

# N. Colorado arts look toward future with funding district



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(Photo: Morgan Spiehs/The Coloradoan)

What if there were no plays in Fort Collins? No exhibits or orchestras, museums, ballets or botanic gardens?

Bruce Freestone doesn't want to find out.

Freestone, who founded Open Stage Theatre & Co. with his wife Denise in 1973, has been a proponent in the Fort Collins arts community for decades. And, now, as nonprofit arts organizations such as his continue to struggle for funding, he's gathering the troops again in hopes of finally getting a tax in front of voters in 2016 to help fund regional scientific and cultural groups.

Denver voters approved a Scientific and Cultural Facilities District in 1988, funded by a 0.1 percent sales and use tax that's brought in \$804 million to scientific and cultural organizations. It's also laid the groundwork for other communities to form their own similar tax districts.



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Rising rents, square renovation lead to Old Town changes

(<http://www.coloradoan.com/story/news/2015/03/07/rising-rents-square-renovation-lead-old-town-changes/24593899/?from=global&sessionKey=&autologin=>)

Enter Northern Colorado.

In an area that has the potential to become an arts and culture powerhouse, Freestone said, an arts and science tax district might be just the ticket for Fort Collins and its surrounding cities.

"It's absolutely essential," Freestone said of the tax. "There's probably not an arts council anywhere in the nation that doesn't have some sort of public funding. This would be a way to put public funding not only into the umbrella advocacy group, but also to the individual disciplines."

Those disciplines, the ones that recognized in Denver's district, include art, music, theater, dance, zoology, botany, natural history and cultural history.



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(<http://www.coloradoan.com/story/entertainment/2015/02/26/colorado-music-party-announces-lineup-sxsw/24065645/>)

Any nonprofit organization or local government agency that falls within the district's boundaries and has the primary purpose of "the enlightenment and entertainment of the public through the production, presentation, exhibition, advancement or preservation" of any of those disciplines would be eligible for funding from the tax, Freestone said.

This could include city-run arts organizations including The Lincoln Center, Fort Collins Museum of Discovery and Loveland's Rialto Theater Center, as well as arts nonprofits such as Bas Bleu Theatre Co., The Fort Collins Symphony, The Fort Collins Museum of Art, Trimble Court Artisans and Beet Street.

## The limits of nonprofit funding

During the economic downturn in 2008 and 2009, Freestone said there were several arts and culture organizations that were forced to scale back operations. His own organization, Open Stage Theatre & Co., had to think about pulling out of The Lincoln Center because of money. That's when the Downtown Development Authority stepped in and provided local performing arts groups with a shared warehouse where they could store scenery for free.

The warehouse is "the kind of thing this dedicated funding mechanism could help us sustain," Freestone said.

Funding from a cultural tax district would give them money to use for roof repairs, utilities and, hopefully, eventual staffing to make it a cleaner, more organized operation.

"Right now it's — and I use this a lot — a herd of cats being directed by a herd of cats," Freestone said. "There's a lot of potential that we're not realizing because every one of these groups is at their minimum: minimum staffing, minimum programming, minimum facilities."



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Q&A: FC Museum of Art Director Lisa Hatchadoorian

(<http://www.coloradoan.com/story/entertainment/2015/02/25/qa-fc-museum-art-director-lisa-hatchadoorian/23941165/?from=global&sessionKey=&autologin=>)

Nonprofits are typically funded by fees for their goods or services, individual donations, corporate contributions, membership dues and foundation or government grants. Local nonprofits can also apply for grants through The Cultural Development & Programming and Tourism Accounts, or Fort Fund, which is funded by lodging tax revenue and allocates grants to promote cultural, economic and tourism development.

But having a regional arts district in Northern Colorado has been a dream for some time — ever since Denver passed theirs.

"It would be ideal if we can come up with something like they've done in Denver," said Mike Powers, a retired city employee who used to manage departments that oversaw The Lincoln Center and history museum.

After initially approving the Denver tax district, voters extended it in 1994 and 2004. From 1989 to 2013, \$804 million had been distributed, according to a report by the Colorado Business Committee for the Arts. In 2013, the Denver district generated and distributed \$47.3 million to its 285 scientific and cultural grantee organizations.

The seven Denver metro counties that the district serves also saw a jump in arts and cultural spending by visitors, which increased by 14 percent over 2011.

### **They've been here before**

To try to secure similar funding for Northern Colorado scientific and cultural organizations, Freestone and a group of volunteers have been working make that dream a reality.

The group took two formal attempts — one in 2008 and the other in 2009 — at getting a citizen initiative for the tax district on the ballot. In 2008, they started the process too late and barely collected the required amount of signatures on their petition. They didn't end up submitting the signatures because they anticipated some would be rejected, putting them below the threshold.

They came back in 2009, refined the petition, defined the tax district as the Loveland and Fort Collins city limits and were well on their way to having enough signatures. But they would have had to place a bond with Larimer County to cover the cost of the ballot mailing fees and, since the funding district would have been the only item on the ballot, the entire mailing costs would have fallen on their shoulders. In light of the thousands of dollars they needed, the campaign was suspended.

Freestone said they didn't make an effort in 2010 because Fort Collins voters were already being faced with a measure to increase the city sales tax, which, if not passed, would have meant cuts that might have included the closure of Mulberry Pool, the cutting of hours, programs and jobs at the senior center and the end to night service for Dial-A-Ride.

Then they lost steam and didn't really regroup until 2014, when they talked about taking another crack at it, but didn't have enough time to run a successful campaign.

Now Freestone's at it again, working to rally the troops and make the big, concerted push this effort has needed.

But, "frankly, I'm not the general," Freestone said. "I'm just the bugler."

### **What it might look like this time**

Freestone says he's not sure what this effort will look like exactly — if the proposed ballot language will be similar to past attempts, contain different boundaries or be completely different. At this point, it's too early to know any specific details about the possible tax, including how much it would be or how much money it could potentially bring in.

Right now, he's focused on getting a handful of "the usual suspects" together to form some sort of regional leadership group who can buckle down, make the necessary decisions and push it through.

"If we're going to be on the November 2016 ballot, what needs to happen in the next, say, three to six months is drafting that case statement, drafting the vision, identifying any kind of strategic alliance and partnerships," Freestone said. "We need to analyze the options. I can't do that by myself."

This time around, Freestone said he'd like to see the group take on a more regional approach.

"The way the statute is constructed, you can only have one (arts tax district) per county, but you can have multiple counties, portions of counties ..." he said.

"I would like to look at this as being all of Larimer County so that you can pull in Estes Park, pull in Rocky Mountain National Park," he added. "What's lacking (in Northern Colorado) — and this is really why I've continued to beat this drum — is that all of these entities who do the arts and culture programming, these are kind of the icing on the cake to make the experience a grand one for the traveling public ... and the people who live here."



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Leah Johnson, a community advocate in Loveland who's participated in the past efforts, said she's excited to start having conversations again and explore how to leverage relationships in different community to use arts as an economic driver.

"I know in the past there's been various conversations to move forward with this, but it hasn't had the momentum to get there," Johnson said, adding that an important piece will be bringing decision makers on the county and municipal levels into the conversation.

"I think we need to look at all the options on the table and decide what's best for Larimer County and Northern Colorado," she said.

"What would we look like if we had optimum facilities, adequate staff, adventurous programming, aggressive marketing? Where the hell would we be?" he added. "Oh my God, it would be different."

What could an scientific and cultural tax district mean for a community?

Denver voters approved its Scientific and Cultural Facilities District in 1988.

#### **Fast facts:**

- The tax that funds the SCFD in Denver is a 0.1 percent sales and use tax that was extended in 1994 and 2004.
- From 1989 to 2013, it brought in \$804 million that's been distributed to more than 300 scientific and cultural organizations.
- In 2013, it generated and distributed \$47.3 million to 285 scientific and cultural grantee organizations.



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[15 in 15: Your 2015 Fort Collins bucket list](http://www.coloradoan.com/story/life/2014/12/30/fort-collins-bucket-list/21079307/)

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