

**Organization**

Rimrock Opera Company  
John O. Baber, Executive Director  
406-671-2214 / 406-252-0081 (home) [www.rimrockopera.org](http://www.rimrockopera.org)

*Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, for the record my name is John Baber, Executive Director of the Rimrock Opera Company of Billings. This is Gail Hein, my associate.*

***History and Vision***

Rimrock Opera Company was formed in 1997, the year opera marked its 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary. As many as 14,000 people including minorities, senior citizens and children are now reached annually. Rimrock Opera continues to evolve artistically within its mission, which is *to enhance the cultural life in this region by providing high quality operatic productions and to make opera available to everyone through community outreach productions and educational programming. Ongoing community support of the arts and culture is important to the local economy. Literally, the arts and culture mean business to our community, creating jobs, income, tourism, and travel. Future artistic programs will serve to push the envelope and further our motto: "Opera Is for Everyone."*

The goals and objectives of The Rimrock Opera are to make available some form of opera to everyone in the community. English Supertitles are projected above the stage to make the opera audience-friendly. On occasion, hearing-impaired persons have been able to enjoy the stunning sets and costumes, while following the story by means of the supertitles. Local and regional talent is used along side the professional guest artists in starring roles.

Montana is endowed with a beautiful natural environment, moderate climate, and rich cultural offerings to attract new businesses and individuals seeking a high standard of living. A well-rounded cultural life is one of the best economic indicators of the health of a community. Rimrock Opera fills a void in the arts landscape.

Two main-stage operas are produced each year at an average cost of \$80,000 to \$90,000 each. Ticket sales at best provide 40-50% of the budget. Last October, Rimrock Opera successfully staged a world premiere of *Nosferatu*, the Dracula legend. Opera Idaho of Boise shared the \$200,000-plus cost of mounting a new opera. Neither company could have afforded to do this on their own. Premiering *Nosferatu* put Billings "on the map" in the arts world. It brought Dana Gioia, who wrote the opera libretto, and is now Director of the National Endowment for the Arts, to Billings. It generated excellent publicity and reviews. With the help of the grant from Montana Cultural and Aesthetic Trust, Rimrock Opera survived the premiere **IN THE BLACK**.

Rimrock Opera is cultivating a new generation of opera lovers and performers through

1. A school tour performing to 8,000 students in twenty-five schools from Billings to Lewistown to Miles City and in between. It's wonderful that the majority of these students have a chance to see live opera as part of their cultural education.
2. An opera youth chorus organized in 2004. Entitled Rimrock Opera Chorus for Kids (ROCK), this group from grade 3 to 10 is learning music theory and music performance beyond their school music training. They will perform the role of the street urchins in Puccini's *La Bohème*, singing in Italian.
3. Arts Day in the community, with the Billings Symphony Orchestra, for 250 to 300 children.
4. A full house of 1,400 students is bused to the Alberta Bair Theater for matinee full-dress rehearsals of the main stage opera, complete with 34 piece Orchestra.
5. And finally, the Rimrock Opera Artistic Director teaches opera units at Boys and Girls Club summer camps.

Students with high levels of arts participation outperform 'arts-poor' students on virtually every measure; the arts have a measurable impact on students and their future.

In-kind support of over \$55,000 is received in good and services, making up 21% of the \$302,000 annual budget. Montana Cultural and Aesthetic Trust has awarded grants to Rimrock Opera for the current biennium and again for the 2006-2007 period, helping to grow enthusiastic audiences, both in the theater and in the schools. It's clear that opera has a promising future in this region.

Rimrock Opera is highly appreciative of the past and future support from the State of Montana through the Trust. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, for the record, as John mentioned, I'm Gail Hein.

My comments are more to the personal side, with a subtitle of "How one became twelve". Nine years ago when my husband died of cancer, I couldn't imagine life without him. I spent about 3 years bottom-feeding in the 'pity pond.' While at the second Rimrock Opera production in 2000, I suddenly got notion that being on their board might be interesting, but I kept my thoughts to myself. Through a chain of unusual circumstances, I was actually asked the very next day to serve on the board. So for the past four years plus, I have been very active and involved with every aspect of the workings of the opera company.

Why am I telling you this? Because first, it changed my life from being near despair to passionate involvement in a segment of the arts world that is endlessly fascinating.

And second, my friends and family have caught the opera-bug along with me. My younger granddaughter sings in the Rimrock Opera children's chorus. An older granddaughter and her husband drive from Scotts Bluff Nebraska to Billings for the opera, bringing along another couple from Casper on the way. My massage therapist became a fan. Etc, etc. And that is how I went from one to twelve people in my group of opera-goers.

The point of this little vignette is that the arts have power beyond entertainment. Through my own experience I have learned that the arts are able to hasten the healing of a suffering spirit, soothe the aching heart, and bring joy to the sorrowing soul. And joy spreads.

**Exhibit Number:**

4

**The following exhibit is a booklet that exceeds the 5-page limit therefore it cannot be scanned. The booklets' cover has been scanned to help you when requesting information. The exhibit is on file at the Montana Historical Society and can be viewed there.**

EXHIBIT 4  
DATE 2.9.03  
HB 9

the  
rimrock | opera