

# Black Mountain, North Carolina



	Black Mountain
Population (2000)	7,510
Municipal budget (2006)	\$6.5 million <sup>66</sup>
Per capita income (2000)	\$20,510
Median household income (2000)	\$35,540
Poverty rate (2000)	10%
Minority population (2000)	9%
Proximity to urban center	30 miles to Asheville, N.C.
Proximity to interstate highway	1 mile
Strategic approach	Tourism Creative Economy
Time frame	1990-2002

The Black Mountain Center for the Arts, made possible by a local government investment, is spurring cultural and economic development. In the early 1970s, the Town of Black Mountain sold its town hall to a group of local artists and business people. Thanks to local government funding, supplemented by private donations, the old town hall was renovated and re-opened as the Black Mountain Center for the Arts in 2000. Two years later, the town council made another strategic decision to retire \$200,000 of the center's remaining renovation debt, ensuring the center's long-term viability. Today the center operates debt free and offers world-class musical, artistic and theater productions that are rekindling Black Mountain's artist community and attracting tourists from throughout the southeastern United States.

*This small town bridges a thriving local arts scene with economic development to restore its cultural identity and enlarge the tax base.*

## The community and its history

Black Mountain is situated in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The community has a rich and storied history as a center for arts, music and drama. Black Mountain College opened in 1933 as an experimental school in interdisciplinary education. The college became a hotbed for European intellectuals forced to flee Nazi persecution. A rich community of international musicians, architects and writers came together in the mountains of western North Carolina. Several world-renowned artists including Buckminster Fuller, Merce Cunningham and Josef Albers either studied or taught at Black Mountain College. After World War II, though,

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Sherry Williams, Town of Black Mountain, June 4, 2007.

many of the college's students and faculty moved to the West Coast, and in 1956, Black Mountain College closed its doors.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Black Mountain struggled. In 1980, the small downtown was a boarded up strip of dilapidated buildings. During the 1980s, an injection of funding from the governor's Community of Excellence program allowed the community to charge some energy into its downtown corridor. By the 1990s, Black Mountain's downtown was back on track. Next, the arts culture, which had been a prominent part of the community until the 1950s, was due for a renaissance.

## The strategy

Black Mountain's strategy was to invigorate the local arts culture to attract tourists and investors into the community and to catalyze small business development. Two decisions were key to its success: (1) to provide building space for the Black Mountain Center for the Arts and (2) to retire the center's construction debt.

The story of Black Mountain's strategy begins in 1990 when the local government was in the market for new office space. The old town hall on Main Street needed of substantial repair. Rather than construct a new building, town leaders purchased the Union Bank building, catty-corner from the hall, for their new offices. At that point, they saw a golden opportunity to help the local Black Mountain arts group.

In 1993, Black Mountain sold the old town hall to a member of an ad-hoc group of artists and business people in Black Mountain. "They didn't have anywhere to work," said Al Richardson, the former town manager. "Giving them the old town hall was the booster shot to get them going." The sale prompted the arts group in 1995 to become a formal nonprofit organization called the Black Mountain Center for the Arts. For the next four years, the nonprofit campaigned for donations to renovate the building. The town government stepped up and provided a low-interest loan and an \$88,000 donation. In all, the group raised \$1.2 million for renovations, and in the fall of 2000, the new Black Mountain Center for the Arts opened.

Since opening, the Center for the Arts has attracted cultural enthusiasts from throughout the state and southeastern region. Concerts and galleries showcase a range of local and international artists, musicians, theater productions and classes.

By 2002, the arts culture was thriving in Black Mountain. In that year, town leaders made another strategic move to ensure the center's continued viability. In exchange for the title to the center's land, the town paid off \$200,000 the center owed for the building's renovation. The center now operates nearly debt free and can offer more events to the public. "Our partnership with Black Mountain is incredibly important," said Gale Jackson, the center's

director. "I'd estimate the help they have provided in purchasing out our debt and land at over \$70,000 per year. To an arts center, that is a lot of money."

Black Mountain is reaping the benefits of investing in its arts community and culture. A recent study estimated the economic impact of Black Mountain and Asheville's 3,000 artists to be over \$200 million annually. This averages \$66,000 for each artist, of which there are hundreds in Black Mountain. "The Center for the Arts is a tremendous part of our tourism strategy and big reason people come to live in Black Mountain," said Bob McMurry, president of the Swannanoa Valley Chamber of Commerce.

### What are the lessons from this story?

*Public-private partnerships can be developed to support community development interests.* The Town of Black Mountain provided capital and building space to an ad-hoc group of local artists. The investment led to the creation of the Center for the Arts and elevated the role of the arts group in the community. It provided the arts community with a place, an identity and a focus. The center in turn benefited each individual artist and the community as a whole.

*Investing in the arts community can be a driver of economic development in a community.* The results of Black Mountain's investment have been increasing tourism, the development of small arts-based businesses and the attraction of new residents who want to associate with the Black Mountain Center for the Arts.

*Strategic investments in community organizations can align private/nonprofit sector interests with broader community interests.* Black Mountain's strategic investment created the incentives so that the energy of local artists was aligned with the interest of the community.

### Contact information

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