

# Creativity leads to economic benefits, panel says

Published September 29, 2015 1:58PM Updated September 29, 2015 6:20PM

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Waterford — Putting creative people together in one spot leads to synergies that are not always obvious at first, a panel of experts pulled together by the Eastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition said Tuesday during a discussion at Charter Oak Federal Credit Union.

The Cultural Summit, titled "Tapping Into the Creative Economy," addressed a wide range of issues, from the use of social media to zoning regulations to the way the region's businesses can reach out to a national audience.

But Michael Blair, a real estate developer who created 38 Green Street Studios in New London, said it all starts on a local level by creating an environment in which like creative minds can live and work together.

"If we put people together, they form relationships with the people they want to ... (who) validate their creative direction," Blair said. "They just naturally come together."

Morgan King, owner of Poor Morgan Screen Printing, Design and Apparel, and Aaren Simoncini, owner of Beer'd Brewing Co., both located at the Velvet Mill in Stonington, said they have a wonderful rapport with their fellow tenants, which until recently also included Mystic Knotwork, owned by fellow panelist Matthew Beaudoin.

Having so many creative businesses in one spot drove traffic to all of the various stores, panelists said.

"They don't want to walk in to a single shop," Simoncini said. "Open doors open for business is a good thing."

Beaudoin, who recently moved his knot-tying business to Cottrell Street in Mystic, said he misses the atmosphere of give-and-take among the creative enterprises at the Velvet Mill.

"That's one thing the business community is lacking — the cluster approach," Beaudoin said.

Jason Vincent, vice president of the Norwich Community Development Corp., said collaboration among various heritage groups in his city has led to a stronger effort to market its historic assets.

"Collaboration and conversation lead to things you never imagined," Vincent said. "You can't do it on your own."

The panel said social media can help in getting the word out about creative businesses at a fraction of the cost of traditional marketing methods. The key, they said, is to create stories that people will want to pass around the Internet and share with friends — and if the story is compelling enough, it eventually will draw a national audience.

"It creates many opportunities for almost no costs," Beaudoin said. "Be honest, be authentic. If it's the right thing to do, just do it."

As for zoning problems, real estate investor Blair said he has had few problems with planning and zoning boards allowing creative reuses of properties so long as they will have a positive impact on a community and create jobs.

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