



ROCKFORD REGION CULTURAL PLAN

State of Culture EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

November 2023

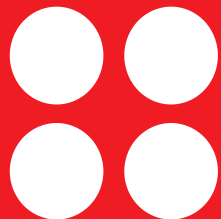
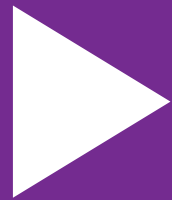


Introduction

In early 2023, The Rockford Area Arts Council (RAAC) hired the consulting firm Lord Cultural Resources to facilitate a cultural plan for the Rockford Region. This planning process was the result of a much longer conversation in Rockford about the role of arts and culture. The seeds of the cultural plan were sewn with Transform Rockford, which began in 2013 as a community-driven planning process to leverage Rockford's many assets to make Rockford one of the top places to live in the country. Arts and culture were a key pillar of Transform Rockford, with the goal to create a cultural plan.

Arts and culture also feature prominently amongst strategies in a number of subsequent Rockford plans. In the last decade, Rockford has made great progress in growing strengths in its arts and cultural landscape while continuing to grapple with ongoing challenges. Arts and culture can assist with these other challenges, and the goal of this planning process is to benefit all who live, work, and visit the Rockford Region.

The Road to the Rockford Region Cultural Plan





WHY

This cultural planning process arrives at a moment of exciting new research about the impact of arts and culture, building upon a long history of data that demonstrates how arts and culture provide numerous benefits to communities. Arts and culture provide beauty, meaning, and comfort, and also demonstrably improve outcomes in numerous other sectors.

Americans for the Arts Social Impact Explorer Wheel aggregates numerous studies, backed by extensive data, to show the proven benefits that arts and culture provide to communities, in sectors as diverse as workforce development, youth education, aging, technology, community cohesion, tourism, the environment, and physical and mental health. (Details can be found at: <https://ww2.americansforthearts.org/explorer>.) There are also many other recent powerful studies about the positive impact of arts and culture (detailed in the State of Culture full report), such as Americans for the Arts [Arts & Economic Prosperity 6](#) Report (known as AEP6) which notes that arts and culture generate over \$1 trillion in GDP annually for the US economy.





WHY NOW

Cultural plans help communities to identify and celebrate their unique cultural assets. The Rockford Region has a rich and diverse cultural heritage, but this is not always well known or appreciated by residents or visitors. A cultural plan can help to raise awareness of Rockford's arts and culture landscape and develop strategies to support, strengthen, and promote it.

- **A cultural plan can help to improve access to arts and culture for all residents.** Rockford has a number of vibrant arts and cultural organizations, but they are not always accessible to everyone. A cultural plan can identify barriers to access and develop strategies to overcome them.
- **A cultural plan can help to boost economic development.** Arts and culture are a major driver of economic growth. A cultural plan can help to attract new businesses and residents to Rockford and create jobs in the creative sector.
- **A cultural plan can help make Rockford a more livable and attractive place to live, work, and visit.** Arts and culture play an important role in creating a vibrant and diverse community. A cultural plan can help to make Rockford a more welcoming and inclusive place for everyone.

In addition to these general benefits, there are a number of specific reasons why it is particularly timely to develop a cultural plan for Rockford now.

- **Rockford is experiencing a period of economic and cultural revitalization.** The city has attracted a number of new businesses and residents in recent years, and there is a growing interest in arts and culture. A cultural plan can help to build on this momentum and ensure that Rockford's cultural sector continues to grow and thrive.
- **Rockford is an increasingly diverse community.** The city has a growing immigrant population and a strong LGBTQ+ community. A cultural plan can help to celebrate Rockford's diversity and ensure that everyone feels welcome and included in the city's cultural life.
- **Rockford is home to a number of talented artists and cultural organizations.** These organizations are producing high-quality work, but they often lack the resources and support they need to reach their full potential. A cultural plan can help to identify and support Rockford's cultural organizations and ensure that they have the resources they need to thrive.



Intersecting Plans in the region:

The Rockford Region Cultural Plan offers many opportunities to connect with, complement, and amplify recommendations and goals for other plans in the region as noted in the chart below.

Rockford Plan	Key Points, Recommendations, and/or Goals
R1 Comprehensive Plan (2023)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arts, Culture & Historic Landmarks are priorities Designated six local historic districts and six districts on National Register of Historic Places Lists important historical structures
Rockford Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Neighborhood placemaking to provide incubation space for arts and local entrepreneurs Support for local arts and maker community through short-term leases for temporary art installations Studios and galleries in vacant commercial spaces, and arts and culture promotion in neighborhoods
City of Rockford Equitable Recovery Assessment (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investing in minority owned businesses historically not included in city business development efforts Covid inspired many minority entrepreneurs to start creative and artistic businesses Partnership with Think Big, local nonprofit providing business support to MWBEs Recommends a regional Equity Pledge and cross-sectoral approach to tackle longstanding issues
Corridor plans (2009-22): 11 th Street, Auburn St, Keith Creek, Kishwaukee Creek	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incorporate public art, placemaking elements, signage, façade programs, and visual branding Integrate art and creativity into civic infrastructure and land use, to tell stories about Rockford and strengthen community identity, in collaboration with partners Improve aesthetic experience while providing information, education, and more vibrant spaces
Rockford Public Schools Facilities Master Plan (2025-2029)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5-year, \$180 million plan 2023-24: community feedback; 2024-25: design work; 2025: start project Sept 2023 launch revealed arts in the schools are very important to the community
Rockford Park District 2020 Action Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arts and culture programming is one of the key areas the community wants their tax dollars spent Communities want culturally inclusive programming
Rockford Area Convention and Visitors Bureau (RACVB) Destination Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Rockford Region Cultural Plan can complement goals of the Destination Plan and vice versa Great moment to highlight Rockford for residents and visitors alike

HOW & WHEN

OUR **PLANNING** PROCESS



The Rockford Region Cultural Plan is being developed through a three-phase process:

- **Phase 1:** Opportunities Assessment: This phase involved gathering data and conducting analysis to identify the opportunities and challenges facing the arts and culture sector in the Rockford Region.
- **Phase 2:** Public Engagement: This phase involved engaging with the community to get input on the current state of arts and culture in the region.
- **Phase 3:** Vision, Strategy, and Implementation: This phase will involve developing a vision for the future of the arts in the Rockford Region, as well as strategies for implementing the Cultural Plan

The three-phased process is designed to ensure that the plan is comprehensive, inclusive, and achievable.

The State of Culture Report provides the results of the extensive data collection in Phases 1 and 2 of the planning process.

The State of Culture Report lays the foundation for community decision-making with a comprehensive review of the region's cultural environment, including:

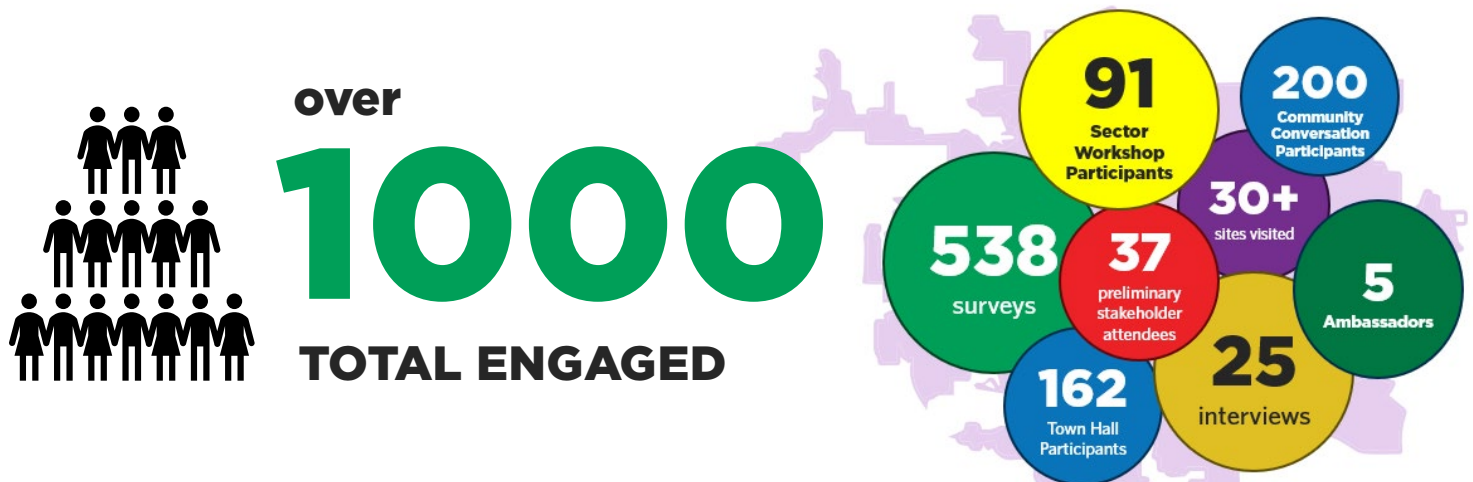
- Analysis of existing data and plans pertaining to the Rockford Region arts and culture sector.
- An examination of comparable communities in the nation.
- Research into relevant trends that have been highlighted in the Rockford Region.
- Key findings from robust areawide community engagement.



WHO

Inclusive Public Engagement and Leadership

The Project Advisory Committee (PAC) is made up of 25 arts and culture community representatives, guiding this planning process to ensure that Rockford Region Cultural Plan is shaped by a diverse spectrum of voices. Altogether, the opportunities put forth in this report were developed by synthesizing findings from comprehensive inputs as noted below:



The Rockford Region Cultural Plan's public engagement process has been extensive and inclusive. Inputs included in the key findings of this report include:

- Public Town Hall Meetings
- Online Survey of Cultural Participation
- Community Conversations and Do-It-Yourself Toolkits
- Site Tours
- Preliminary Stakeholder Workshop
- Stakeholder Interviews
- Sector Workshops
- Ambassadors from Rockford Region Residents



RRCP Project Advisory Committee (PAC)

Laurie Anderson	<i>Rockford Park District</i>
Janna Bailey	<i>Region 1 Planning Council</i>
Virginia Barnett	<i>RPS 205</i>
Bethany Bohn	<i>ASM Rockford</i>
Armando Cardenas	<i>State Farm Insurance-Domingos</i>
Earl Dotson Jr.	<i>RPS 205</i>
Michael Dunn	<i>Region 1 Planning Council</i>
Gretchen Gilmore	<i>ASM Rockford</i>
John Groh	<i>RACVB</i>
Wally Haas	<i>Transform Rockford</i>
Beth Howard	<i>Friends of the Coronado</i>
Becky Kendall	<i>Rockford Regional Health Council</i>
Sarah Leys	<i>City of Rockford</i>
Mary McNamara Bernsten	<i>RAAC</i>
Tremayne Meadows	<i>ER815</i>
Yash Musabji	<i>Icon Studios</i>
Danielle Potter	<i>Rockford Park District</i>
Vic Rivera	<i>Artist-Influencer</i>
Dan Ross	<i>CFNIL</i>
Jay Sandine	<i>Rockford Park District</i>
Melissa Santillan	<i>Beauty by Melissa Santillan</i>
Jennifer Smith	<i>CFNIL</i>
Jackie Sundquist	<i>RAMP</i>
Manny Tang	<i>Regional Artist</i>
Diego Valdivia	<i>YWCA Northwestern Illinois</i>

WHERE

Cultural Assets

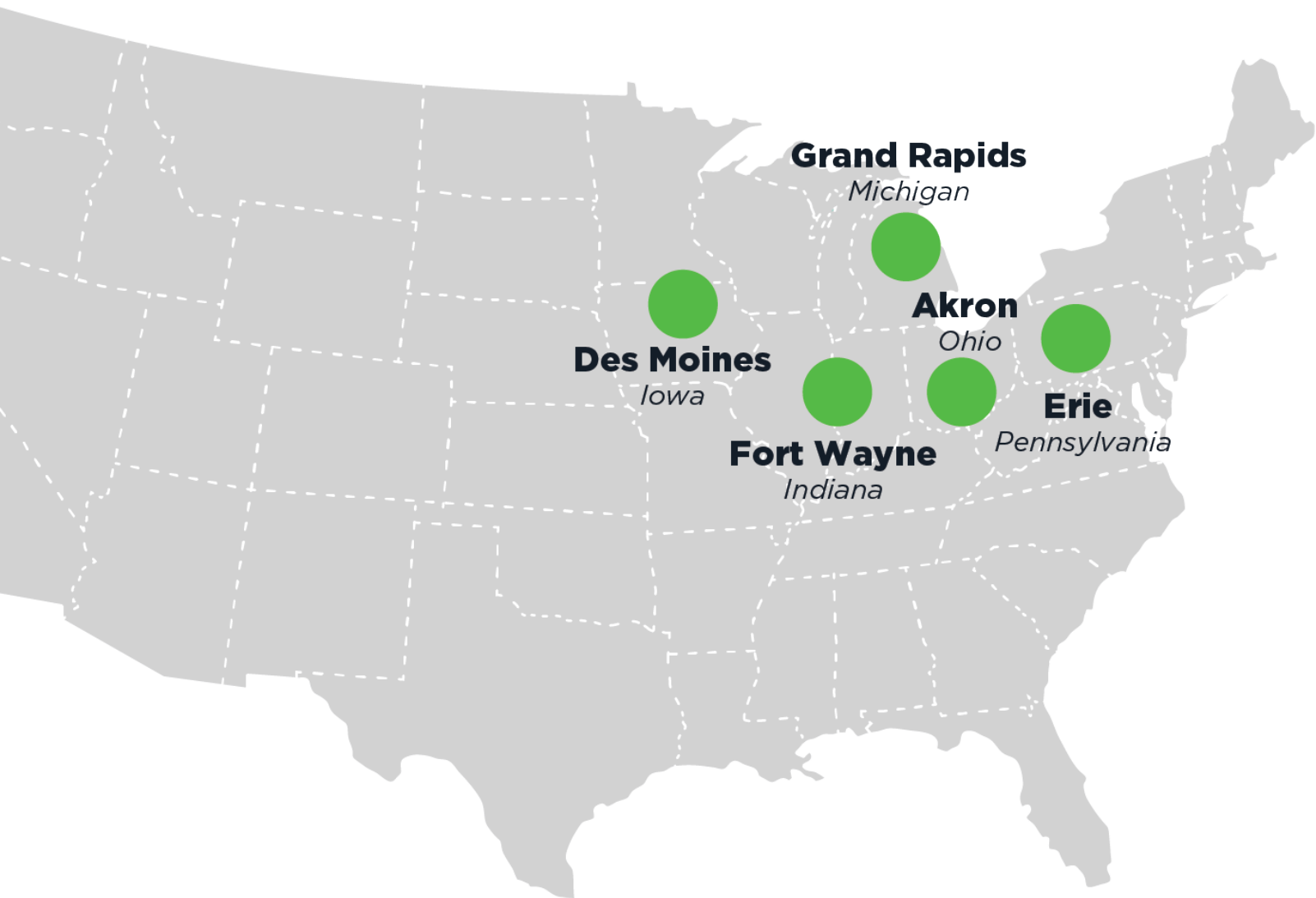
- A cultural asset inventory is a systematic record of the cultural assets of a community or region. Cultural assets can include a wide range of things, such as historic sites, museums, performing arts venues, cultural festivals, traditional arts and crafts, and cultural landscapes.
- The cultural asset inventory for the Rockford Region could be used to:
 - Create a map that allows users to explore the region's cultural assets by type of activity, type of space, and by location;
 - Develop educational materials for schools and community groups;
 - Integrate into a cultural tourism marketing campaign;
 - Inform decisions about how to allocate public funding for arts and culture;
 - And identify opportunities for collaboration and networking among arts and cultural organizations.





Comparable Cities

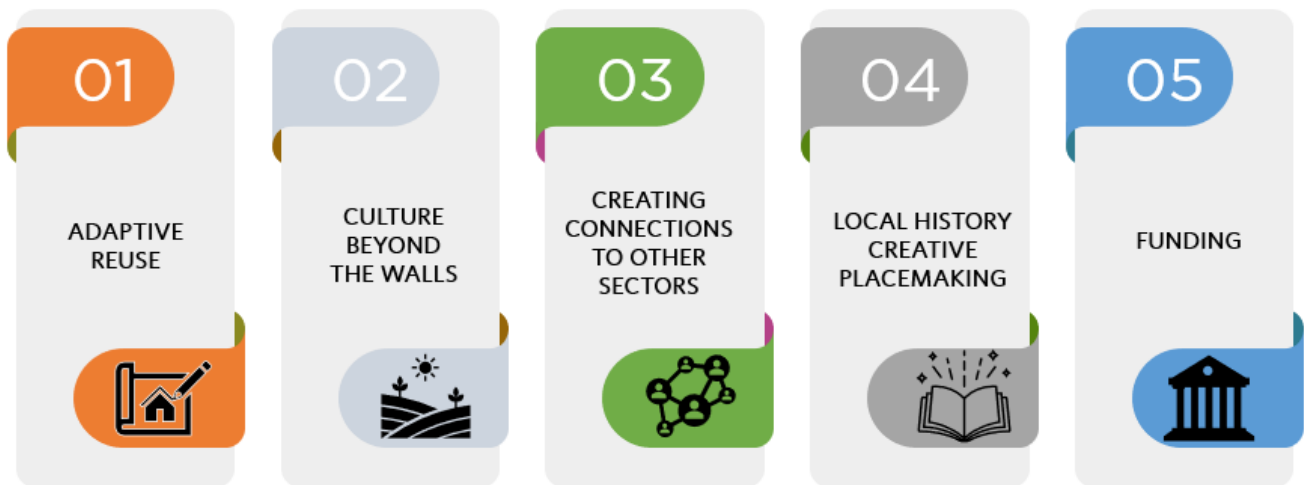
As part of the planning process, the planning team worked with the PAC to identify comparable cities that offer inspirations and lessons for the Rockford Region.



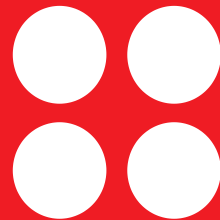
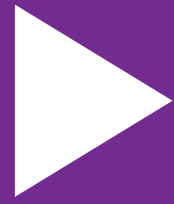


Trends

The planning team worked with the PAC to identify trends in arts and culture and provided examples of these trends in other places. These can also serve as inspirations for the Rockford Region.



KEY FINDINGS





WHAT

Key Findings

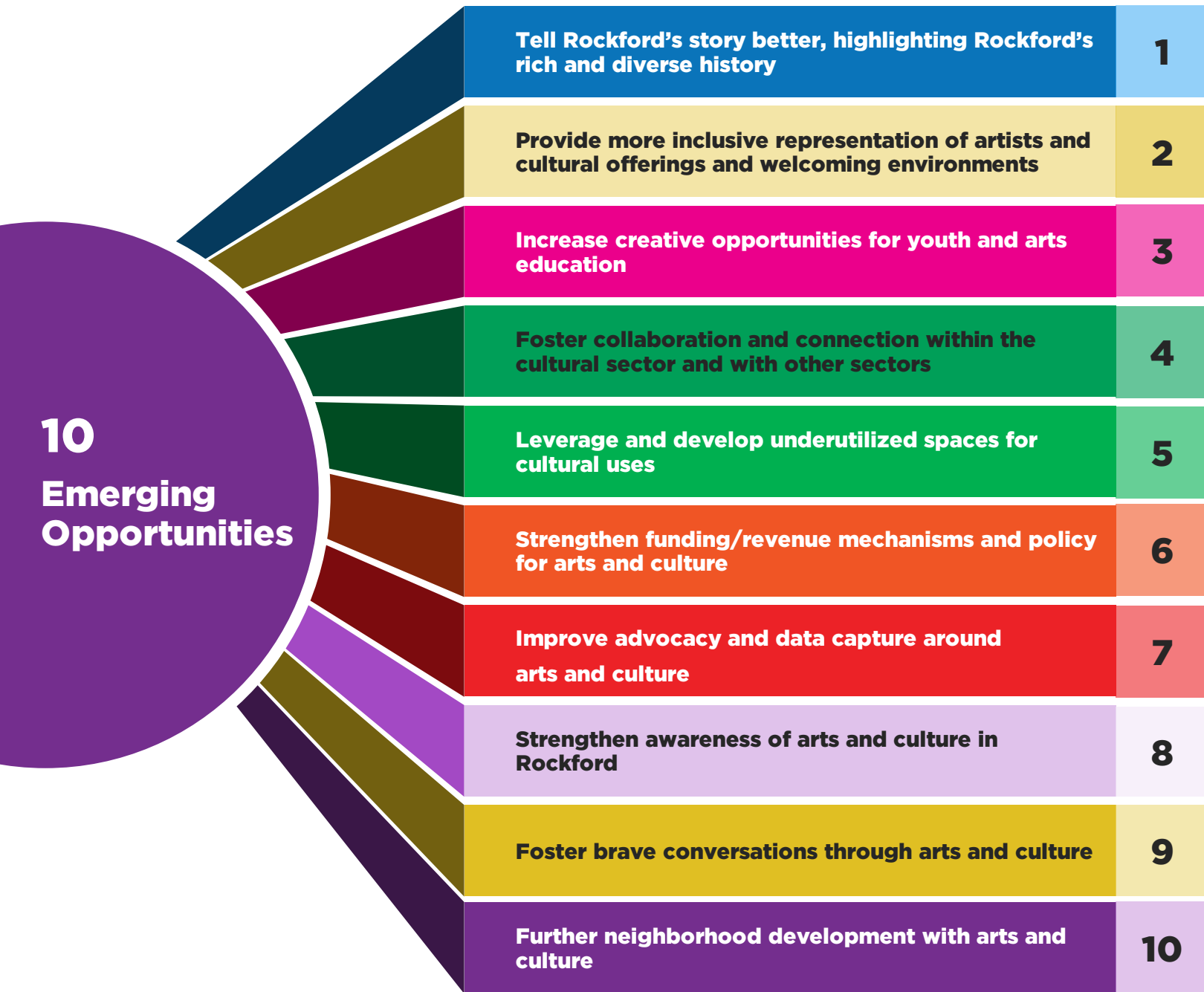
As a result of all the research and public engagement, the following are the key findings about the Rockford Region cultural landscape:

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES	CHALLENGES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversity of offerings and population with growing equity in representation • Music and cultural festivals • Nature and parks • Location and access • Rich cultural assets • Public art - murals, sculptures, utility box wraps, art along the bike path • Growth in the arts and connections “beyond the art world” • Quality of life/boomerang residents • Rich history • Entrepreneurial spirit • Architecture • Momentum to build upon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness is low • Not taking credit for successes/negative self-perception • Economic challenges for artists and arts organizations • Not enough affordable spaces for artists and arts activities • Segregated cultural offerings • Gaps in arts education and youth opportunities • Fragmentation and a sense of cliquishness • Need for more nightlife options • Professional skills (fundraising, marketing, permitting, etc.) • Lack of centralized information hub for arts and culture events and offerings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographic, class, and racial divides • Lack of equitable representation • Trauma and mental illness • Low income/educational attainment • Cost barriers • Transportation • Shortage of housing and communal spaces • Difficulty recruiting talent • Covid impact • Lack of trust • Population loss • Language barriers to participate and share diverse cultural offerings



Emerging Opportunities

Emerging opportunities are listed below. In the report, each opportunity in turn has examples of detailed actions to address these opportunities.





ROCKFORD REGION CULTURAL PLAN

For more information, visit the Rockford Area Arts Council web page:

<https://www.artsforeveryone.com/cultural-plan/>

We are deeply grateful to all who contributed to the findings of this report, and extend a special thanks to the committed individuals on the Project Advisory Committee (PAC).