Cambridge, David: Museums offer much value

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Do you remember your first visit to a museum? Perhaps it was when you were a child, or an experience discovered later in life. Either way, chances are you haven't forgotten it. Museum Advocacy Day is Tuesday, and there is no better time to share your thoughts on how your favorite museum has impacted your life and community.

Surely you remember how intriguing that great place was. It may have been large and imposing with many stone steps leading up to the front door. Or, it may have been just a room in the back of the library or a local historical society. It may have smelled a little musty. What made it all great was the stuff it had — the beautiful fossils and rocks, old photographs of when the town was small, weird natural specimens or great paintings that filled the walls. It was a place that invited you to stay as long as you wanted, and learn as much as you could.

Maybe it was the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum, which opened in 1933, that first welcomed you. Do you remember the things you saw? Do you remember the Bugbee and Mead murals in Pioneer Hall? Did you like the bits of cowboy memorabilia, the buffalo, the great oil derrick or Pioneer Town the best?

The Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum is now the largest history museum in Texas, and that's only part of it. The collections of art, archeology, paleontology, textiles, petroleum and transportation make this museum one of the most important in the country. All of the great stuff is still here, as you remember, and then some. The Pioneer Hall murals have been fully restored and are as vibrant as when they were new, the Native American and pioneer artifacts are used to illustrate how different cultures have adapted to life on this land, and Pioneer Town is undergoing a well-deserved renovation. In addition, exhibits of history, textiles, art, paleontology, firearms and vintage automobiles make the museum a multidisciplined treasure. You can be proud of what your museum has become.

You also can be proud of what your museum does for education and the local economy. The museum served 22,400 school children last year through tours, presentations and special educational outreach services. It conducts workshops and continuing education opportunities for regional educators. Did you know students with exposure to museum-based educational opportunities have higher college entrance exam scores, a higher acceptance rate to medical schools, and possess a lower incidence of substance abuse?

Every museum promotes economic and civic vitality through creating jobs, increasing property values, encouraging retail sales and generating state and local tax revenue. Museums are important tourist destinations and contribute to the $40.4-billion tourism industry in Texas.

All of this is to share the value museums bring to our communities every day as economic sparks, as pillars of our education system and as major contributors to the overall quality of life in America. We will be conveying that message to our elected leaders on Capitol Hill on Tuesday, when museum professionals from around the country journey to Washington, D.C., to make our case to Congress. If you value our local museums, we urge you to join us by contacting your elected officials, at all levels of government. The American Association of Museums website (www.speak upformuseums.org) has a range of tools to help you. All museums are vital to our communities and their economies.

Join us and speak up. Help us keep our museums — and our communities — strong by lending your voice to ours, ensuring the cause of museums is heard Museum Advocacy Day.

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