

Musikfest Highlights Critical Role Live Entertainment Plays in Lehigh Valley Economy

By Nicole Radzievich Mertz and Paul Muschick / Top photo by Donna Fisher Photography. Middle photo courtesy of IronPigs. Bottom photo courtesy of State Theatre.

LEHIGH VALLEY - When Musikfest opens July 31, the Lehigh Valley will once again strike a chord that echoes far beyond the stages and plazas of America's largest free, ungated music festival.

From signature bites like roasted corn to the colorful spectacle of street performers, Musikfest is not just a collection of more than 500 concerts over 10 days but an anthem for a region reinventing itself through art, culture, and shared experiences.

Live entertainment and cultural events are playing critical roles in the Lehigh Valley's economic renaissance, strengthening the growing, diversified \$56 billion economy now supporting historic high employment.

"The arts and entertainment sector has become one of the Lehigh Valley's most powerful engines for economic growth and quality of life," said Kassie Hilgert, President & CEO of ArtsQuest, the nonprofit that runs Musikfest.

"From full-time creative professionals to seasonal and support roles, this industry is generating jobs, attracting talent, and anchoring a regional identity rooted in innovation, community, and culture. Events like Musikfest, along with year-round programming at ArtsQuest and other venues across the Valley, not only fuel our local economy, they help position the Lehigh Valley as a dynamic, exciting place to live, work, and create," said Hilgert, who is a member of the Board of Directors of the Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corporation (LVEDC).

Live entertainment options are growing across the country in recent decades and have become an economic development asset for regions seeking to attract the creative class, a key driver of the 21st century economy. In the Lehigh Valley, this movement is especially pronounced.

Employment in the arts, spectator sports, and related industries grew from 932 jobs in 2001 to 2,214 today, according to an analysis of federal labor data by LVEDC Director of Research and Data Management Frank Alvarado. That's a 138% jump or about 2.5 times the national growth rate. While the sector comprises just a sliver of the jobs in the Lehigh Valley, the notable growth underscores the importance of live entertainment in the Lehigh Valley and how deeply it is embedded in the region's strategy for economic development and talent attraction.

In the last two decades, public-private partnerships have invested billions of dollars into venues like the PPL Center, Coca-Cola Park, Archer Music Hall, SteelStacks, and Wind Creek Event Center along with the debut of popular celebrations such as "BaconFest" in Easton and "Martin on Main" in Nazareth. That investment has reshaped the Lehigh Valley's industrial corners into destinations buzzing with concerts, games, and festivals.

Those new performance spaces and events join longtime gems such as the State Theatre Center for the Arts in Easton and Miller Symphony Hall and the Civic Theatre in Allentown, and of course, Musikfest, which debuted in 1984.

Lehigh Valley's arts and entertainment assets are among the key sectors of the Lehigh Valley economy targeted for growth by LVEDC in the organization's recently adopted strategic plan for 2025-2027.

"Arts and entertainment, and sports and recreation, are the front door to economic development," said Don Cunningham, President and CEO of LVEDC. "They create a quality of life and place that attracts people and their talents, which attracts companies, and makes a place special. The growth of this sector during the last 20 years was key to the economic renaissance of the Lehigh Valley."

People want to live where there are a variety of fun things to do. That helps to draw the talent that employers need, contributing to why Lehigh Valley has consistently been ranked as one of the top mid-sized regions in the U.S. for economic development.

The Lehigh Valley's population has grown to about 708,000. At a 3.1% growth rate since 2020, the two-county region is a hotspot for growth in Pennsylvania. Three of Pennsylvania's Top 10 fastest growing municipalities are in the Lehigh Valley: Bethlehem (3rd), Upper Macungie Township (4th), and Easton (8th).

"Lehigh Valley's arts and entertainment culture is continuing to expand and mature, driving economic growth and contributing to our exceptional quality of life that draws visitors and attracts talent for the region's employers," said Kurt Landes, President and General Manager of the Lehigh Valley IronPigs, the Phillies AAA team that plays at Coca-Cola Park.

"Coca-Cola Park in Allentown is best known as home of the IronPigs, consistently one of the top drawing teams in minor league baseball. But it hosts events year-round, serving as a community asset and a job creator," Landes said.

Coca-Cola Park was recently renovated, with a combination of public and private support, to improve the experience for both spectators and participants. Over the decades, the Lehigh Valley's classic performance halls, such as Miller Symphony Hall, which was built as the Lyric Theatre in 1899, and the State Theatre, which was built as the Neumeyer Theatre in 1910, also have been upgraded to keep up with the times and accommodate larger audiences.

"At the State Theatre, we light up Easton's historic stage with performances that spark joy and fuel the Lehigh Valley's economy," said State Theatre President and CEO Shelley Brown. "From Broadway hits to our beloved Freddy Awards, we support jobs for artists, stagehands, and local crews, while drawing audiences that energize downtown restaurants and hotels. We're more than a theatre; we're the beating heart of a community where culture thrives and lifelong memories are made."

