


Arts & Culture Drive Economic Development in Rural Communities





Evidence from across Ontario shows that strategic investment in arts and culture delivers strong economic and social returns—particularly in rural communities.

- Arts and culture are important in rural communities — they are **economic and social infrastructure**.
- This session focuses on **how arts and culture drive rural vitality**, using real municipal examples and provincial data.
- We'll look at **social ROI, economic impact, and practical tools** rural municipalities can use right now.

AACO is a province-wide network of arts councils and arts service organizations working collaboratively to strengthen the arts sector across Ontario. The Alliance supports peer learning, mentorship, shared advocacy, and capacity-building—particularly for small, rural, and emerging arts councils.

A photograph of two people performing a backbend on a rooftop at sunset. The person in the foreground is wearing a black t-shirt and dark pants, with their back to the camera. The person behind them is wearing a patterned shirt and dark pants, with their arms extended forward. The background features a large, rounded structure, possibly a dome or a large tank, and several tall, thin poles with lights. The sky is a warm, orange-brown color, suggesting the time is either sunrise or sunset. The overall scene is artistic and captures a moment of physical challenge and teamwork.

Why Arts & Culture Matter in Rural Communities

Jennifer Harrison and David Hudson - Hamilton

- In rural communities, arts and culture often serve multiple roles at once: economic driver, community connector, and place-maker.
- Cultural activity improves **quality of life**, which is critical for **retention of residents and workers**.

 **Tweed**

 **Population:** ~6,000

Tweed & Company Theatre owns and operates the **Marble Arts Centre**, a **120-seat professional performing arts venue**.

Tweed & Company presents a production, it is typically scheduled for **eight performances**, most of which are **sold out**, drawing audiences from across Eastern Ontario.

The organization also owns and operates the **Village Playhouse in Bancroft**, further expanding year-round cultural activity and programming capacity in rural Ontario.

These venues function as **cultural anchors**, driving repeat visitation, downtown foot traffic, and spending on local restaurants, accommodations, and retail.



Arts & Culture as Economic Drivers

Marc Fornes Photo by Jack Landau

- Festivals, performances, exhibitions, and cultural attractions bring people into rural communities.
- That translates into spending on **accommodations, restaurants, retail, and services.**

 **Stratford**

 **Population: ~33,000**

- Stratford's cultural economy—anchored by the **Stratford Festival**—is strengthened year-round.

In 1953, local journalist Tom Patterson had an idea - revitalize their economy through theatre. Approached City Council and with a contribution of \$125 - that is the equivalent of \$1500 today, the Stratford festival began. A small city leveraging arts and culture as a primary economic driver and downtown anchor.

A strategic investment in arts and culture can anchor downtown revitalization and long-term economic growth in a rural community



The background image shows two men in an art gallery. They are looking at several framed artworks on a dark wall. The artworks include a piece with yellow and red wavy lines, a piece with two white swans forming a heart, a piece with a white swan, and a large, ornate oval mirror with a black and white image of a person. There are also smaller framed pieces at the bottom right. The men are in the foreground, looking towards the art.

The Social Return on Investment (ROI)

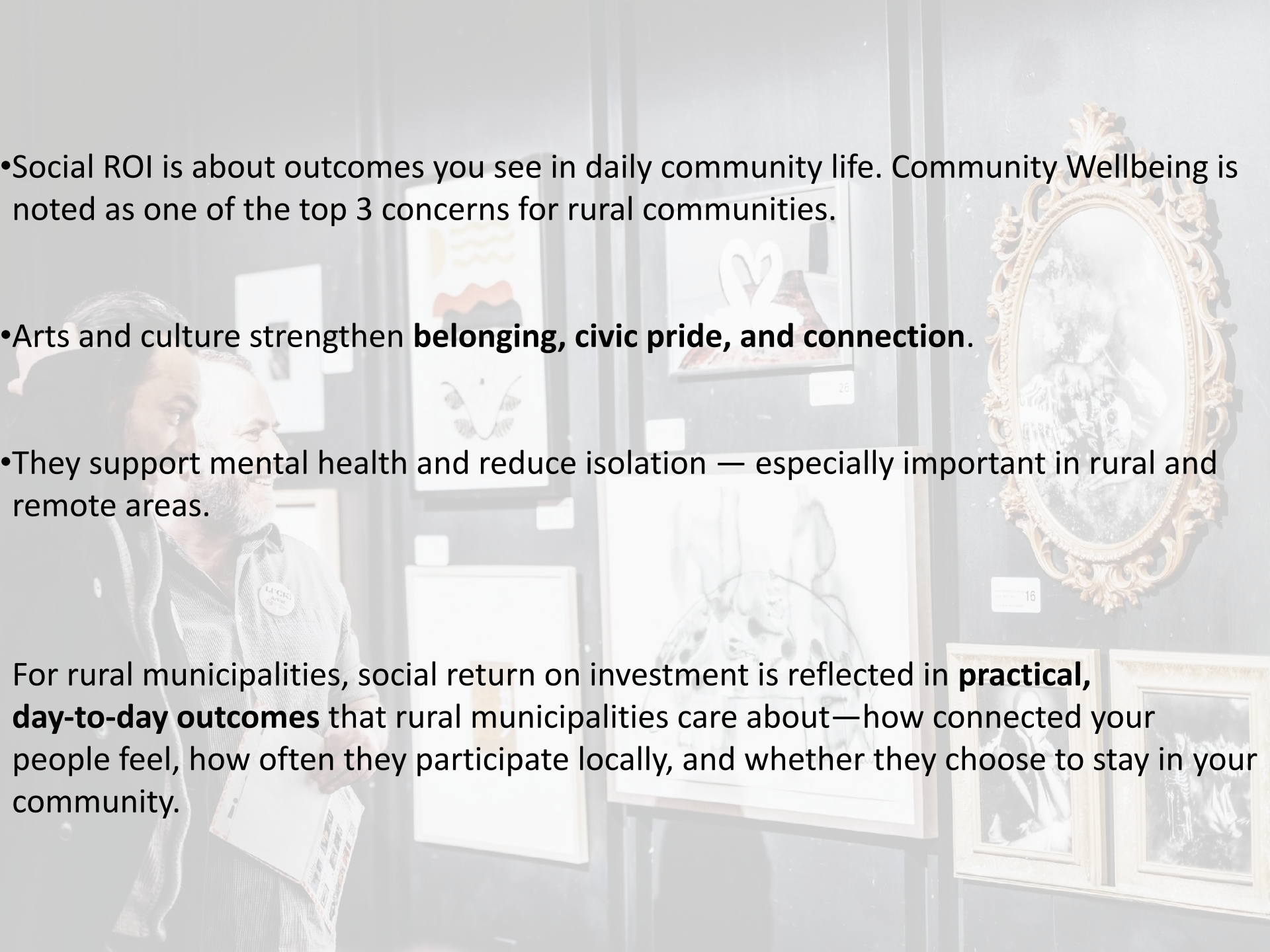
PC Curtis Perry LUCK 2023

• Social ROI is about outcomes you see in daily community life. Community Wellbeing is noted as one of the top 3 concerns for rural communities.

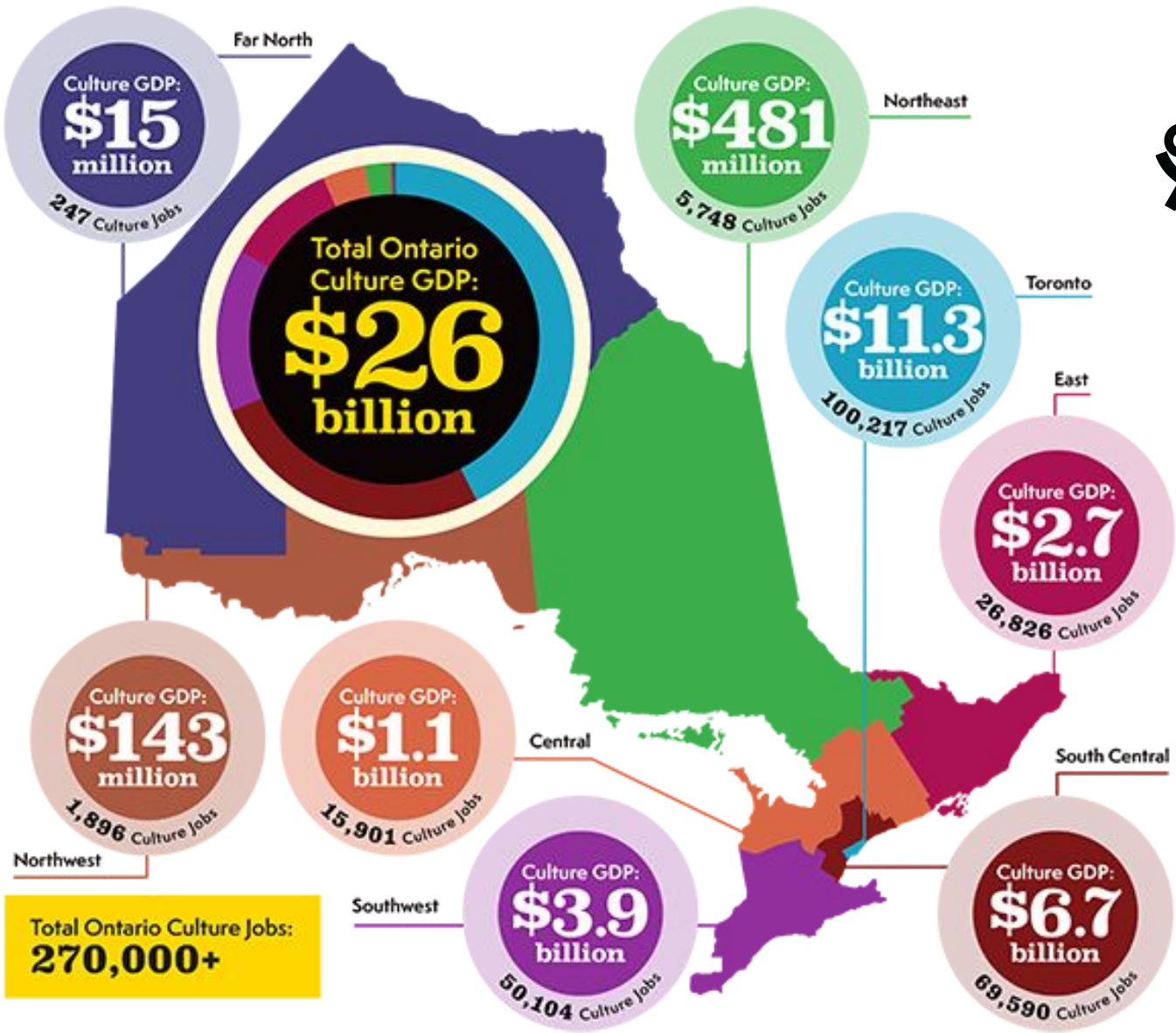
• Arts and culture strengthen **belonging, civic pride, and connection.**

• They support mental health and reduce isolation — especially important in rural and remote areas.

For rural municipalities, social return on investment is reflected in **practical, day-to-day outcomes** that rural municipalities care about—how connected your people feel, how often they participate locally, and whether they choose to stay in your community.



Arts Across Ontario: Economic ROI



•According to the *Arts Across Ontario* report:

- Arts and culture tourism generated **\$11.4 billion** in visitor spending in 2019.
- That's roughly **30% of Ontario's total tourism spending**.

•Arts tourists spend more and stay longer — a key opportunity for rural municipalities.

According to the *Arts Across Ontario* report released in 2025, **for every \$1 invested in arts and culture, up to \$25 is generated in economic activity**, reflecting spending on tourism, local businesses, employment, and services.

This data reinforces that arts and culture are **high-ROI, low-infrastructure investments**, making cultural investment one of the most effective tools available to rural municipalities.



A person is performing with multiple red hula hoops in a festival setting. The person is wearing a grey t-shirt and a red and white patterned vest. They are holding several hoops in their hands, and some are around their neck and waist. The background is a wooden wall with a black doorway. Above the person, there are several red stage lights and a string of small white lights. The overall scene is festive and artistic.

Arts Across Ontario: Rural Insights (OAC)

Beany John Flight Festival of Contemporary Dance

A person in traditional attire, including a patterned vest and a necklace, is performing a hula hoop routine. They are holding multiple pink hoops, some of which are stacked on their feet and others are in the air. The background is a wooden wall with string lights and stage lights.

- Rural participation in arts activities remains strong.

- Public investment delivers both economic and social ROI.

Rural festivals and cultural events support jobs, small businesses, and long-term resilience.

In small and dispersed communities, arts and cultural organizations often serve as **social connectors, and community hubs**—supporting local businesses, strengthening identity, and fostering belonging. Rural arts and culture play a critical role in attracting visitors, retaining residents, and building long-term resilience, demonstrating that strategic investment in the arts delivers meaningful returns for rural municipalities.



AACO Mentorship Program

Tyendinaga Traditional Pow Wow PC Don Carr

- AACO connects **long-established arts councils** with emerging and rural councils.

Powwows & Cultural Gatherings

Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory

 **Population: ~4500**

- Annual powwows and cultural events draw visitors from across Ontario and neighbouring provinces.
- These gatherings increase demand for **local vendors, accommodations, restaurants, and regional tourism services.**

Economic impact: “In Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory, arts and culture are not only expressions of identity—they are engines of entrepreneurship, tourism, and intergenerational economic resilience.”



A stone sculpture in a forest setting. The sculpture is composed of several stacked elements: a bird-like figure with spread wings at the top, a shell-like middle section, and a base of stacked stones. The background is a lush green forest with sunlight filtering through the trees.

On-the-Ground Rural Experiences

Haliburton Highlands Sculpture Forest Guo Qing Fan

- We see rural arts councils revitalizing main streets and public spaces.
- Programs engage youth, seniors, newcomers, and volunteers. Newcomers look for arts and culture -Community arts centres, galleries, libraries, and performance spaces that signal **“this is a place you can belong.”**

 **Haliburton County**

 **Population:** ~20,000

Haliburton has embedded arts and culture into its regional development strategy—using studio tours, maker spaces, and cultural trails to support creative entrepreneurship, extend the tourism season, and retain residents.

This approach demonstrates how arts investment strengthens economic diversification and community resilience without increasing pressure on municipal infrastructure.



Key Takeaways for Rural Leaders

Atelier Sisu's "Evanescent" Luminato Festival 2024



1. Recognize arts and culture as economic infrastructure.

Include arts and culture in economic development, tourism, and downtown revitalization strategies—reflecting their proven economic and social ROI.

2. Partner with your local arts council.

Treat rural arts councils as **strategic community development partners**, not just grant recipients, and involve them early in planning and place-based initiatives.

3. Support collaboration and mentorship.

Encourage regional collaboration and mentorship models that build capacity, reduce risk, and strengthen smaller or emerging rural organizations.


4. Lead through partnership.

Municipal leadership—through policy alignment, modest investment, and cross-department collaboration—is essential to sustaining rural vitality without increasing pressure on municipal infrastructure.

A woman with a vibrant pink headwrap and colorful beaded jewelry is performing on stage, smiling and gesturing with her hand. She is wearing a black sleeveless top over a red garment. In the background, another musician wearing a cap and a patterned shirt is playing a guitar. The stage is lit with blue and purple lights, and a microphone stand is visible in the foreground.

Economic Impact in Rural Communities

Mandala Spotlight Artist Jacqui Du Toit

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- A woman in traditional attire, including a red headscarf and a black dress with gold jewelry, is performing on a stage. She is smiling and looking towards the left. In the background, another person is playing a drum. The scene is lit with blue and purple stage lights.
- 30% of tourism spending is for arts and culture. Festivals and cultural events increase spending on accommodations, dining, and services.
 - Arts investment supports local jobs, small businesses, and downtown revitalization.
 - Rural arts and culture strengthen long-term economic resilience.

As elected leaders, you are making decisions every day about investment, infrastructure, and long-term sustainability. Arts and culture are not discretionary — they are proven drivers of economic activity, community wellbeing, and rural vitality.

The data shows that when **municipalities partner with arts councils and cultural organizations**, public investment delivers real returns: stronger local economies, healthier communities, and places people are proud to call home.

Supporting arts and culture is not about funding programs — it's about investing in resilient, connected, and prosperous rural communities.

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