

# [Taking Charlotte's Arts & Science Council in a new direction](#)

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Tell people the arts mean business. And then say it again.

Those thoughts keep running through [Robert Bush](#)'s mind. The Arts & Science Council president, [who took over in 2014 after a one-year interim stint](#), has steered the arts group through an era of change. The local nonprofit group advocates for the arts, promotes cultural events and groups and raises money used to award grants to various arts groups.

This year, [ASC](#) awarded 500 grants worth a combined \$7.2 million to arts groups and organizations. Many groups receive multiple grants.

Fundraising has shifted, to a significant degree, from mass workplace campaigns funneling money first to [ASC](#) to then be distributed to area museums and arts groups into a system that emphasizes direct donations. Part of the strategy stems from seeking to place more emphasis on the arts organizations themselves — and part comes from generational behavior. Young professionals prefer direct contributions, local and national surveys have found.

[ASC, a \\$15 million agency](#), has made those and other changes of late, but one thing Bush and his colleagues know they must improve upon is telling a more complete story about the importance of the arts. Beyond enriching people's lives and adding to the must-have attractions other cities boast, arts and culture translate into jobs, local and visitor spending and crucial business for restaurants, hotels and other hospitality companies.

A new national study released this week found [that nonprofit arts groups and venues add \\$359 million to Charlotte's regional economy](#). Nonprofit advocacy group Americans for the Arts compiled the report, measuring 341 districts, cities, counties and states for arts-related spending and jobs.

In Mecklenburg County, the figure is \$243 million, a gain of 20% from the most recent prior study, published in 2012. Arts in Mecklenburg accounted for \$203 million in jobs and spending five years ago. Museums, performing arts, theaters and history sites are all included in the impact numbers as long as they are nonprofit organizations and venues.

[Discovery Place](#), Blumenthal Performing Arts and the Levine Center for the Arts are part of the Mecklenburg study while the regional impact adds Daniel Stowe Botanical Garden, the Museum of York County and the [Catawba Science Center](#), among others.

Unlike past studies, when economic impact findings would be disclosed and then largely forgotten, [ASC](#) is hoping for a much longer, in-depth run with its newest numbers. A social media

campaign sprinkling nuggets and tidbits on social media and elsewhere starts Sept. 15 to keep the findings top of mind.

Beyond a splashy kickoff, [ASC](#) and its affiliates plan to make the economic study a frequent topic with the public and other stakeholders in the weeks and months ahead.

Statistics have become a hot topic at [ASC](#). Bush proudly reels off a litany of facts and figures showing the arts as more than a cultural force, including the fact that 3.2 million people attend arts events and programs backed by ASC each year — or 700,000 more than the combined attendance of the area's major pro sports teams and events.

During a recent interview at [ASC's](#) uptown headquarters, Bush spoke with me about making a business case for the arts and what's next for his organization. Following are excerpts from our conversation.

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**On the study's findings:** One of the things we like is they're very conservative. (Americans for the Arts is) very careful to only use the data that's put before them. We think this is a conservative estimate.

The first two times we did it, we did it just for Mecklenburg County, but, coming out of our new vision plan in 2014 and the recommendations of the cultural life task force about a much more regional approach, we decided to reach out to the [Charlotte Regional Partnership](#) and see if they would partner with us to do the entire 16 counties together: four in South Carolina and the 12 in North Carolina.

We don't have comparative numbers for the region, but we know the Mecklenburg County numbers are up about 20% since the last study. They're very clearly growing.

And this is the first time the new Levine (cultural campus uptown) and the (NASCAR) Hall of Fame are included. So we have expanded the cultural offerings and that is one of the reasons the impact is going up.

The numbers are good and they're strong. People are coming here to spend money because of the cultural event taking place here. (According to the study, 75.5% of attendees at Charlotte arts events who came from beyond the 16-county region said the primary purpose of their visit was to see the arts event. In addition, 84% said they would have gone elsewhere for a similar event if it had not taken place here.)

**On how arts affect business:** This is about driving the economy in many ways. It strengthens our partnership with the (Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority). It gives us new ways of looking at the region and how we might partner across the region because, for example, a huge piece of the (arts) volunteer base is out in the region.

There are interesting sub-pieces of this.

We're combining this roll-out with two other big things. (A separate analysis) found that 58,000 people in the region are in jobs that the U.S. Department of Labor classifies as creative. (Examples include

media companies, software publishers, studios, architecture, industrial design and photography, among many others.)

That is equal to the [Wells Fargo](#) and Carolinas HealthCare workforce combined, 10 times as many as lawyers and nearly as many creatives as the entire transportation and warehousing sector. We may be in all these small businesses and nonprofits across the region, but we are a force in this economy. We know the creative jobs are the jobs that stay.

**On how the findings will be used:** We're doing it a little different this time. The partnership has been involved, the chamber has been involved, Center City Partners has been involved. Some of the advertising sector has been involved in helping us to re-think how we roll all this strategy out.

In the past, for example, we have done these little, get 150 people breakfast events. This time, we're going to stream live across the region and we already have 350 people signed up to attend the roll-out (on Sept. 15). And there are screening sites around the region. That's a different way to approach this.

We have a social media campaign, we have [Tweets](#) already prepared, we're going to really not just depend on the one announcement. This is not going to go away.

The other thing we're going to do is roll out a new scorecard on the local sector that we will be able to update on an annual basis. We've turned this into info-graphics, tracking things like the fact that there were 794 sites (during fiscal 2017 with events staged by [ASC-funded](#) groups and programs).

**On the new approach:** [ASC](#) and the whole sector's been going through a lot of change. But ASC has really been going through change as we respond to what [the community told us in 2014](#). We needed to become clearer and more articulate telling the story of the value of the sector, not just to the choir, but to the entire community.

We think we have put into place a whole new toolkit that can be used to lift up and advocate, (to say), "This is why it's important for you to donate, this is why it's important for the city or the county to invest in those programs." This is not just about putting people that can't afford (tickets) in a seat. This is about getting things deep into the community and it actually brings new people into the community as visitors or as residents.

**On what the impact study excludes:** None of the concerts at the (NBA) arena, none of the concerts at (the NC) Music Factory or PNC (Music Pavilion). That's actually the next step that I'm really interested in, and a number of my peers across the country. When are we going to start telling the entire story? Not just the nonprofit story, but the for-profit (arts events and venues), too. Because that is a significant piece we're not paying attention to.

**On uptown's importance:** Clearly, Tryon Street drives the region. We are learning that Charlotte is the Manhattan of the region and this proves we are. It doesn't mean there isn't cultural activity all over the region, but the driver — \$200 million of the \$359 million is right here. I think that that's a really good story to tell. Because if you go back to why [ASC](#) got re-started in the 1970s in the form that we're in, it's because the city and the county and the chamber of commerce decided that they needed a new way to

differentiate Charlotte from its peers. And they were going to invest in cultural assets to build the brand of Charlotte — and look what's happened.

So out of that 1975 plan — [Discovery Place](#), Spirit Square, the Performing Arts Center, the idea of a Mint uptown, all of that is envisioned in that plan. Look what happened when we put our minds to it. And look at the companies that have come here.

**On [ASC's](#) reinvention:** Before the recession, ASC was half the (funding for arts groups). Now we're less than a quarter. The groups are raising that much more. So there is that shift.

We have also made adjustments to bring our grants down to what we think is a healthier level, and we are in a transition plan with the big groups that were way over — 10% is the maximum we'll do now for the big groups.

We're continuing to see changes in workplace giving. Companies are changing their philosophy about letting someone come in from the outside and ask the employees for gifts. We're trying to change and adapt in new ways.