Silver City, Nevada
A Linchpin in a Wheel of Arts and Culture Economies

By Quest Lakes, Healthy Communities Coalition

The tiny mountain community of Silver City, located in Northern Nevada a few miles from Virginia City and about 30 miles from both Lake Tahoe and Reno, is an unusual case study in “Recreational Economies.” Unlike the nearby towns that offer full schedules of outdoor recreation possibilities and tourist attractions, Silver City is a linchpin in the region’s production of arts and cultural resources.

Situated in one of the country’s largest federally designated historic districts, Silver City has its roots in the mining boom of the 1860s. Historians estimate that by 1861, Silver City had at least a dozen stores, four hotels, three blacksmith shops, two butcher shops, and a post office, serving a population of more than 1,000 people. However, by the 1940s, the town had become a very quiet place that passing tourists saw as a ghost town.

But by the mid 1960s, a new wave of residents from other states began to arrive and Silver City experienced a “cultural re-population” that continued for the next 50 years. As former Silver City resident and University of Nevada, Reno Professor Emeritus Jim McCormick describes it, the new residents infused the community with fresh ideas and energy. In his 1987 Nevada Historical Quarterly essay, “Silver City-Reminiscences, Facts and a Little Gossip,” McCormick recalled that the new residents repaired the dilapidated community center; voted themselves onto the town council and instituted a rare participatory democracy system; expanded the town park adding new playground equipment, trees and a lawn; restored and remodeled historic structures to create unique homes; and re-invigorated the volunteer fire department (which...
then became one of the first in the U.S. to welcome women as firefighters).

Over the course of these 50 years, the community of less than 200 people produced a remarkable body of work that has contributed to recreational economies in a way that is unique. They’ve produced regionally and nationally recognized work in archaeology; anthropology; visual art; theater; music; photography; and historic preservation; as well as academic research and projects on the Great Basin, the historic Comstock region, and other parts of Nevada and the world. Many created hand-crafted items in silver, wood, gemstones, clay, etc., and examples can be found in diverse places, from the Smithsonian American Art Museum to the region’s historic cemeteries, homes, and buildings.

And although the residents enjoy their privacy, most of the year, over the last decade, they’ve expanded local public programming that reflects the unique “Arts and Cultural Resources Production Center” character of the community. Since 2003, the town has offered a free arts and science events program each summer. And throughout the year, public events including pop-up art shows, poetry readings, and monthly acoustic music events are hosted by a local arts group. The Resident Artist Program hosts both U.S. and international artists, musicians, and writers who stay at “McCormick House,” an artist’s residence designed by Professor McCormick, while they offer public programming in Silver City and Northern Nevada. This summer the town kicked off its 2016-2017 music season with a public concert featuring more than a dozen local musicians and bands performing on a new outdoor stage dubbed the “Silver Pavilion.”

In 2014, the Silver City Advisory Board recognized the existing character of Silver City as an “Arts and Cultural Resources Production Center,” and formally recognized the considerable work residents have contributed, and continue to contribute, to the production of important work in the areas of arts and cultural resources. The Board also formally recognized the extraordinary support the entire community has given and continues to give to local arts and cultural resources production, events, and programming.