The case for museums

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The case for museums

By Sondra Hines, IR YourTurn helenair.com | Posted: Tuesday, February 28, 2012 6:13 pm | (2) Comments

A museum is many things: a center for lifelong learning, an economic engine for the local community, a civic forum where ideas and democracy itself become reality. But today’s museums are, above all, educational institutions, essential pillars of America’s educational infrastructure and therefore critical to our future economic competitiveness and to maintaining American leadership in technology, innovation and culture.

For these and myriad other reasons, U.S. museums merit the support of governments at all levels. That’s the message of more than 200 museum professionals who will gather in Washington Feb. 27-28 to convey to Congress the value museums bring to communities everywhere. You too can be part of this effort. And here’s why you should be.

In the words of Smithsonian Secretary Wayne Clough, museums are much more than “places where we hang things on the walls.”

According to the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), museums annually provide more than 18 million instructional hours to American students and educators, ranging from professional development for teachers to traveling exhibits to schools to the traditional field trip. An estimated 55 million school children take part in museum field trips each year, despite cuts in school budgets. Such school outings range from visiting science museums to learn about the human heart to visiting botanic gardens to examine environmental conservation to becoming familiar with their town’s past at the local history museum. All told, American museums invest some $2 billion in education programs, reaching all age and economic groups in the nation.

Right here in Helena, the Holter Museum of Art, the Montana Historical Society and ExplorationWorks work to help make art, history and science come alive for visitors of all ages. Our programs support our local schools by working closely with teachers to deliver authentic and meaningful learning experiences for students as well as families who homeschool. One recent and powerful example occurred over the course of two weeks in early February at the Holter Museum of Art. The Museum’s Education Department hosted 322 Helena Public School students, 19 educators and 22 parent chaperones. All had the opportunity to learn from and work with Wanzin Zhang, an internationally recognized sculptor who is currently exhibiting his life-sized sculptures at the Holter. Students get excited about these kinds of opportunities. One fourth grader commented, “Wanzin Zhang, you’ve inspired me to do what you do.” Teachers feel that the experiences support learning in the arts as well as other curriculum areas and provide them with art making opportunities that couldn’t be re-created in the classroom.

Another fine example of how museums support student learning is the recent Medicine Wheel Project in which high school students learned the roles of American Indian men and women through time during an extended visit to the Montana Historical Society in partnership with Montana’s Indian Education for All initiative. Overall, Helena’s museums play a vital role in our community.

Perhaps unknown to many of our citizens, museum leaders play a major role in formulating school curriculum, working in concert with school officials in many states. And, of course, museums are vital educational tools for the parents of the estimated two million home-schooled children in this country.

Further, museums have adapted their educational programs to conform to the mandates of No Child Left Behind, incorporating standards in math and reading, while also adapting educational offerings to state and local benchmarks in art, science, language arts, civics and government and economics and financial literacy.

For many of today’s students, museums provide the switch that makes the light bulb go on. The experiential learning environment provided by museums makes it easier for many young people to grasp concepts that seem irrelevant and obscure on the pages of a textbook.

Clearly, the mission of all types of museums — from art museums to zoos and everything in between — is public service. And Americans appreciate this devotion to the public good. Witness the fact that museums receive more than 850 million visits annually, more than attendance at all professional sporting events and theme parks combined.
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If you value your local museum, tell your elected leaders, on Capitol Hill and at every level of government — either by email, telephone or old fashioned letter. The American Association of Museums website can help (www.speakupformuseums.org).

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