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Orchestra's loss would be sour note

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Business Editor

The number crunchers are working overtime to justify taxpayer support for Orchestra London, but you need look no further for economic spinoff than London restaurateur Perry Jeffery.

He knows when Orchestra London is performing — and not just because he appreciates music.

Business is up noticeably at his three restaurants — Oscar Taylor's and T.J. Baxter's on Richmond Row and Rockwater's downtown — on performance nights.

It's safe to say other restaurants experience the same thing.

Those kinds of events draw people out at nights and the food and beverage industry is a natural beneficiary," Jeffery says. "It would be a blow to the industry to lose it (orchestra)."

It is not the orchestra's job — nor the taxpayer's responsibility — to prop up businesses such as Jeffery's.

But a healthy economic community — downtown and beyond — is in all our best interests and a community without an orchestra is one in danger of economic decline.

It's all part of a city's infrastructure — an economic ecosystem as delicate as any biological one.

That's why council has decided to support the orchestra. Yet it also knows taxpayers will go only so far.

A tougher business plan is a start, but it's also time for an overall arts strategy with more business principles and co-operation. They can't be self-sustaining, but they can be less costly. Coun. Joe Swan has been pushing for such a strategy and it's worth consideration.

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Pardon the expression, but there must be synergies between organizations. Surely the Grand Theatre and Orchestra London — and perhaps even others — can find some. Meanwhile, there are always more ways to increase revenues and reduce costs.

It's expected in the private sector to look for such opportunities. These two organizations — and others — can't surely try to do the same.

Meanwhile, for those still skeptical of the need for taxpayer support, consider that statistics show every \$1 of arts revenues generate another \$3 in spending. Studies also show each new dollar of municipal arts investment leverages another \$24 from other levels of government, the private sector and audiences.

Of course, such figures are becoming commonplace. Everybody wants money. Every organization thinks it has an economic spinoff.

The fact is they all do.

That's why we have a convention centre, why we're building an arena, why we built a market.

The loss of any cultural organization creates a chink in the economic armour of a community — a weak spot most can ill afford. There's no use focusing on a new type of entertainment in a community if you lose focus of an existing one.

Beyond the sentimental reasons for wanting an orchestra, that's why so many cities support them—most, according to Orchestra London, to a much greater tune than does this city Kitchener-Waterloo and Windsor, for example, pay \$1 per capita to support the orchestra each year in those cities. London pays 38 cents.

We can all do more.

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