their citizens to explore the wisdom of applying similar efforts and funding here. By virtue of its history and its native philanthropists such as Henry Walters, George Peabody and the Cone sisters, Baltimore is unusually blessed in the arts.

It is time Baltimore, like Philadelphia, made the most of those blessings.

Timothy D. Armbruster is president and chief executive officer of the Baltimore Community Foundation.