



# ROCKFORD REGION CULTURAL PLAN

## State of Culture

November 2023

Lord Cultural Resources is a global professional practice dedicated to making the world a better place through culture.

We assist people, communities, and organizations to realize and enhance cultural meaning and expression.

We distinguish ourselves through a comprehensive and integrated full-service offering built on a foundation of key competencies: visioning, planning and implementation.

We value and believe in cultural expression as essential for all people. We conduct ourselves with respect for collaboration, local adaptation and cultural diversity, embodying the highest standards of integrity, ethics and professional practice.

We help clients clarify their goals; we provide them with the tools to achieve those goals; and we leave a legacy as a result of training and collaboration.

Our New York office is located on the traditional lands of the Lenape peoples. Our Long Beach office is located on the land of the Tongva/Gabrieleño and the Acjachemen/Juaneño Nations, who have lived and continue to live here. Our Toronto office is located within the traditional territory of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples.

We encourage you to acknowledge the presence of the people who came before, wherever you are.



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# FUNDERS AND PARTNERS



**Funding partners:**

- Community Foundation of Northern Illinois
- Rockford Area Convention and Visitors Bureau
- City of Rockford
- Rockford Area Arts Council

**Our collaborative partners include:**

- Rockford Park District
- Region 1 - Planning Council
- Transform Rockford
- Winnebago County
- Northern Illinois Center for Nonprofit Excellence
- State Representatives West, Sosnowski, and Vella
- State Senators Stadelman and Syverson





# 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 (Winnebago and Boone Counties). 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.

## Why create a cultural plan?

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.





### **Arts + Social Cohesion**

- 40% feel more positive about their community after taking part in the arts
- 9 out of 10 say the arts increase connection to community
- 80% of people explore new places for the arts
- Arts bridge language barriers and unite disparate groups
- Groups built around cultural experiences score highest on trust and tolerance
- Arts participation unites generations, reduces fear, and empowers citizens

### **Arts + Public Welfare**

- Arts participation increases neighborhoods' safety
- Cultural participants are 50% more likely to be involved in other community activities
- Arts-rich communities have 18% less serious crime and 14% fewer reports of abuse and neglect
- Cultural participants are 2x as likely to volunteer
- The arts encourage empathy and decrease distrust of others

### **Arts + Workforce Development**

- Creativity is a top 3 most desired skill by employers
- 50% of business executives credit the arts for their career success
- 4.7 million jobs are created by arts and culture
- Employers rank study in the arts as a top indicator of desirability in employees
- 90% of CEOs partook in arts in school

### **Arts + Health & Well-Being**

- 43% of frontline clinical health staff believe that arts have a positive effect on healing
- 50% of hospitals have arts programs
- \$2.25 billion of savings are projected by scaling a successful hospital arts program to national level
- \$56 billion annually can be saved nationwide from patients exposed to art who recuperate faster and need less medication
- The arts provide a 24% improvement in clinical outcomes
- Increased immunity results from artistic activity for those battling terminal diseases

Note: Sources for all datapoints can be found at <https://americansforthearts.org/socialimpact>

An underlying goal of this Rockford Region cultural planning process is to connect to other community goals in Rockford, while also strengthening the fabric of arts and culture in the region, to attract and retain more residents, visitors, and investment.



## The Power of a Cultural Plan

On a practical level, cultural plans can galvanize communities and attract new resources, including financial support. In Kingston, New York, the Kingston Arts and Culture Master Plan (completed by Lord Cultural Resources in 2021) was cited as one of the inspirations for the nonprofit Center for Photography at Woodstock (CPW) to move to Kingston from its original location in Woodstock, purchasing a 40,000 square foot former cigar factory to restore it as a destination arts center. The project attracted support from New York's governor, the Ulster County Executive, and a \$1.5 million Restore NY grant from Empire State Development (ESD) as well as an ESD Capital Grant of \$350,000 recommended by the Mid-Hudson Regional Economic Development Council.

A key priority of the Kingston cultural plan was to nurture the creative economy - to preserve and create affordable space, workforce development and, economic opportunities — and to be a regional cultural hub. The Kingston Arts and Culture Master Plan — and how investing in CPW's new home aligned with that plan - was cited in the April 2023 press release announcing the groundbreaking for the project\*.

\* <https://esd.ny.gov/esd-media-center/press-releases/esd-announces-groundbreaking-2-million-center-for-photography-at-woodstock-ulster-county>





# PROCESS OVERVIEW



# PROCESS OVERVIEW

## OUR **PLANNING** PROCESS



This planning process consists of three phases. The State of Culture is a report on the summation of work conducted in Phases 1 and 2.

## PHASE 1: OPPORTUNITIES ASSESSMENT

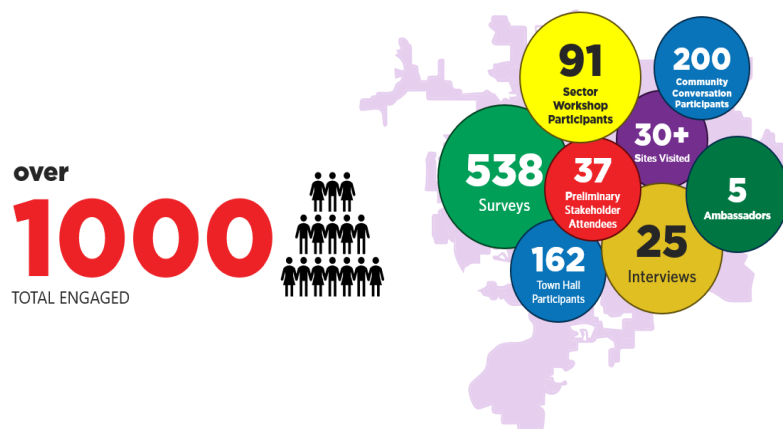
As a part of this planning process, the consultant team reviewed previous planning efforts for the Rockford Region (see Chapter 3). Through consultation with the Rockford Area Arts Council and a Project Advisory Committee (PAC), made up of representatives from all over the region, the team crafted a public engagement strategy to ensure that this plan for arts and culture in the Rockford Region became an opportunity to bring together the Rockford community to address challenges and opportunities impacting the arts and culture ecosystem.



## PHASE 2: PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

To date, over 1,000 people from the Rockford Region have been engaged in the Regional Cultural Plan process, through:

- Preliminary Stakeholder Conversations
- Town Hall Meetings
- Online Survey of Cultural Participation
- Sector Workshops
- Community Ambassador Outreach
- Community Conversations and DIY Tool Kits
- Stakeholder Interviews
- Site Visits



In collaboration with the Rockford Area Arts Council and the Project Advisory Committee (PAC), the consultant team created a process grounded in equitable public engagement.

This intentional work of reaching into not only geographic neighborhoods, but also cultural communities, has been imperative to ensure a multitude of voices are brought to the table to build trust and legitimacy for the planning process.

When people feel like they have a say in the decisions that affect their lives, they are more likely to support the outcomes. This is especially important for a plan that aims to promote cultural vitality and community development through the activation of arts and culture practitioners, business owners, and residents.

Working with the PAC from the outset of the planning process has helped to identify and address potential challenges and concerns early on and ensure the creation of a plan that is truly representative of the community.

Phases 1 and 2 of this planning process set the stage for Phase 3. This report consolidates the findings from the first two phases to have a common frame of reference to decide on the high-level priorities for the cultural plan. Those priorities in turn will be the basis of Phase 3 - creating a vision and strategies for implementation.



**CONNECTING WITH  
OTHER PLANS &  
STUDIES**



# CONNECTING WITH OTHER PLANS & STUDIES

## THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF ARTS AND CULTURE NATIONALLY

The planning process for the Rockford Region Cultural Plan is occurring just as Americans for the Arts released its newest Arts & Economic Prosperity Report, known as AEP6, the most rigorous national study of the social and economic impact of the arts across the United States. The study provides detailed findings on 373 regions across the United States, ranging from small to large populations and representing rural, suburban, and urban communities. While the Rockford Region did not participate as a partner in AEP6 (due to cost and capacity issues), the study does provide useful context surfacing trends relevant to Rockford. In 2024, additional data by Americans for the Arts will be released for all counties in the U.S. – including the Rockford Region – about the number of (nonprofit and commercial) arts business establishments, employment, income, and artist employment. As part of this planning process, the consultant team secured some of this information for this State of Culture report. AEP6 data pertaining to the Rockford Region is included in Appendix H.

**“Arts and culture are a fundamental component of livable communities— beautifying cities and towns, bringing joy to residents, and celebrating diverse cultural expressions and traditions. It powers the creative communities where people want to live and work, where entrepreneurs and innovation thrive, and where businesses and nighttime economies flourish. Shared cultural experiences strengthen social bonds, sense of belonging, and community pride and identity.”**

- AEP6, Americans for the Arts

**“Arts & Economic Prosperity 6 delivers a clear and welcome message: When communities invest in arts and culture, they are not doing so at the expense of community and economic development. Rather, they are investing in an industry that stimulates the economy, supports local jobs, and contributes to building healthy, vibrant, and more livable communities.”**

- AEP6, Americans for the Arts



The headline message of AEP6 is the arts are good business, and a vibrant nonprofit arts and culture community not only keep residents and their discretionary spending close to home, they also attract visitors who spend money and help local businesses thrive.

Highlights from the study include:

- In 2022, arts and culture generated \$151.7 billion in economic activity
- Total spent by arts and culture organizations: \$73.3 billion
- Event related spending by arts and culture audiences: \$78.4 billion
- Jobs supported: 2.6 million jobs
- Personal income to residents: \$101 billion
- Government tax revenue: \$29.1 billion

Other key takeaways are:

- Nonprofit arts and culture organizations are businesses, creating jobs and spending money locally.
- Arts and culture drives commerce to local businesses including restaurants, transportation, and child or pet care. Attendees at nonprofit arts and culture events spent an average of \$38.46 per event beyond the cost of admission.
- Arts and culture strengthen the visitor economy: 77% of nonlocal attendees to activities report that the primary purpose of their visit was to attend that cultural event. On average these visitors spend twice as much as their local counterparts.
- A vibrant arts and culture community keeps residents spending locally.
- Spending by attendees to BIPOC and ALAANA<sup>1</sup> events reflect national spending, demonstrated by Americans for the Arts rigorous methodology that intentionally measured diverse audiences for the first time.
- Arts and culture sparks creativity and innovation: “Creativity” is among the top skills sought by business leaders and employers.
- Improved community image: 70% agree that arts and culture “improve the image and identity of their community.”
- Arts and culture instill pride: 63% say “arts and culture inspire a sense of pride in their community.”
- Improved livability: 86% believe arts and culture is “important to their community’s quality of life and livability.”
- Building empathy and understanding: 72% believe “the arts provide shared experiences with people of different races, ethnicities, ages, beliefs, and identities (gender, political, national origin).”

AEP6 data pertaining to the Rockford Region is included in Appendix H.

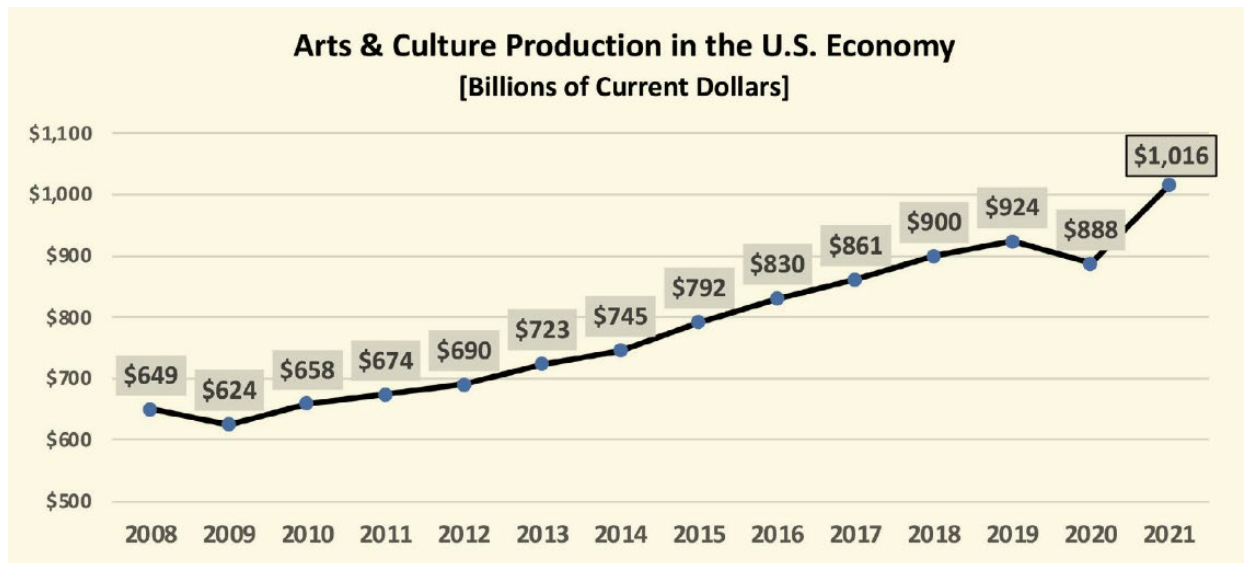
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<sup>1</sup> BIPOC refers to Black, Indigenous, People of color and ALAANA refers to African, Latinx, Asian, Arab, Native American populations.



## ARTS AND CULTURE AS ONE OF THE ECONOMY'S LARGEST SECTORS

While AEP6 focuses on the nonprofit sector, a March 2023 analysis by the U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) includes both the commercial and nonprofit sector and reveals that arts and cultural economic activity in 2021 accounted for **4.4 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), or \$1.02 trillion, in 2021 supporting 4.9 percent jobs.**<sup>2</sup> Arts and culture are a larger segment of the economy than most people realize – a larger share of GDP than construction, transportation, and agriculture. Furthermore, arts and culture production has been steadily growing aside from the pandemic dip:



## THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE ARTS IN ILLINOIS AND IN THE ROCKFORD REGION

According to the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA), in 2021, art and culture production accounted for \$31.1 billion and 3.3% of the Illinois economy, with 196,769 jobs related to the industry. Arts and cultural value added in Illinois ranked third among comparison sectors – more than construction, utilities, education services, agriculture and forestry, and mining.<sup>3</sup>

The 2021 report *The Economic Impact of the Arts Industry in Northern Illinois*, created by Region 1 Planning Council, Rockford Area Arts Council, City of Rockford, and Winnebago County, provides data on the economic impact of arts and culture in four counties: Winnebago, Boone Ogle, and Dekalb. Key findings from this report include that in 2019:

- The arts industry created a total output of roughly \$145 billion.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.bea.gov/news/2023/arts-and-cultural-production-satellite-account-us-and-states-2021#:~:text=Arts%20and%20cultural%20economic%20activity%20accounted%20for%204.4%20percent%20of,\(tables%20%20and%203\)](https://www.bea.gov/news/2023/arts-and-cultural-production-satellite-account-us-and-states-2021#:~:text=Arts%20and%20cultural%20economic%20activity%20accounted%20for%204.4%20percent%20of,(tables%20%20and%203))

<sup>3</sup> [https://nasaa-arts.org/nasaa\\_research/creative-economy-state-profiles/#nasaa\\_field\\_1](https://nasaa-arts.org/nasaa_research/creative-economy-state-profiles/#nasaa_field_1)



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- The arts industry employed roughly 4,000 employees, two-thirds of which were in Winnebago County.
- There are approximately 86 arts organizations within the four-county region, the majority (52) of which are in Winnebago County.
- In 2021, the arts industry created \$144 million in output for Winnebago County.
- For every dollar of creative output, \$.58 of additional output is created in eight key sectors (construction, real estate, manufacturing, retail + wholesale, transportation + public utilities, accommodation, food + beverage services, and state + local government).

This study was based in part on findings from SMU's Arts Vibrancy Index<sup>4</sup> from 2020. Updated information about Rockford from SMU's 2023 Arts Vibrancy Index is included in Appendix G.

## THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

The COVID-19 epidemic and its aftermath has been a major factor for Rockford's arts and culture sector, reflecting national trends as evidenced by a variety of recently published reports and studies.

**Chicago Arts and Culture Financial and Operating Trends:** An October 2023 report by SMU Data Arts and DCASE (Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events), *Navigating Recovery: Arts and Culture Financial and Operating Trends in Chicago*<sup>5</sup> notes that despite our collective emergence from the pandemic, many arts organizations are still struggling to recoup pre-pandemic audience levels, while costs are rising and governmental pandemic-related support is drying up. Attendance decreases varied among organizations; larger organizations had slightly lower percentage decreases in in-person attendance than smaller organizations, and BIPOC organizations saw somewhat deeper in-person attendance losses. Overall, earned income as a portion of total income dropped from 60% in 2019 to 46% in 2022 (though 2022 improved from 2021, where the percentage was just 29%). Private donations, meanwhile, have failed to keep pace with inflation.

Still, there are bright spots. In-person attendance has steadily grown since 2020, though the future levels are still unknown. Arts and culture organizations learned new and nimble ways of working, including increasing digital programming and creating new models for pricing, packaging, programmatic offerings, and locations of offerings such as mobile pop-ups. For example, the American Alliance of Museums has promoted the adoption of monthly rather than annual museum membership, an idea which has had success in other nonprofit sectors. Also, BIPOC organizations in the Chicago report experienced a 46% increase in individual contributions. Also, while total foundation support decreased by 21%, small organizations bucked the trend with 59% growth in foundation support. Working capital was a bright spot for smaller organizations, who grew their working capital relative to expenses by 40%, and medium organizations, who grew it by 20%. This finding suggests that larger organizations

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<sup>4</sup> SMU DataArts, is a national center for arts research at Southern Methodist University.

<sup>5</sup> Prepared by Zannie Voss, Rebecca Roscoe, Daniel Fonner, and Jen Benoit-Bryan for the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, "*Navigating Recovery: Arts and Culture Financial and Operating Trends in Chicago*" (Chicago: SMU Data Arts and DCASE, 2023), [https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/dca/supp\\_info/navigating\\_recovery.html](https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/dca/supp_info/navigating_recovery.html). Accessed October 6, 2023.

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can benefit by collaborating with smaller organizations – each can complement the other with relative strengths.

The Chicago report notes that the trends in Chicago are a microcosm of broader experiences elsewhere. The trends revealed by the Chicago report align with some of the findings from Rockford's arts and cultural organizations, which are also experiencing attendance and ticket sales below pre-pandemic levels. Still, Rockford's arts organizations displayed great nimbleness during the pandemic, and grew a foundation for collaboration that can benefit all in the arts and culture landscape as we more fully emerge from the impacts of COVID-19.

Key to the production of the Chicago SMU report was an investment in data gathering prior to the production of the report. This involved drawing on data from SMU's Cultural Data Project (CDP) as well as adding questions on the Chicago Arts Recovery Program (CARP) applications. **Clear data gathering of this kind requires up front planning which can be a goal for the Rockford Region in the future.**

**Public Participation in the Arts and Online Audiences:** In October 2023, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) released the results of two new research publications: *Arts Participation Patterns in 2022: Highlights from the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts and Online Audiences for Arts Programming: A Survey of Virtual Participation Amid COVID-19*. Key findings from the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPAA) includes the following:

- More than half (52 %) of the nation's adults did some form of art making in 2022, similar to levels in 2017.
- For most art forms, the share of adults personally creating and/or performing has either grown modestly or held flat since 2017. Art making activities that showed growth from 2017 included leatherwork, metalwork, and woodwork, and playing musical instruments.
- Social dancing is the most popular activity across all forms of personal arts performance and creation, followed by singing.
- Attendance rates to in-person art events declined in virtually every category specified in the survey — art museum or gallery visits, and attendance at jazz, classical, or Latin/salsa music performances, musical and non-musical plays, craft fairs and outdoor performing arts festivals, operas, ballet and other dance forms, and movies.
- However, attendance rates grew 15 % to 21% of adults for the "other" performing arts category. This could include all kinds of music, dance, and theater events not specified by the survey, such as rock or pop, rap or hip-hop, folk or country, or music from other countries and cultural traditions, in addition to comedy/improv, circus acts, or magic shows.
- As for visual arts attendance, the only activity not to see a severe decline was visits to parks, buildings, monuments, or neighborhoods for historic or design purposes.
- **In 2022, open-air facilities (e.g., parks, pavilions, amphitheaters) were among the most popular sites of in-person arts attendance.**
- Social media and peer-to-peer communications were the most commonly cited mechanisms for learning about in-person arts events that survey respondents attended.

The *Online Audiences for Arts Programming* can be read as a companion to the SPPA. In short, it reveals (unsurprisingly) a major increase in experiencing arts programming via digital means. While the pandemic is mostly over, the habits of engaging with the arts online are likely to be a lasting legacy. That said, this does not need to be an either/or proposal, but rather, digital programming can be a complement to in-person programming.



**Museum Visitation Shifts:** Another 2023 report focuses specifically on museum visitation habits post-pandemic. The American Alliance of Museums 2023 Data Stories<sup>6</sup> includes a report on leisure time shifts impacting museum visitation. The report finds that museums having to address greater competition and barriers including costs, personal health concerns, and crowds. Museums can address these concerns with coupons, discounts, sharing “less busy” times, and having special hours for those with health concerns. Additionally, many respondents noted they wished for a greater variety of things happening at museums such as:

- Alternative hours of operation (evening events, date nights, happy hours)
- Opportunities to socialize with people
- Anything new for kids such as experiential activities and learning opportunities
- “Places need to be opened up in a way that people feel they can just sit and be somewhere other than the four walls of their own home!”



📷 Rockford Art Museum is housed at the Riverfront Museum Park, in Rockford. (Jon McGinty photo)

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.wilkeningconsulting.com/uploads/8/6/3/2/86329422/asmg\\_2023\\_-\\_leisure\\_time\\_data\\_story.pdf](https://www.wilkeningconsulting.com/uploads/8/6/3/2/86329422/asmg_2023_-_leisure_time_data_story.pdf)



## **Advocacy to address the challenges of the performing arts**

Theater and the performing arts have been particularly hard hit as a result of the pandemic, experiencing significantly higher audience declines than museums. In July 2023, the New York Times published an essay entitled "American Theater Is Imploding Before Our Eyes." The publication noted numerous theaters nationwide which had canceled or reduced performances and laid off staff. The essay has sparked a lot of conversations among everyone in and near the performing arts.

One response is proposed by

One Nation/ One Project, a national arts and health initiative designed to activate the power of the arts to repair the social fabric of our national and heal our communities. One Nation, One Project's new campaign Arts for Everybody is modeled on the 1936 Federal Theatre Project, which produced and premiered an adaptation of a single play on the same night across America. On July 24, 2024, Arts for Everybody will similarly bring together cities and towns across the United States to simultaneously premiere distinct, collaborative, and participatory works, each site uniquely and creatively responding to a single prompt #NoPlaceLikeHome.

While Rockford can start by collaborating more closely locally and regionally, a goal for the future could be to partner on broader, national initiatives of this kind.

Finally, respondents expressed a desire to see new work that includes voices that have historically not been as present: "It's critical for a museum to support robust curatorial missions and risk takers. I hope that the museum can find the courage to make gains and take risks and bring work that isn't already canonized elsewhere. Otherwise, the museum will lose the next generation of supporters and philanthropists. We cannot be places where everyone is over 70 and remembers the good ol' days. We need to create the good days for today's aware and informed citizenry." This sentiment speaks directly to a broader shift happening in society – an increasing imperative for greater equity, diversity, and inclusion.

## **SHIFTING TO A MORE EQUITABLE SOCIETY**

A concurrent impact of the watershed COVID-19 crisis has been a historic reckoning with structural racial inequities and a growing imperative for diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and belonging. The outcomes of this societal shift are globally felt through all sectors and are also prominently reflected in arts and culture trends. One example is a community engagement and equity research director was hired as for the newly-released Arts & Economic Prosperity 6 report. While arts and culture find expression among all people, there is recognition that not all voices in arts and culture have been historically equally elevated. Across the field, arts and culture organizations are intently working at deepening engagement with diverse communities to improve accessibility and a true feeling of welcome.

Several recently published reports have studied the intersection of arts and cultural organizations and communities of color. According to "Centering the Picture: The Role of Race



& Ethnicity in Cultural Engagement in the U.S.” published in December 2020, changes desired by cultural audiences post-pandemic are even more pronounced among BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) groups. The three top changes cited by these community-centered cultural organizations are to 1) become more inclusive and community centered; 2) become more casual and enjoyable; and 3) offer content that is more reflective of people’s lives and is more frequently refreshed.<sup>7</sup> An April 2021 SMU DataArts report, “The Intersection of Funding, Marketing, and Audience, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion,” examines “if and how donor priorities and an organization’s location, subscriber base, and marketing actions affect the extent to which audiences represent the diversity of the organization’s community.”<sup>8</sup> Among the studies’ findings are that the larger the subscriber base of an organization, the lower the levels of audience and income representativeness, and that foundation/government philanthropic support correlates with a greater level of racial and income representativeness, and the opposite is true with corporate support. In Rockford, a top-level finding is that diversity is a key strength of the region. While there is a painful history of segregation, there are also many signs of progress in overcoming the past, and great opportunity in ensuring a truly welcoming arts and culture landscape for all in Rockford.

## ROCKFORD REGION PLANS AND STUDIES

The Rockford Region Arts and Culture Plan builds upon other plans in Rockford to amplify with previous recommendations and deepen connections to arts and culture as a strategy for overall community uplift. Connections to arts and culture are woven through a number of recent Rockford plans, as follows:

**City of Rockford Comprehensive Plan (2023)** lays out a vision for a future city where arts attractions prominently feature as part of the plan’s overall goals to make the City of Rockford a more desirable place to live for all. The plan notes public art as a key strength in Rockford, particularly the CRE8IV Transformational Arts Festival and public murals created by the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau’s (RACVB) placemaking and beautification initiative. Funded largely by a grant from the Illinois Department of Commerce’s Office of Tourism and local match raised through personal investments, sponsorships, and donations, the festival was first held in 2019 and included nine murals in downtown Rockford by eight artists. Since 2019, 20 more murals have been added throughout the Rockford Region. Sculptures are also a prominent feature of the Rock River Recreational Path. The Rockford Park District in cooperation with the Rockford Art Museum and Arts Council, maintains these sculptures, and these entities have also worked together to create a two-mile public art walking tour that can be self-guided or part of a tour leaving from the Nicholas Conservatory & Garden Grounds.

In addition to Rockford’s key museums, learning centers, and other arts institutions (all listed in the cultural asset inventory that is part of this plan), the comprehensive plan also notes

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<sup>7</sup> Jen Benoit-Bryan et al., “Centering the Picture: The Role of Race & Ethnicity in Cultural Engagement in the U.S.” (Chicago: Slover Linnett Audience Research, 2020), 2. An analysis of national survey data from the first wave of “Culture and Community in a Time of Crisis: A Special Edition of Culture Track.” [sloverlinett.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Centering-the-Picture-full-report-CCTC-Wave-1-findings.pdf](https://sloverlinett.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Centering-the-Picture-full-report-CCTC-Wave-1-findings.pdf). Accessed April 1, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Zannie Voss, Glenn Voss, and Young Woong Park, “The Intersection of Funding, Marketing, and Audience Diversity, Equity and Inclusion” (Dallas: SMU Data Arts, 2021), 3. [sloverlinett.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Centering-the-Picture-full-report-CCTC-Wave-1-findings.pdf](https://sloverlinett.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Centering-the-Picture-full-report-CCTC-Wave-1-findings.pdf). Accessed May 1, 2021.

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historic preservation as a priority. As of January 2018, Rockford designated the following six areas as local historic districts:

- Haight Village
- Garfield Avenue
- Indian Terrace
- Brown’s Hills/Knightsville
- Northeast State & Main
- Peacock Brewery

In addition, six districts have been listed on the National Register of Historic Places, as follows:

- East Rockford
- Haight Village
- 7<sup>th</sup> Street Commercial
- Barber-Colman Company
- West Downtown Rockford
- Garrison-Coronado-Haskell Historic District

These districts can be guides to priority geographic areas for this cultural plan. Since the Rockford Comprehensive Plan was adopted, the Barber-Colman Redevelopment Plan was approved by the City Council in July 2023. The full \$430 million plan is expected to be completed over 10 years.

The comprehensive plan also lists several important historical structures. The goals for Arts, Culture & Historic Landmarks from the comprehensive plan, listed below are to provide complementary context for the goals to be determined as a result of this cultural plan. Particularly notable is the final goal in this list: “Establish a list that can be updated and added to highlight local amenities by category or type.” Such a list is part of this planning process, which is creating a cultural asset inventory for the Rockford Region.



Goals Objectives and Implementation Strategies			
ARTS, CULTURE, & HISTORIC LANDMARKS			
Improve the quality and quantity of all forms of urban art, cultural landmarks, and historic preservation efforts			
Implementation Strategy	Cost	Timeframe	Priority
Establish matching grants or revolving loan funds for historic preservation	\$\$	Medium	Medium
Continue to develop and implement the adopted wayfinding guidelines	\$\$	Short	Medium
Continue to promote cultural assets through public art and event nights	\$\$	Medium	High
Work to make retail centers more attractive destinations and any new development to be held to higher design standards	\$	Short	Medium
Create active and secure open spaces, define neighborhoods with visual cues, increased signage, entryways, and street lighting design	\$\$	Medium	Medium
Continue to preserve scenic vistas through the appropriate location of telecommunications towers and removal of billboards from the city; and enact clear design guidelines so that streets, buildings, and public spaces work together to create a sense of place	\$	Short	Medium
Add properties that qualify for designation as landmarks or historic designation	\$	Long	Medium
Continue to support citywide art and beautification projects	\$\$	Short	High
Continue with the Creative Program- Art Installations -Sculptors, local and traveling art exhibits	\$\$	Short	High
Setup a tour for the murals/art installations- to keep them relevant and to highlight the locations better	\$	Short	Low
Develop an interactive public art map that describes artists and shows their information	\$	Short	Medium
Bring new public art displays into the neighborhoods	\$	Short	High
Design art around neighborhood history that depicts important events, people, and contributors to our region	\$	Short	High
Promote Wavepark and other recreational facilities that are unique sports attractions or venues	\$	Medium	Medium
Establish a list that can be updated and added to highlight local amenities by category or type	\$	Medium	Medium

**Rockford Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy (2019)** was a partnership with the National Resource Network to develop a neighborhood revitalization strategy addressing the deteriorated conditions in many Rockford neighborhoods. The study identifies neighborhoods to target in Rockford and strategies to improve them. Foundational to the approach is building on the assets and characteristics that are unique to Rockford. Arts and culture are a key strategy including:

- Neighboring placemaking: Provide incubation space for arts and local entrepreneurs
- Support for local arts and maker community through short-term leases for temporary art installations

## State of Culture



- Studios and galleries in vacant commercial spaces
- Arts and culture promotion in neighborhoods

**City of Rockford Equitable Recovery Assessment (2021)** was a pilot program with the National Resource Network to assess equitable recovery from the economic downturn triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. A key strategy identified in the study was investing in minority entrepreneurs and start-ups. Rockford residents described the pandemic as inspiring local entrepreneurs to start their own businesses, often creative businesses - artists, makers, and selling other talents and services. Many are small, pop-up businesses, including catering, books, artwork, clothing, jewelry, and other retail. Interviewees reported that many of these businesses are owned by Black, Latinx, and other business owners of color and many are woman owned. However, minority-owned businesses historically have not always been included in traditional business development efforts in the city and could benefit from increased funding and support programs. The report notes discussions of Rockford partnering with Think Big, a Rockford-based 501(c)3 providing business education and support networks to entrepreneurs with a specific focus on Minority/Women Owned Business Enterprise (MWBE). This partnership holds promise as a model to help the local business community equitably grow. This report also recommends that the City of Rockford should lead the region's reckoning with racial disparities by launching a regional Equity Pledge. ***"The pandemic has not so much created new economic problems in Rockford as it has exacerbated them, and it has brought new attention to racial disparities that have been unacknowledged for decades."*** A cross-sectoral approach, building on precedents set by the Family Peace Center, can begin to tackle long-standing issues in the community.

**Corridor Plans for the City of Rockford Community and Economic Development:** Several recent plans focusing on specific corridors within Rockford include recommendations that intersect with arts and culture and should be considered in the later phases of the planning process. These include:

- 11<sup>th</sup> Street Corridor Transportation Study (March 2021)
- Auburn Street Corridor Transportation Study (May 2022)
- Keith Creek Corridor Study (December 2022)
- Kishwaukee Street Corridor Revitalization Plan (February 2009)

These plans propose specific ideas connected to public art, placemaking elements, streetscaping, façade programs, neighborhood beautification, adaptive reuse, signage, and visual branding. Ideas range from "quick win" changes to more expensive installations and investments. There are numerous opportunities to integrate art and creativity into civic infrastructure and land use, to tell stories about Rockford and strengthen the community's identity. Writ large, these corridor studies recognize the key role of arts and culture in improving the aesthetic quality of Rockford and creating meaningful, engaging experiences for people in these spaces by making them more vibrant, informative, and beautiful. Specifically, the corridor studies suggest uplifting local artists, makers, and educators from diverse backgrounds by engaging them to collaborate and partner on art projects along these corridors. The plans also call for collaboration with other entities in Rockford such as the Rockford Area Arts Council. These ideas can be looked at in more detail during this planning process's implementation phase.

Additional Rockford Region plans and studies reviewed as part of this process, which informed the findings below, include:





## Rockford Region Cultural Plan

### State of Culture

- Community Health Status Assessment: 2020 Healthy Community Study, Winnebago County Health Department (2020)
- R1 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (2021-2025)
- County Health Rankings National Findings Report, University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute (2023)
- Northern Illinois Coordinated Workforce Report, R1 (Spring 2019)
- R1 Annual Report (2021)

**Rockford Park District Action Plan Update 2020:** The action plan provides an update on a five-year strategic plan developed by the Rockford Park District, based on feedback from an estimated 37,000 youth and adults in the area. **Arts and cultural programming were among the top priorities expressed by citizens.** Communities also want culturally inclusive options. Operational and capital dollars invested in this priority for the parks department can be opportunities to connect with the Rockford Region Cultural Plan.

Additionally, there are two existing planning efforts underway at the same time as this cultural planning process:

- 1) The Rockford Area Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) is creating a **Destination Master Plan**. This provides an opportunity for the Rockford Region Cultural Plan and the RACVB Destination Master Plan to complement each other.
- 2) Rockford Public Schools (RPS) has kicked off a five-year, \$180 million **Facilities Master Plan**. Already in the project launch, **arts in the schools have been identified as a very important priority for the Rockford community.**



# Rockford Region Cultural Plan

Preliminary Stakeholders  
Workshop

RAAC  
YOU

## COMPARABLE CITIES AND TRENDS



# COMPARABLE CITIES AND TRENDS

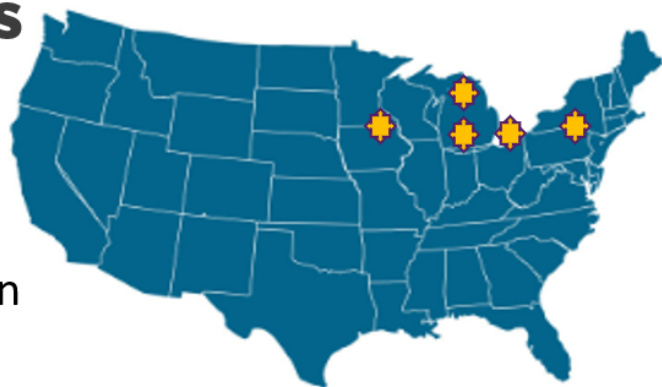
As a part of this process, the consultant team in collaboration with the Project Advisory Council identified five cities to learn from as we craft this Rockford Region Cultural Plan. There are significant benefits to analyzing the Rockford Region against other communities to ensure best practices. Some benefits include:

- **To learn from the successes** and failures of others. By studying how other cities have expanded their arts and culture sectors, the Rockford Region can identify strategies that are likely to be effective and avoid strategies that have been unsuccessful.
- **To identify trends** that are shaping the arts and culture landscape. The arts and culture sector is constantly evolving, and it is important for the Rockford Region to stay up to date on the latest trends to remain responsive to nationwide trends.
- **To develop a plan** that is tailored to the Rockford Region's unique needs and assets. Every city is different, and it is important for the Rockford Region to develop a plan that considers its own unique strengths and weaknesses.

By investing in its arts and culture sector, the Rockford Region can position itself as a vibrant and attractive place to live, work, and visit.

## Comparable Cities

- Akron, Ohio
- Erie, Pennsylvania
- Des Moines, Iowa
- Fort Wayne, Indiana
- Grand Rapids, Michigan





## TAKEAWAYS FROM COMPARABLE CITIES

A key goal of looking at the comparable cities is to provide inspiration for Rockford, which will be useful in the implementation phase of this planning process. For now, below are examples of takeaways from this research. Further details on the comparable cities are in Appendix C.

### **EQUITABLE REPRESENTATION IN ARTS AND CULTURE**

Comparable cities are increasingly taking steps to ensure that their arts and culture sectors are equitable and inclusive. This includes initiatives such as:

- Targeted funding for arts and cultural organizations that serve underserved populations
- Support for individual artists and creators from marginalized communities
- Training and mentorship programs for arts and cultural professionals from diverse backgrounds
- Culturally specific arts and cultural programming

### **COMMUNITY REVITALIZATION THROUGH ART**

Art can play a powerful role in revitalizing communities. Comparable cities are using art to:

- Create public gathering spaces and attract visitors to neighborhoods
- Provide opportunities for community members to express themselves and build relationships
- Promote neighborhood pride and economic development

### **FUNDING MECHANISMS**

Comparable cities are using a variety of funding mechanisms to support their arts and culture sectors. This includes:

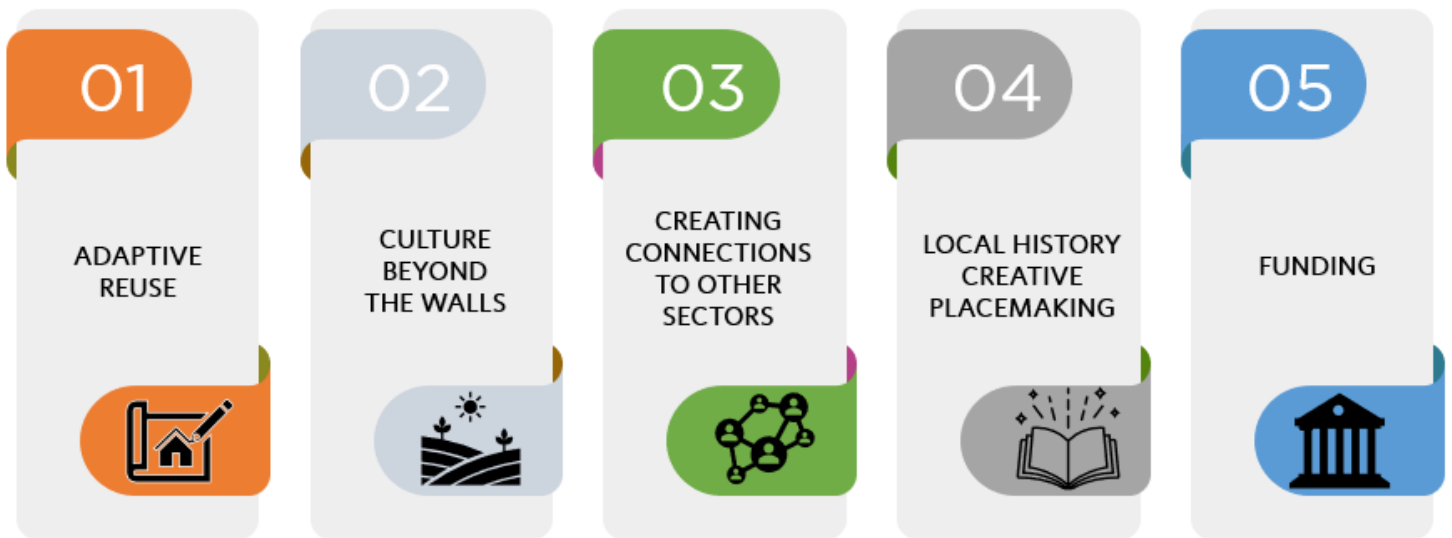
- General fund appropriations
- Hotel/motel taxes
- Dedicated arts and culture funds
- Private philanthropy
- Corporate sponsorships



## TRENDS

The Rockford Region is a vibrant and diverse community with a rich cultural heritage. The arts and culture sector plays a key role in the region's economy, society, and quality of life.

The region's arts and culture sector is facing challenges, like other communities around the country, and it is also well-positioned for growth. The region has a solid foundation of arts and cultural organizations and a diverse community. Analyzing how other communities have addressed the trends below, can identify opportunities for the Rockford Region. Examples of these trends can be found in Appendix D.



# CULTURAL ASSETS

February-May 2023

Review  
March 30-31<sup>st</sup>  
Stakeholder Workshop: March 31<sup>st</sup>  
Strategy  
Eng Planning  
Review  
Analysis, Benchmarking & Comparables



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# CULTURAL ASSETS

A cultural asset inventory, also known as a cultural resource 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. For the Rockford Region, this inventory is important for several reasons.

First, it can help to raise awareness of the Region's rich cultural heritage. The inventory can be used to educate residents and visitors about the Region's diverse cultural assets. This can help to foster a sense of pride and attachment to the Region and can attract visitors and new residents.

Second, a cultural asset inventory can be used to support planning and decision-making. The inventory can help to identify cultural assets that are at risk and can inform decisions about how to preserve and protect them. It can also be used to identify opportunities for cultural development and investment in different neighborhoods and communities that may not have access to arts and culture offerings in their immediate area.

Third, a cultural asset inventory can be used to promote collaboration and networking among arts and cultural organizations. The inventory can help organizations to learn about each other's work and to identify opportunities for collaboration. It can also help to build a sense of community among arts and cultural organizations.

A cultural asset inventory that is continuously updated by community members and organizations is particularly valuable because it ensures that the inventory is comprehensive and up to date. Community members and organizations have a wealth of knowledge about the region's cultural assets, and they can play a key role in keeping the inventory current.

A 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 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.

Overall, creating a cultural asset inventory for the Rockford Region that can be updated by community members and organizations is a valuable initiative that can help to promote the region's cultural heritage, support planning and decision-making, and foster collaboration and networking among arts and cultural organizations.



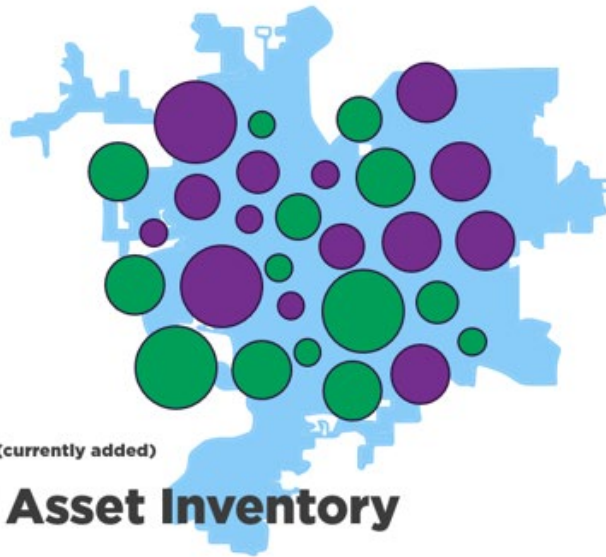
**State of Culture**

**COLLABORATION WITH REGION 1 PLANNING COUNCIL (R1)**

This cultural asset inventory will need a permanent and universally accessible access point. As a part of this process, the planning team is working with R1 to create a dynamic map with all the collected assets from 14 categories of activities and 14 types of arts and culture spaces. This map will be a part of the Rockford Region Cultural Plan.

Visual Arts
Outdoor Arts/Cultural Venue
Public Park, Garden, Arboretum
Music
Theatre
Dance
"Maker"
History
Literature
Film, Video, TV, Radio
Religious, Ethnic Celebration
Multidisciplinary
Vendor Market
Culinary, Distillery

**14 types of activities**



Cultural Facility / Space
Cultural / Creative Business
Natural Heritage
Performing Arts Group
Museum
Public Art
Service Organization
Historical Building / Built Heritage
Education Organization
Festival / Annual Event
Individuals Artist Studio / Practice
Community Center
Place of Worship
Library / Archive

**14 types of Spaces**

**298** (currently added)  
**Cultural Asset Inventory**







# KEY FINDINGS



# KEY FINDINGS

Based on the research to date, including extensive public engagement, the following are key findings, grouped by strengths, weaknesses, challenges and finally, the emerging opportunities which are a response to the underlying conditions in the Rockford Region, and which indicate possible priorities for this plan. Additional input from specific sectors is included in Appendix A.

## STRENGTHS

### Diversity

Diversity was universally cited as a strength of the Rockford Region. Diversity includes a wide range of cultural options. Many people noted that for a community of its size, Rockford punches above its weight. There is also great diversity in the ethnic heritage of Rockford residents including African American, Irish, Italian, Lithuanian, Polish, Swedish, Hispanic/Latinx, Arab, Indian, and Asian populations. While some noted challenges in equitable representation of Rockford's racially and ethnically diverse populations, there is evidence of growing equity in the last decade. To note a few examples:

- City Market has grown more diverse since its founding in 2010. At inception, its vendor makeup was 40% M/WBE (Minority/Women Owned Enterprise), 5% Black, 0% Hispanic/Latinx, and 5% Asian. In 2023, the vendor makeup is 60% M/WBE, 18% Black, 12% Hispanic/Latinx, and 5% Asian.
- In 2021, Rockford institutions, including RAVE, Davis Park, BMO and the Coronado, undertook racial bias training and programmed performances grappling with racial healing, supported by a Healing Illinois grant.<sup>9</sup>
- The Soar Awards are a major new player in Rockford's cultural landscape. Held at the Coronado Performing Arts Center, they have become an impressive force in the genre of gospel music, creating a platform to showcase some of the genre's most talented upcoming artists.<sup>10</sup>
- The West Side Show Room, starting in 2017, undertook workshops with arts activist Denise Yvette Serna around equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), and began offering courses to the arts community including EDI for arts leaders and anti-racism action planning for arts organizations.
- Starlight Theater has recently produced shows with majority BIPOC casts, such as "In the Heights" and "Dreamgirls." Auburn High School recently featured a BIPOC actress as Wednesday in their production of "The Addams Family."
- Eliminate Racism 815 is taking action to try to dismantle racism in the community and bring people together.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.friendsofthecoronado.org/healing-illinois/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://coronadopac.org/events/soar-awards2024>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.er815.org/our-story>

## State of Culture

- The CRE8IV initiative, run by the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau (RACVB), has increasingly featured work by diverse communities.
- ART FOR IMPACT, the Rockford Area Arts Council's public art program, is focused on the installment of public art in every neighborhood, with a focus on reflecting the neighborhood's cultural heritage, current make-up, historical significance, and/or relevant current events, with a broader goal of creating a sense of belonging.
- Food Truck Tuesday, an extremely popular community event presented by Nicholas Conservatory & Gardens, features diverse cuisines (Mexican, Puerto Rican, Korean, Jamaican, etc.).
- Minority owned businesses elsewhere in Rockford are thriving such as La Chiquita grocery store.



You Belong Here is the theme for Screw City Steel, a public art initiative that brought new murals to Davis Park in downtown Rockford. The murals are being created through Monday, Sept. 5, 2022. (Photo by Kevin Haas/Rock River Current)

## Nature and parks

Known as the Forest City for its verdant woods, Rockford is famous for its stunning natural beauty including multiple green spaces, the Rock River, and other waterways. Outdoor recreation is a huge draw, and arts and culture offer many points of connection to Rockford's network of outdoor attractions such as concerts, artmaking, and enjoyment of botanic gardens. Rockford's riverfront is a prime attraction, which the city leverages with its Rock River Recreation Path, Riverfront Museum Park, and Public Art Trail. Other examples of the arts connecting to outdoor spaces include the Sounds of Summer concert and performance series comprised of Music in the Park at the Sinnissippi Music Shell and Live at Levings and Domingos en el Parque at Levings Park, and the Art in Nature program run by the Natural Land Institute. In addition to its excellent network of public parks that receive public support, Rockford boasts additional gardens such as Anderson Gardens (open to the public but

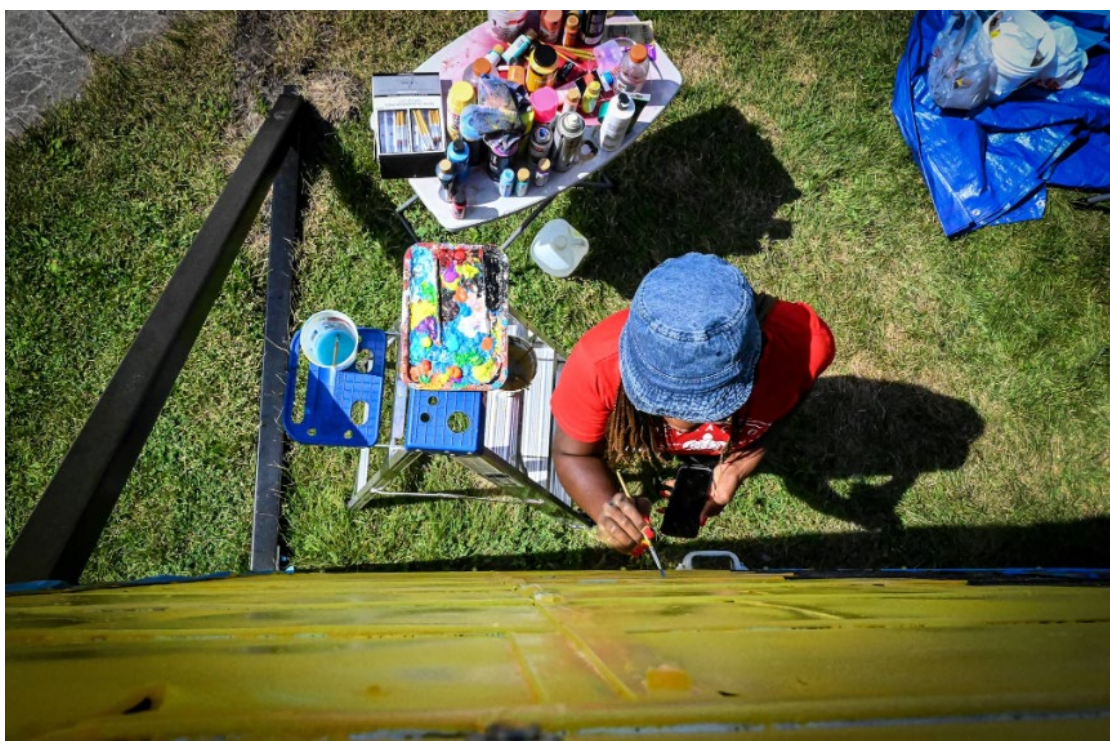


**State of Culture**



privately funded) the Nicholas Conservatory and Gardens, and Klehm Arboretum & Botanic Garden, maintained in partnership with the Forest Preserves of Winnebago County. Davis Park was singled out by many respondents for the recent public art initiatives as part of CR8IV, including the “You Belong Here” artwork as part of the Screw City Steel project that brought together professional artists to paint murals on two sides of four industrial steel doors that were harvested from the former Rockford Products site at Harrison Avenue and Kishwaukee Street.

Rockford’s strength in having excellent outdoor spaces connects well to broader current societal shifts to a preference for outdoor activities. As noted above (Impact of COVID-19 section), NEA’s Survey of Public Participation in the Arts revealed that in 2022, **open-air facilities (including parks) were among the most popular sites of in-person arts attendance, thus positioning Rockford to further leverage their advantage with outdoor spaces for arts and cultural programming.**



Shaniqwa Porter paints a mural Friday, Sept. 2, 2022, on a steel door at Davis Park in Rockford as part of the Screw City Steel initiative. (Photo by Kevin Haas/Rock River Current)

**Location and access**

Related to Rockford’s stunning natural geography is its excellent location. Located just 85 miles northwest of downtown Chicago, it offers a relatively easy commute to one the nation’s biggest cities. This distance provides many of the conveniences of a suburb, while the City of Rockford has its own urban identity, with collar communities in Winnebago and Boone County that in turn offer a more rural living experience for those seeking that. Rockford is also close to Madison and Milwaukee in Wisconsin.

While driving to nearby cities is relatively quick, access to Rockford will be further boosted by the Metra Line restoring passenger rail service between Rockford and Chicago for the first time since 1981. As of July 2023, Illinois Department of Transportation officials announced that the service should be available by late 2027. Also, the Chicago-Rockford International Airport is a

## State of Culture



huge asset, serving over 100,000 passengers per year and is among the fastest-growing cargo airports in the world. Rockford's location and convenient access position it well to be a cultural tourism destination city for out-of-town visitors. Rockford's proximity and easy access from other population centers means that artists and arts organizations can draw audiences and patrons from a wide range of people beyond the local community, and in many cases (as in the case of Midway Village) already do.

### Rich cultural assets

#### Nurturing challenged youth with art

In October 2023, 19-year-old artist Dysen White exhibited his paintings at Kortman Center for Design in downtown Rockford. Dysen was raised in the foster care system while his mother battled an alcohol addiction and his father died from a drug overdose in 2017. Inspired by his godmother, LuAnn Widergren, a former Rockford art teacher and accomplished painter, and fellow Haitian-American Jean-Michel Basquiat, Dysen channeled his experience into his paintings, which received acclaim and successful sales. Dysen plans to graduate from the alternative high school at Roosevelt Community Education Center this year and enroll in Full Sail University in Florida to study animation.



Artist Dysen White of Rockford is pictured with his paintings Monday, Oct. 9, 2023, in the upstairs gallery at J.R. Kortman Center for Design in Rockford.

Susan Moran/Rockford Register Star

source

<https://www.rrostar.com/story/news/local/2023/10/11/rockford-artists-exhibit-odyssey-the-teen-at-kortman-art-gallery/71118980007>

Throughout the data gathering process, participants noted a wide variety of cultural assets that are treasured in Rockford. These range from long-standing institutions — like the Coronado Performing Arts Center, Rockford Symphony Orchestra, Midway Village, Tinker Swiss Cottage, Ethnic Heritage Center, and Riverfront Museum Campus featuring the Burpee Museum of Natural History, Discovery Center Museum, Rockford Art Museum, Rockford Dance Company, Phantom Regiment, and Womanspace — to newer organizations like the West Side Show Room, the 317 Art Collective, and City Stages, a new sound stage and production facility also offering space for photographers, graphic designers, musicians, web developers and other creative workers. Rockford's Public Library is newly renovated, offering a huge new asset to the community with its new maker space featuring a sewing lab, 3D printing, embroidery machine, T-shirt press, and more in about 8,000 square feet. The Library Nordlof Center has an excellent performance space, and an artist-in-residence program (currently Moon Dog Theater). Of particular note is the Coronado's "REACH for the Stars" project which presents a fully-staged, world-class touring cultural arts performance for over 4,000 students to experience each year, free of charge. Also, noteworthy is that, while a weakness cited below for arts organizations is earned income from ticket revenue, some Rockford arts organizations like Midway Village have successfully increased ticket prices, sometimes by as much as 55-60%.

Rockford's higher education institutions also boast excellent cultural assets such as Rock Valley College's Starlight Theater and Northern Illinois University's four theaters. Rockford also has a variety of festivals, such as [Greenwich Village Art Festival](#), the longest-running art fair of its kind in the Midwest. This planning process includes the compilation of a cultural asset inventory to be shared with the community upon completion and

**State of Culture**



mapped in a GIS system with the support of R1. The assets listed here are but a fraction of the many assets in the Rockford Region. Additionally, a number of new cultural assets are in the works such as Hard Rock’s recently announced plans to build a new outdoor concert venue in Levings Park on South Pierpont Avenue in Southwest Rockford. Respondents also noted that Rockford has excellent culinary arts that reflect the diversity of its communities.

**Connecting art to mental health**

Like many communities, Rockford is grappling with mental health challenges among its community members. Extensive data shows the benefits of the arts for people struggling with mental illness. In 2022, Rockford’s 317 Art Collective displayed the work of approximately 25 artists with mental health disorders in its exhibition “Comorbidity.” The collective reached out to mental health treatment organizations such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness as well as local organizations including Stepping Stones of Rockford and Rosecrance to find artists for the show. The result demonstrates a powerful example of the arts community collaboration with the mental health community – a model to inspire other such collaborations in the future.



Kate Mayo, an artist who has bipolar II disorder and OCD, is one of about two dozen artists part of the Comorbidity show at 317 Art Collective, 317 Market St. in Rockford. (Photo by Kevin Haas/Rock River Current)

Susan Moran/Rockford Register Star

Image source:

<https://www.rockrivercurrent.com/2022/04/20/we-really-wanted-people-to-have-a-voice-exhibit-showcases-artists-with-mental-health-disorders/>

**Growth in the arts and connections beyond the “art world”**

A recurring theme of the public engagement and background research for this plan was the impressive growth of arts and culture in recent years, which many respondents noted. A distinguishing feature of Rockford’s arts and culture landscape is how it appears in often unusual places such as a dry cleaner, canine care, or hairdresser. Related to this is a quirkiness, as demonstrated elsewhere in the region, as in Rockton’s Yeti festival and Pelican festival, celebrating kitsch. The growing public art in Rockford – including numerous murals and wrapped utility boxes – is appreciated by the community and extends throughout the counties. Respondents also noted a rising sense of pride in the arts increasingly visible in Rockford, such as new sculptures on Main Street and the renaissance of live music in more venues.

A signature event of the Rockford Area Arts Council demonstrates the many ways that artists and artworks appear in many locations outside of traditional art settings. ArtScene was cited by many participants in the public engagement. ArtScene’s partners, for its most recent session, show its growing connections to other sectors as follows:

- **Houses of worship:** Our Saviors Lutheran Church
- **Culinary arts and restaurants:** Abreo, Baker Street Burgers, Linamar Restaurant, Octane, The Norwegian, Olympic Tavern, Spider Sushi Bar, Ernie’s Midtown Pub, District Bar & Grill
- **Local businesses:** Bennie’s Cleaners, Maze Books, Ameriprise Financial Studio Wealth Advisory Group, Canine to 4 Dogcare and Learning Center, Tad More Tailoring, Test Site, SRM Prints, Real Beautiful You
- **Creative businesses/art collectives:** 304 Main, 317 Collaborative, Kortman Design, Kith and Kin Art Collective, Inscape collective, Future Memory Media, Cleta’s Stay & Sew, Art de Triomphe, The Underground, Three Ravens Pottery
- **Government:** Rockford City Hall
- **Real estate developments:** Norwegian Artists Lofts,

Standard on State (214 Project)

- **Community focus:** Rockford United Labor, Rockford Public Library, LZ Peace Memorial



### **Quality of life**

Rockford is often described as a City that feels like a small town in terms of being friendly, affordable, and a great place to raise a family. There are many “boomerang” residents – people who grew up in Rockford, then left to work or study elsewhere, only to return later in life when they realized they had a better quality of life in Rockford than in other places. This is especially true for younger residents, who are attracted by a housing market that allows them higher quality living situations than can be found in more expensive cities. Often, the people who came back to Rockford gained a new appreciation for how good things are in Rockford, which they had not fully felt before leaving. Many respondents in this planning process expressed that Rockford punches above its weight with the amenities it offers such as City Market or live poetry in the parks.

Another distinguishing feature of Rockford is that one person can really make a difference. For example, a small business owner and small-scale real estate investor interviewed for this process noticed issues with the sidewalks in front his investment property. With a few phone calls, he was able to set in motion sidewalk repair by the City, to the benefit of others in the community. In a larger city, the layers of bureaucracy could make such a community improvement more difficult and lengthier, but the business owner noted how much he appreciated the possibly in Rockford for individual citizens to have significant agency.



Image source: Rockford Area Arts Council



## Rich history

Rockford has a rich and distinctive history as a manufacturing center, as reflected in one of its nicknames, Screw City. Many talk of the innovator mindset, which today can be seen in its strength in the aerospace industry. There is also a resilience, grittiness, and creativeness that runs through Rockford's history, which can be seen in the Sock Monkey that Rockford is known for. Rockford has also been strong in sports including hockey, soccer, golf, and particularly women's baseball. The Rockford Peaches inspired a major motion picture "A League of their Own" which in turn was adapted into a television series. This illustrious history will soon be

celebrated in the International Women's Baseball Center in the works in Rockford, which will be at Beyer Stadium. The museum will be designed by one of the world's most renowned architects, Jeanne Gang, who was raised in the Rockford Region. Many other famous people are from Rockford, from sports stars like NBA basketball player Fred VanFleet, fashion designer Virgil Abloh, Destiny's Child singer Michelle Williams, and Cheap Trick's Rick Nielson. Many respondents noted that Rockfordians have a tradition of giving back to the community, as demonstrated by Rick Nielson housing his guitar collection at the newly-opened Hard Rock Casino.

## Creative business fostering workforce development and opportunity

Sonny's Place opened in 2022 as a restaurant and more. The owner Jurea Crudup celebrates the legacy of her father, Sonny Crudup, who ran a popular record store, Ubiquity Records. Jurea incorporated pieces from her father's store into the décor of the restaurant, which is decorated with pictures of hip-hop and other artists who visited Ubiquity. After 27 years of working in health care, Jurea decided to change her service to creating nurturing food, as well as providing minorities professional development in catering and culinary skills. In addition to forming the Awaken Foundation to provide skills in construction and landscaping, she now partners with Rockford Housing, Winnebago County, NiReACH Housing, Habitat, and Meta. Sonny's Place provides a model for entrepreneurship that celebrates Black-owned businesses and fosters creative workers, while connecting with other sectors such as housing and workforce development.



Image source:  
<https://www.sonnysplacerockford.com/?pgid=j8ijj4o5-54418e7e-fe2d-4140-9431-3943a29498a7>

## Entrepreneurial spirit

Unsurprisingly, given Rockford's history, today Rockford displays a rich entrepreneurial spirit. This can be seen in the Rockford Art Deli, which is a creative business and successful retail enterprise. City Stages is a new production facility that is one of the largest and most well-equipped sound stages in the Midwest, outside the Chicago area. It aims to leverage Rockford as a film-friendly town, taking advantage of state tax incentives and the unique benefits of Rockford's scale and size to attract film and video business, as well as providing space to other creative industries such as photography, design, marketing, and web businesses. Rockford has many small and quirky entrepreneurs, from Bennie's cleaners (which combines an art gallery with a dry cleaner), to numerous tattoo parlors, and a wide variety of cosmetology services. Its literary scene is growing with the arrival of Maze Books, adding to the longtime fixture of Toad Hall Books and Records, a beloved Rockford landmark with plans to expand. Rockford also has excellent culinary entrepreneurs, from a growing number of restaurants offering diverse cuisine, to the mobile food providers who participate in Food Truck





Tuesdays. The collar communities around Rockford contribute their own unique creative efforts such as Rockton's Yeti fest and Pelican Fest.

### **Architecture**

Rockford has many beautiful and historically significant buildings and homes. Rockford architect Jesse Barloga designed several important buildings such as the Rockford News Tower, Metropolitan Hall, and many private homes. The world-renowned architect Jeanne Gang (who is from Belvidere, the county seat of Boone County) designed the Starlight Theater at Rock Valley College. The Coronado Performing Arts Center is a crown jewel of Rockford, saved and restored by the community 25 years ago. The local mosque is a point of pride for resident Muslims. One of the nation's most famous architects, Frank Lloyd Wright, built the Laurent House in Rockford, providing accessibility long before Americans with Disability Act (ADA) compliance became common practice.

### **Momentum to build on**

This planning process occurs at a time when Rockford is experiencing many signs of positive momentum. Rockford's downtown, despite the global challenges of the pandemic, continues to experience revitalization. Rockford's South Main Corridor is also undergoing revitalization plans including recently improved roads. Colman Yards, after years of planning, was approved by City Council in 2023. Also in 2023, Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker announced a new state partnership with Meta to extend to Rockford, projected to begin in 2027. Rockford Public Schools (RPS), from 2013-2023, completed a \$279 million facilities plan and has now just launched a new, five-year \$180 million facilities master plan, with construction to begin in 2025. The Hard Rock Casino Rockford is well under way, and the permanent resort is expected to open in August 2024, which could provide significant economic benefits to the region. Already, Hard Rock Casino Rockford, in partnership with Ringland-Johnson Construction and the Rockford Park District, unveiled plans for a permanent, new concert venue in Levings Park. The new venue will include an 807-foot stage, upgraded lighting and sound equipment, and dressing rooms. Construction is expected to be completed before summer 2024.

## **WEAKNESSES**

The following weaknesses primarily relate to arts and culture in Rockford, although some could be argued to be part of the broader challenges which follow.

### **Awareness is low**

A large number of respondents expressed that it was hard to know all that is going on in Rockford. As a result, many do not realize how many great cultural offerings are already available in Rockford. Extreme cases include when some residents were unaware that an art museum exists, even after visiting the Burpee or Discovery at the Riverfront Museum Campus. A missed opportunity for Rockford is that real estate brokers - who are effectively ambassadors to the community - don't have a full sense of all of Rockford's cultural offerings and may rely on internet research which may not provide the kind of breadth that the Rockford Area Arts Council could provide.

### **Not taking credit for successes**

Connected perhaps to the lack of awareness is that many respondents noted that Rockford lacks pride and does not take credit for or sufficiently celebrate its successes. Many expressed

## State of Culture



that too many people have an undeserved negative self-perception: “We put ourselves down.” Some of this may be related to its proximity to Chicago. While this is a strength, it can also be a double-edged sword, since some feel Rockford plays “second fiddle” to Chicago. Many people wind up going to Chicago to experience arts and culture, instead of taking advantage of local options. Many films are also shot in Rockford (including “Groundhog Day,” “The Big One,” and “At Any Price”), but this fact is not sufficiently promoted.

### **Economic and funding challenges for artists and arts organizations**

In line with national trends, Rockford’s arts institutions are experiencing difficulty maintaining funding with earned revenue and contributed income. COVID-19 exacerbated pre-pandemic trends, where ticket sales were dwindling, in part due to generational shifts, where younger audiences are less likely to purchase subscriptions and memberships. At the same time, costs are rising due to inflation. This puts anchor institutions at risk, with a need to develop new audiences to cultivate not only newly-earned revenue, but also individual and corporate donations and philanthropic support. Beyond the arts organizations, individual artists are often underpaid, as it is hard to sell artwork. Finally, while the public art program has been very successful, maintenance funds are difficult to secure.

### **Not enough affordable spaces for artists and arts activities**

Many respondents expressed there were not enough spaces for cultural activities. For example, artists need more spaces to work at affordable prices. Creatives need spaces to collaborate, rehearse, and perform. Overall, there are not enough communal spaces for communities to gather for creative and cultural pursuits. Outside of the BMO and Coronado, there are not many spaces for music performances.

### **Gaps in arts education and youth opportunities**

While CAPA has in the past been a source of pride, many expressed the program has suffered in more recent years from a lack of teachers. About a decade ago, arts in Rockford Public Schools were “gutted” and RPS is still working to rebuild. Overall, Rockford lacks sufficient experienced and qualified arts teachers. There is an equity aspect to this as well, as it was noted that the whiter, wealthier schools tended to have more experienced arts education teachers whereas the poorer schools with more students of color have less experienced teachers. Beyond school, there are not many spaces for children and youth to have access to safe and affordable cultural activities.

### **Professional skills (fundraising, marketing, permitting, etc.)**

A large need for the creative ecosystem in Rockford is for artists, small arts organizations, and creative entrepreneurs to develop skills to professionalize their work. This includes learning about fundraising, marketing, budgeting, and sometimes even more basic skills such as generating invoices and ensuring payments are linked to an Employee Identification Number. Rockford can build upon the work of this kind Think Big is doing in partnership with others, as there are still many creatives who lack these skills. A more professionalized creative workforce will be win-win for Rockford – allowing creatives to level up their work while also allowing Rockford to better collect data on its creative workforce, which can be used for future analysis to determine ongoing progress or areas that need further assistance. Additionally, some respondents noted that obtaining permits from the city for artistic events is difficult.



### **Segregated cultural offerings**

Many respondents expressed that historically, many cultural experiences catered to middle class white audiences. As a result, audiences of color have not always felt welcome. Currently, there are not enough cultural offerings for diverse audiences, nor enough culture that acknowledges the history and contributions of the Black and Latinx communities. Some expressed the sentiment of a historical disconnect between communities of color and powerful institutions like RACVB, such as “the Black community is always invited to the party when it’s over, but we want to be part of the planning when it’s taking place.” The Hispanic/Latinx community expressed challenges securing funding and rehearsal space for cultural activities. More detail is provided in Appendix A that provides additional responses from different sectors in Rockford.

### **Fragmentation and a sense of cliquishness**

Perhaps related to the historically segregated offerings, some respondents expressed that the arts and culture landscape in Rockford can feel insular, and in some cases, competitive. This was not a majority opinion but one that was stated enough that it bore mention, as it speaks to a need to do more to ensure everyone feels welcome and that they belong.

### **Need for more nightlife options**

A number of respondents pointed out that Rockford lacks a diversity of nightlife options. Past clubs that catered to a more diverse audience have closed (perhaps due to the pandemic), leaving a gap. In some of the conversations, the need for a late-night culture that does not have to do with alcohol came across as an opportunity for those who do not culturally drink. Participants pointed to the Eli Tea Bar in Chicago as an example of a sober bar that has late hours.

## **CHALLENGES**

Challenges of broader underlying conditions that are external to the arts and culture landscape and yet pose threats to it.

### **Geographic, class, and racial divides**

Like many cities, Rockford has a history of divisions that remain painful to this day. Some of these are geographic; many people talked about the West side being historically underinvested, compared to the East side. These geographic divisions were exacerbated by the I-90 highway (again, in a pattern that can be seen nationwide). The geographic divides mirror the historical and ongoing racial and socioeconomic divides between wealthier (and historically whiter) people on the East side, and lower income (and historically primarily people of color) on the West side. Some respondents pointed to the “People Who Care” lawsuit filed against the Rockford Public Schools, where RPS was found guilty of racial discrimination. While the lawsuit resulted in the construction of four new West side schools — Barbour Language Academy, Ellis Arts Academy, Lewis Lemon Global Studies, and RESA Middle School — deep scars remain.

### **Lack of equitable representation**

Numerous respondents surfaced frustration with equitable representation in Rockford, expressing the sentiment that “everything is driven by white culture.” While Rockford has made progress in its efforts at greater equity (as noted in the “Strengths” section above), there is still much work to do. Leaders of color often are not sufficiently credited for their ideas and

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contributions. Too often, the same handful of leaders of color are asked repeatedly to partake in planning efforts, and there is a very strong need to cultivate new leaders of color among younger, emerging individuals. Many more people from communities of color in Rockford need to be asked to join the table at all stages of the process – in particular, early on, to have true agency in the decision-making process.

### COVID impact

Obviously, the impacts of COVID-19 extend beyond Rockford. Yet the legacy of the pandemic remains a huge challenge for the Rockford region in multiple ways. In general, civic engagement is harder now, with people entrenched in the pandemic habits of relying more on their screens. Rockford Public Schools suffered a huge loss of momentum due to COVID; while RPS underwent a massive investment starting in 2013, progress was halted by the pandemic, and RPS, like Rockford arts organizations and much broader swaths of society, is still in the mode of rebuilding. While federal funds were a huge lifeline during the height of the pandemic, those funds now are drying up.

### Trauma and mental illness

Connected to COVID is the rise of mental illness and substance use disorders. This exacerbates a pre-pandemic problem in Rockford, which is the high rates of domestic abuse and violent crime. These problems are particularly traumatic for Rockford's youth, of whom over 60% grow up experiencing some kind of abuse. On top of these problems among longtime residents of Rockford, there are also transient populations in Rockford such as the unhoused, for whom it is particularly difficult to reach and sustain connections.

### Low income/educational attainment

Census data for the Rockford region shows that it is challenged by low household income and low educational attainment. Too many people who are struggling for survival are thus less inclined to participate in arts and culture. Some pointed to Rockford's industrial roots, noting that this is connected to the low educational attainment and economic disparities. Historically, arts and culture are perceived by some to be "luxuries" even though culture is available to all and can encompass a broad range of activities from music to cultural heritage celebrations to body art and much more. However, due to sometimes stubborn misperceptions of arts and culture as "elitist," some respondents expressed the sentiment that "people would rather pay \$25 for a sporting event or beer fest than attend a cultural event."

### Cost barriers

Related to Rockford's relatively large lower income population, cost barriers create a challenge for arts and culture. Lower income populations simply cannot afford to pay much for arts and culture activities or products. That said, while there are many free cultural activities in Rockford, many people are not aware of these (as noted in the "Weaknesses" section).

### Transportation

Transportation access is a huge issue in Rockford. Public transportation is limited. Many stated that one needs a car in Rockford (though not everyone can afford one). These transportation issues have a major impact on arts and cultural activities, since attendance is impacted if people have difficulty physically getting to places. While Rockford was recently noted in a

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survey to be the safest city in Illinois to ride a bicycle<sup>12</sup>, some in the bike community expressed surprise at this finding, noting continued needs to improve safety along Rockford's bike routes.

### Shortage of housing and communal spaces

While Rockford enjoys strength in the affordability of its housing options, there is currently an insufficient quantity of housing options. Respondents also expressed that there is also a lack of space for communal activities. Additionally, not enough spaces offer ADA accessibility.

### Difficulty recruiting talent

While today's post-pandemic landscape allows many workers to work from anywhere, Rockford is challenged in its efforts to recruit workers for the businesses centered in Rockford, such as aerospace. This extends to challenges hiring teachers for Rockford schools. One key reason behind the difficulty of recruitment is the housing shortage. Real estate professionals also note that realtors are not always equipped with the fullest picture of Rockford's cultural offerings, which could be a draw for prospective workers and residents.

### Lack of trust

Many respondents pointed to a lack of trust as one of the key challenges facing Rockford. This takes many forms. One area where trust is lacking is between the Black community and the police force and City leadership. Another is a perception that efforts to diversify power and leadership are "lip service" at a more token level, rather than a profound and systemic shift. Yet another is a lack of trust in planning itself - that is, a skepticism that things will change because of planning efforts. There are also trust issues between the City of Rockford and the collar communities in the counties. A participant in this planning process who works in government noted that "change happens at the speed of trust." Building this trust requires relationship building and collaboration over time.

### Population loss

As the comprehensive plan lays out in greater detail, while Rockford's overall population has grown since 1990, the rate of increase has slowed over time, and even begun to decline slightly by 2020. The challenge here is trend lines mainly point towards declines, which hopefully can be reversed. Also of concern is a perception that those leaving are older, wealthier people moving to places like Florida, who have historically been patrons and supporters of arts and culture.

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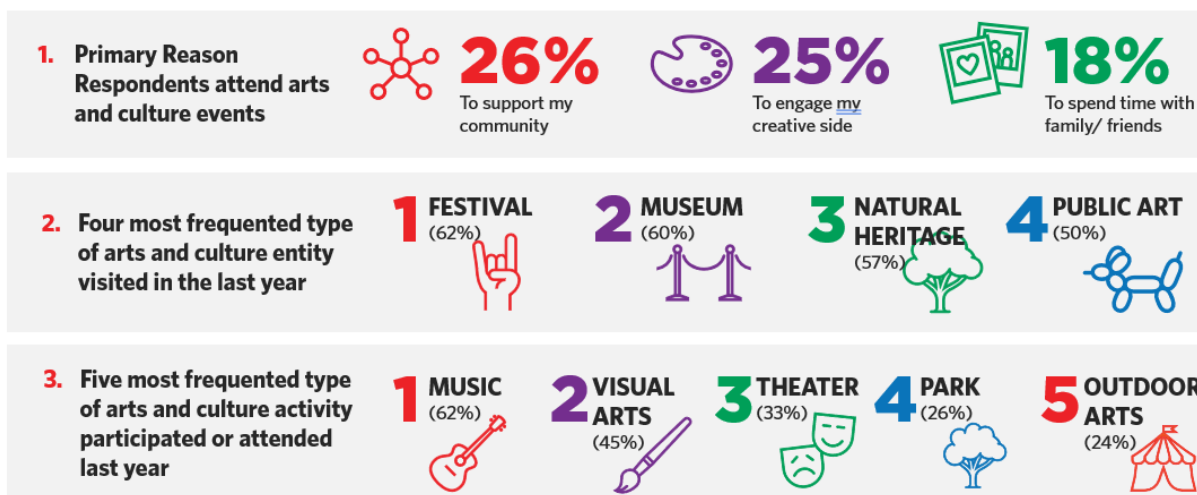
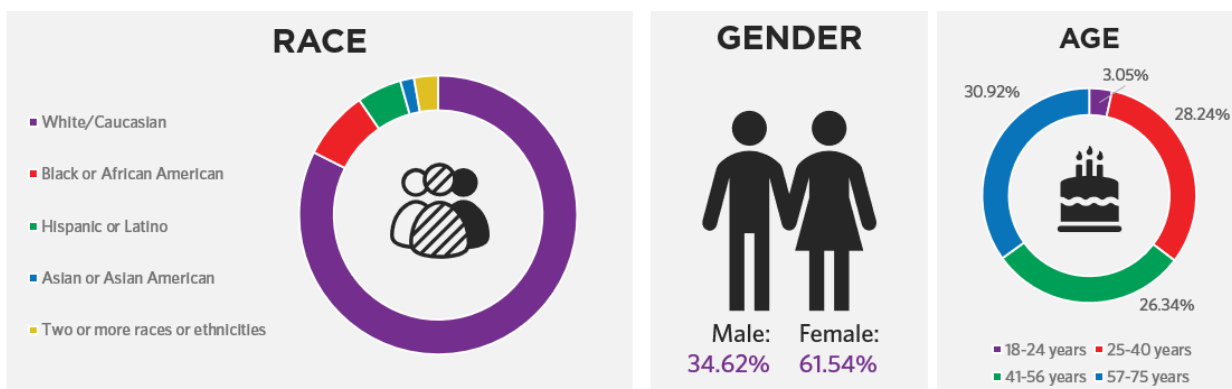
<sup>12</sup> <https://www.rrstar.com/story/news/local/2023/08/30/survey-says-rockford-safest-city-in-illinois-to-ride-a-bicycle/70712438007/>



## Survey Results

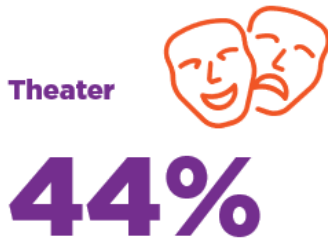
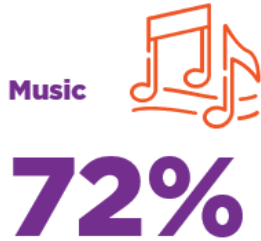
The Rockford Region Cultural Plan community survey was conducted from May-October 2023 and received over 500 responses from residents of all ages, backgrounds, and neighborhoods. The survey findings provide valuable insights into the key findings for the Rockford region and the public's priorities for arts and culture. That said, as is common in surveys, the demographics of those who took the survey are not fully representative of the population of Rockford. Thus, the survey findings are factored into the overall findings (and corroborate many of the findings from other inputs) while these overall findings also were intentional about ensuring that the voices represented were more broadly representative.

Below are highlights from the survey results and further survey data can be found in Appendix F.





## Respondents are most looking forward to having greater access to these arts and culture experiences in the Rockford Region



## Barriers to Participation in Arts and Culture



Activities don't fit with my schedule or conflict with each other.



I can never find out what is going on.



It's not difficult for me to participate in the arts and culture scene.



The range of offerings is too limited/does not match my interests.



# OPPORTUNITIES

The preceding contextual data and analysis of Rockford's strengths, weaknesses, and challenges sets the stage for what is most important in this State of Culture report: identifying the opportunities that can develop into priorities for the overall cultural plan. Those opportunities are summarized below and are followed by detail for each opportunity.

- 1. Tell Rockford's story better, highlighting Rockford's rich and diverse history**
- 2. Provide more inclusive cultural offerings and welcoming environments**
- 3. Increase creative opportunities for youth and arts education**
- 4. Foster collaboration and connection within and across sectors**
- 5. Leverage and develop underutilized spaces for cultural uses**
- 6. Strengthen funding/revenue mechanisms and policy for arts and culture**
- 7. Improve advocacy and data capture around arts and culture**
- 8. Strengthen awareness of arts and culture in Rockford**
- 9. Foster brave conversations through arts and culture**
- 10. Increase neighborhood development with arts and culture**





## OPPORTUNITIES

### **1. Tell Rockford's story better, highlighting Rockford's rich and diverse history**

Rockford has a rich and diverse history, and yet does not seem to give itself the credit it deserves. There is a huge opportunity to better celebrate Rockford's past, present, and future. Rockford's entrepreneurial spirit has produced many successes and lives on today in so many creatives in Rockford. Rockford has a multitude of celebrities to draw upon, from those who grew up in the area like Destiny's Child singer Michelle Williams, piano prodigy Emily Bear (who toured with Beyonce), Cheap Trick's Rick Nielson, and architect Jeanne Gang, to famous people originally from other places who have chosen to invest in Rockford, like Frances Ford Coppola.

Storytelling can take place through the arts, by deploying creative placemaking strategies such as integrating creative infrastructure and signage along key Rockford corridors as noted in the "connecting with other plans" section of this report to elevate local artists while providing them a platform to tell stories unique to Rockford. A broader marketing strategy in coordination with the RACVB can highlight arts and culture in its destination planning. Arts and culture can also be a mechanism for healing some of the wounds of Rockford — for example, while there are pain points around racial divisions, the very founders of Rockford were a diverse group including Lewis Lemon, an African American who is one of the three city founders. A sculpture of these three founders, created by artist Gene Horvath in 1976 as a bicentennial monument, had previously been displayed in Rockford, but is currently not on view. Celebrating Black history (with resources such as the African American Resource Center at Booker Washington) is but one of many rich under told stories that can be shared through arts and culture, which can help instill pride among Rockford's residents and attract new visitors.

### **2. Provide more inclusive cultural offerings and welcoming environments**

As national trends show, an increasingly diverse population craves more diverse cultural offerings. Equally important is that for arts and culture organizations to stay relevant and grow audiences, they must be truly welcoming to diverse audiences. In Rockford, many respondents expressed a desire for more culturally inclusive and diverse offerings. Rockford audiences don't want to have to go to Chicago to have diverse cultural experiences. To achieve this goal, a variety of ideas arose, such as creating a Hispanic/Latinx heritage district, supporting more artists of color with funding opportunities, programming more broadly at the BMO center, including more diverse entertainment at City Market, and creating more varied nightlife offerings. There is progress already in place to build upon but much more work to do. Rockford has the precedent of its Healing Illinois work it did in 2021, with a performance event at the Coronado called "Breaking Chains, Healing Wounds, Making Change." A broader trend in more inclusive programming is "meeting people where they are" – that is, larger arts organizations partnering with entities in diverse neighborhoods to create "pop-up" events to build relationships that will then make broader audiences feel welcome at the main facility of that organization. Broadly defining – and supporting – culture can also help provide more diverse offerings, such as encouraging cultural events in houses of worship and restaurants.



### 3. Increase opportunities for youth and arts education

To ensure that Rockford is creating a new generation of producers of arts and culture, as well as audiences, it is essential to reach youth. Studies show that providing exposure to the arts to children at young ages provides a wide range of benefits<sup>13</sup>. To do so, arts education must be a priority in Rockford Public Schools. This includes expanding the Creative and Performing Arts program (CAPA), so that more kids can benefit. Overall, arts education needs to be a higher priority in all of Rockford Public Schools, particularly in the younger grades. In the RPS Facilities Master Planning process that launched in September 2023, participants have already expressed that increasing the arts and arts education – including arts facilities — is a top priority. This planning process is very fortuitous as it can align with the goals of the Rockford Region Cultural Plan.

Beyond the school system, youth need spaces outside of school and home to access cultural and creative activities, in safe, affordable, and welcoming settings. Maker spaces, creative incubators, and communal hangouts are all ideas. Examples that have had success in the past include the Irving Avenue Strong Neighborhood House (beloved, but ultimately dismantled when it lost its champion), which provided kids ages seven to 17 access to learn audio-video skills, artmaking, and 3D printing. Another example is ArtsPlace, the summer partnership between Rockford Area Arts Council, RPS 205, and Washington Park Community Center. This is also a beloved program, but challenging to fund.

**“Art should be for everyone and feel welcoming”**

- public engagement participant

### 4. Foster collaboration and connection within the cultural sector and with other sectors

Coming out of the pandemic, a broader nationally and internationally trend has been increased collaboration among arts organizations. Rockford arts organizations noted during the planning process that they were proud of their strengths in working together to collectively weather COVID-19. Rockford can now build on that foundation to deepen collaboration within the arts and culture sector. This could include larger organizations sharing space and resources with smaller ones to simultaneously build trust and cultivate new audiences, co-creating programming and events, and collaboratively applying for grants and other funding. Different disciplines within the arts can also better connect. For example, by expanding ArtScene to include live music, which is underway. Rockford also has a model in its social service sector for collaboration across institutions, in its Rockford Area Case Management<sup>14</sup> started in 2017. While this is a very different sector than arts and culture, a question for arts and culture organizations in Rockford is whether they too could create a community of practice to better serve audiences and creatives in Rockford.

Beyond collaboration within the arts and culture sector, it is equally important for Rockford to foster connections and collaboration between arts and culture and other sectors. This can take many forms, with examples listed below:

- **Elected officials and public service representatives:** Engage around workforce development, the economic development potential of arts and culture, and public art programming – for example, clarifying maintenance obligations for public art situated in areas where jurisdiction is unclear.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.amacad.org/publication/case-for-arts-education/section/2>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.niu.edu/nicne/rockford-area-case-management-initiative/index.shtml>

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- **Parks department and nature-focused organizations:** Build on existing collaborations and Rockford Park Department most recent strategic plan noting arts and cultural programming as a priority.
- **Art and culture dealing with trauma:** Connecting people through arts and culture.
- **Public safety:** Create programming with the Rockford Police Department around violence interrupters as well as exhibiting artwork by Rockford youth in police stations (building on a past collaboration between RPS and Rockford Police).
- **Workforce development:** Connect with Colman Yards which will have many opportunities for workforce development that could include artists and creative workers.
- **Faith community:** Explore opportunities to connect artists and arts organizations with houses of worship. A great resource for this is Making Homes for the Arts in Sacred Places<sup>15</sup> which fosters successful partnerships between arts groups and congregations.
- **Business community:** Chambers of Commerce and Leadership Rockford could have a creative economy component and offer professional development to creatives.
- **Higher education:** Leverage resources at Northern Illinois University (which has a new art & design director), Rock Valley College, and Rockford University.
- **Health care:** Mercy Health, Rosecrance, Swedish American Hospital, and Rockford Ready are all entities to explore deepening connections to art therapy to serve mental and physical health needs, especially for individuals grappling with trauma.
- **Real estate:** Urban Equity Properties, Rockford Local Development Council, and Northwest Illinois Alliance of Realtors should all be kept apprised of developments in Rockford's arts and culture landscape to both be ambassadors to spread awareness and help strategize potential arts and culture uses of real estate.
- **Social services:** Deepen relationships with major service organizations and other nonprofits such as the United Way, Goodwill, YMCA downtown, and Eliminate Racism 815.
- **Small business professional development for artists:** Build on work by Think Big (75% of clients are creative businesses), [Rock Valley College Small Business Development Center](#), and Accelerating Creatives & Entrepreneurs Conference and Expo.
- **Sports:** Many cities integrate artistic initiatives in the sports sector, i.e., stadiums and major sporting events. Rockford has started to do this with the Ice Hogs and can grow such initiatives (including at Beyer Stadium) as win-win opportunities to promote Rockford sports and provide exposure/work opportunities for local artists.
- **Film, media, technology:** Work with places like City Stages to support cultivating the film industry in Rockford, as well as, more broadly, media and technology, i.e., photography and web design.

## 5. Leverage development and underutilized spaces

Rockford has a large number of blighted, “brown” sites, and city-owned vacant properties that could be transformed into vibrant places for arts and culture. There are many examples of other places doing this as noted in the “Adaptive Reuse” trend section. There are a number of highly successful precedents for this in Rockford. The dilapidated former Amerock factory was slated for demolition before it was transformed by Wisconsin-based Gorman & Company into the 160-room Embassy Suites. The Coronado, built in 1927 was revived as the Coronado Performing Arts Center with a \$18.5 million fundraising campaign. And recently, Colman Yards

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<sup>15</sup> <https://sacredplaces.org/our-work/arts-sacred-places/>

## State of Culture



was approved by City Council and was cited by many as an exciting “game changer” for Rockford. Additional ideas and strategies towards this opportunity are as follows:

- Deploy the existing Arts Overlay in Rockford’s zoning code to facilitate arts-related development.
- Activate vacant storefronts with artists and art projects (7th Street is a particularly promising area for this).
- Leverage the under-utilized parks district volleyball and basketball courts.
- There are number of unoccupied buildings in Rockford with potential, including the following:
  - The Rockford Armory, 605 North Main St. an Art Deco building designed by local architects Bradley and Bradley and opened in 1937, is currently vacant. The building is included on the National Register of Historic Places and was gifted to the City of Rockford in 2003. At one point, it was pitched to George Lucas a site for his Museum of Narrative Art (now opening in Los Angeles).
  - The News Tower, at 99 E. State St., was designed by Pecatonia-born architect Jesse Barlog and built in 1930. In April 2023, it was announced that Iconic Energy CEO Teague Dickey, purchased the iconic building and was moving forward with a \$22 million redevelopment plan. This would add to the downtown revitalization that includes the UW Health Sports Factory and the newly renovated Rockford Public Library. With a projected opening date of 2024, it would be worth speaking with them to see if there was any potential for arts and culture presence in the development.
  - Midway Theater, at 721 East State St. was opened in 1918 and closed around 2006. Built in the Spanish Renaissance style, it was designed by renowned architect J.E.O Pridmore. While it suffers from multiple code violations, in September 2023, WIFR shared news that Council Member Isidro Barrios is on board for a revitalization.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.wifr.com/2023/09/23/rockford-residents-share-optimism-midway-theater-revitalization/>



## Adaptive reuse projects in Rockford

Rockford has a number of exciting adaptive reuse projects underway, which offer possibilities for arts and cultural activity. Among these are:

### Colman Yards



- 26-acre, nine building complex along the South Main Street corridor, rehabilitated after four decades of neglect
- Will create a brand new residential, commercial, retail, recreation, and public green space neighborhood and trade district
- Maker spaces can nurture creativity
- Riverfront access, green space, and common areas can be sites for arts and culture activations and partnerships
- Retail space can house creative businesses
- Transit hub can improve connectivity
- Arts advisory council working with developer to strategize placemaking efforts and cultural partnerships

Image Source on the left:  
<https://www.rockrivercurrent.com/2022/10/19/introducing-colman-yards-a-first-look-at-the-future-of-rockfords-barber-colman-complex/>

### Times Theater (224 North Main St.)

- One of two Rockford movie houses designed in the Art Moderne style; it has been closed for 20 years
- Acquired by SupplyCore CEO Peter Provenzano's Joseph James Partners
- Renovation planned to create a multi-use facility and entertainment venue with a seating capacity of 650 and a standing capacity of between 800-900 people
- Plans include an auditorium, restaurant, and auxiliary stage
- \$3.5 million in state DCEO grants have been secured
- Programming to include live music, lectures, film and performances
- Goal is to open in 2025

Image Source on the right:  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/myoldpostcards/50345886802>

- Former Mendelssohn Performing Arts Center, 406 N. Main St., in downtown Rockford. In 2022, this was purchased by Sarah and Todd Honeyville to create Main Street Theater & Arts which would host small plays, poetry readings, stand-up and improv comedy, lectures, and other performing arts.
- Elks Lodge, 201 West Jefferson St., built in 1912 as a social hall by Chicago architect Lawrence Buck and currently listed on Landmark Illinois' "Most Endangered Places" in the state.

## 6. Strategize funding and revenue mechanisms

Almost all of the ideas and potential strategies for this plan will require resources including funding and revenue. Thus, strategizing sources of revenue will be a key aspect of the success of implementation. Some ideas surfaced thus far are as follows:

- Create a Percent for Art ordinance to finance a new arts and culture fund – many cities nationwide successfully fund arts and culture with this mechanism.
- Amusement tax funds could be a revenue source for arts and culture.
- Hard Rock Casino funds can help support arts and culture in Rockford, as is already the case with the new concert venue they are investing in at Levings Park. Another way for Hard Rock to support arts and culture is to create an art collection uplifting local artists. A successful model for this is Prince George's County MGM Casino art collection<sup>17</sup>.
- Leverage financing tools to spur revitalization of properties that would not receive adequate appraisal for financing when comps are insufficient to obtain financing. Tools include tax incentives, tax increment financing, new markets tax credits, structured financing, and other forms of risk capital to be provided by the city or private sector.
- Secure arts and culture funding from other city departments where arts have data-

<sup>17</sup> <https://mgmnationalharbor.mgmresorts.com/en/amenities/heritage-collection.html>

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backed benefits, i.e., public safety. This is a strategy that has been very successful for Minneapolis' Office of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy.

- Connect with top foundations serving Rockford to consider a consortium model.
- For creative businesses, earned income models include connecting with pop-ups such as the national Markets for Makers model or creating membership models for ongoing revenue.
- To finance public art, Rockford can study models of neighboring communities such as Moline, Illinois' 2021 Public Art and Placemaking Plan.<sup>18</sup>

## 7. Improve advocacy and data capture around arts and culture

An overarching goal of this planning process is to raise awareness among Rockford stakeholders of the value of arts and culture, and why it is critical to invest in arts and culture to benefit all in Rockford. To be able to measure the impact of these investments, and progress over time, requires creating structures to collect accurate data. Currently, many creative individuals (who are a large part of the "gig economy") do not even use Employee Identification Numbers to invoice, and are often paid off the books, thus rendering invisible their contributions to the Rockford Regional economy.

Likewise, while many arts organizations in Rockford receive contributed income, both from public and private sources, so there is not a holistic method of capturing data in a way that allows for efficient tracking and analysis. The October 2023 report by SMU Data Arts "Navigating Recovery: Arts and Culture Financial and Operating Trends in Chicago" was possible in large part due to investments on the part of Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE) into *up-front mechanisms* to collect reliable data inputs to then be analyzed and synthesized by SMU. Rockford could aspire to similar such efforts with SMU DataArts in the future. Another goal could be working with Americans for the Arts on their next Arts and Economic Property study. Studies and reports such as these then become valuable tools for arts advocacy, to have hard data demonstrating the impact of the arts in Rockford, which can in turn attract needed resources and support.



### Recent cultural win

In October 2023, the Rockford Area Arts Council secured over \$400,000 for Rockford arts and culture organizations as part of the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) distribution of funds to Illinois' creatives in its last Back to Business (B2B) American Relief Plan Distribution

## 8. Strengthen awareness of arts and culture in Rockford

The quest to better promote and publicize arts and culture is one that many communities share. The challenge is doing so is in some ways magnified by the splintered media landscape with so many sources of information online. That said, there are a number of ideas and strategies that emerged throughout the planning process as follows:

- Create a centralized hub to promote arts and culture in the Rockford Region. The Arts Council has a directory online, and this process is creating a cultural asset inventory. Building - and maintaining - a more centralized portal will require ongoing investment.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.renewmoline.com/project/city-of-moline-public-art-placemaking-plan/>

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- Tap into employers' HR departments that can be a good partner in disseminating information. This can be both to share information to potential audiences and also many companies have potential volunteers who can donate time to arts and culture organizations.
- Advocate for arts and culture to have a seat at the table in other sectors. Many cities, like New York City and St. Paul, MN, embed artists in residency in city departments in completely different sectors such as public health or transportation. Doing so helps other areas of the city better understand the work and value artists bring to planning and responding to community needs.
- The real estate community can be a huge source to help spread awareness. Real estate brokers are on the front lines to attract new residents and workers, including remote workers who may be enticed by Rockford's arts and culture amenities. To do so, however, these realtors need to be briefed on the options to share with prospective clients. Partnering with groups like the Northwest Alliance of Realtors can facilitate this strategy.
- Strengthening and supporting local media is essential to have arts journalism spread the word about arts and culture happenings in Rockford.
- Celebrate success stories in arts and culture to build momentum for more success. This can be done with social media campaigns.
- Collaborative marketing campaigns between arts organizations, or in collaboration with RACVB, can be very successful and help strengthen the overall Rockford brand.
- It is important to ensure that marketing campaigns extend a sense of welcome with diverse and inclusive messaging and imagery.

## 9. Foster brave conversations through arts and culture

Healing past divisions and lack of trust requires difficult conversations. Arts and culture can help us to see each other and create space for these conversations. There are existing initiatives within Rockford that can integrate arts and culture, such as Eliminate Racism 815, which lists as a goal within its Relationship Building Team, the following: "Build relationships through the arts with 10 community/faith-based groups doing equity work by January 2024." Rockford can also build on the Heal Illinois Initiative it began in 2021. Beyond these local resources, there are national and international initiatives that Rockford could connect to such as The Human Library, the Cultural Equity Learning Community, or the Creative Equity Toolkit.

## 10. Increase neighborhood development with arts and culture

While there is excitement about building on the revitalization of Rockford's downtown to ensure greater density and a vibrant town center, there is also a desire to ensure other communities are developed, recognizing their unique identities. Foremost among these is broadly speaking the West side of Rockford, which has historically been disinvested. More specifically, areas of Rockford mentioned in the data gathering include Charles Street, Broadway,



### Recent cultural win

The RAAC officially sits on Illinois' State Cultural District Advisory Committee, which will be investing \$3 million in 10 new cultural districts chosen in 2023 and 2024. Rockford's Ethnic Heritage Museum, in partnership with the RAAC, the City of Rockford, and the RACVB is applying for a State Cultural District designation for the Southwest side of Rockford.



**State of Culture**

Perryville, and the North Main Corridor, as well as building further on the strength of Rockford's riverfront. This priority can draw upon the 2019 Neighborhood Revitalization Study to prioritize which neighborhoods to focus upon first, as well as the 2023 R1 Comprehensive Plan. Additionally, there are many ideas in the Corridor Plans – Keith Creek, 11th Street, Auburn Street, and Kishwaukee. These include integrating creative approaches to infrastructure (bridges, light poles, signage, benches, and trash cans), using murals to tell stories, i.e., to educate people about flooding, and using creative placemaking techniques to brand neighborhoods and enhance their identity. Inspirations can come from other places in the country, or even in the world. An example is the Oma Painted Forest in Spain, which uses art to create a destination in their forest lands. Such an idea could be applied to the Kishwaukee River Forest Preserve or elsewhere in Rockford.



Oma Painted Forest in Bizkaia, Basque County. Image source: <https://unusualplaces.org/the-painted-forest-of-oma/>

The headline from all of these findings is that Rockford has great strengths on which it can build. While weaknesses and challenges remain, these are the result of both longstanding historical forces and more recent events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Some participants voiced frustration about things in Rockford not changing, but the evidence speaks otherwise. Rockford has made, and continues to make progress, particularly in its arts and culture landscape. There is still so much potential to be explored in the next phase of this cultural planning process.





**NEXT STEPS**



# NEXT STEPS

This State of Culture Report represents the conclusion of Phases 1 and 2 research and engagement. Following this report, the team will take the following steps:

1. Conduct a public survey for community members to weigh in on which opportunities are of greatest priority to this cultural plan.
2. Work with the RAAC and PAC to review the results of the priorities survey and begin Phase 3: Vision, Strategy, and Implementation.
3. In Phase 3, the consultant team will work with the RAAC and the PAC to create task forces for implementation workshops. Each task force will tackle a high-level priority (to be confirmed following the closing of the priority survey) to develop strategies to implement those priorities.
4. As implementation workshops progress, the Draft Rockford Region Cultural Plan will be developed.
5. The Draft Cultural Plan will be shared with the public for comment prior to the release of the final Rockford Region Cultural Plan.



# APPENDICES



# APPENDICES

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## A. SECTOR SPECIFIC WORKSHOP FINDINGS

### Healthcare

- Strong collaborations exist to build upon in the wellness community, i.e., Womanspace which integrates creative arts into a holistic health approach.
- Rockford is supportive of exploring health issues through culture. The Artists Ensemble Theater restaging of *Jumping to Delusions* is an example as a play about mental illness originally staged in the 1990s in collaboration with Rockford University and therapists, with post-show talkbacks.
- Healthcare services needed in the arts and culture community given the current delays in healthcare services at local hospitals and clinics.
- Transportation and access to art supplies are huge challenges.
- Art-related support groups and art therapy, including gardening is an opportunity to support health care work, provided there are well trained art therapists.
- Opportunities include working with local the NAMI chapter and creating shared resources for art materials, perhaps through the library.

*Connecting art to mental health in action: The Artists' Ensemble Theatre, in partnership Stepping Stones of Rockford, in spring 2023 presented "Jumping to Delusions" described as a "groundbreaking play using a combination of sketch comedy, vaudeville and real-life accounts to demystify mental illness."*



Image source: [https://allevents.in/mobile/amp-event.php?event\\_id=200024357187436](https://allevents.in/mobile/amp-event.php?event_id=200024357187436)



### Latinx Community

- Multiple organizations want to serve all the subgroups, creating large tents that can't meet the needs of everybody. The needs of the Latinx community do not reflect the same needs of the Black community, and the tensions between the communities are not talked about enough to try and resolve.
- Art about immigration can be powerful.
- Space is a valuable commodity for arts and cultural events, especially that can be accessed by communities of color. We have to fight for space, i.e., using Davis Park for festivals.
- There are ongoing cultural events that exclude Latinx artists and vendors. We need to bring together the community around arts and culture, not separate out certain types. WE need to showcase ALL of Rockford.
- Barriers include funding, language, and spread-out geography.
- Trust needs to be built - recognition that RACVB is making efforts, and it will take time to heal from the past. Cultural events should feature more Spanish and Black programming, i.e., music.
- A need is professional development for creatives in Spanish, i.e., how to apply for grants.
- Successes to build on:
  - Parks are a free open venue for the Latinx community, i.e., Sunday Dominoes in the Park.
  - Cultural heritage museum mercado (*Ethnic Heritage Museum*)
  - Multicultural festival on South Side was a good event but paused for COVID.

### LGBTQ+ Community

- There have recently been more LGBTQ+ events. The Liam Foundation is a strong advocate and resource. Rock Valley College has great safe spaces. PFLAG has been encouraged to join the July 4 parade. Many businesses have also expressed support for the community.
- Support for the LGBTQ community is uneven; the city is more progressive and the broader region is more conservative.
- There is a need for greater administrative support in LGBTQ+ arts and culture organizations and businesses.
- Rockford needs to tap into the high school Gay Student Alliance (GSA) groups.
- Local businesses could demonstrate support for the LGBTQ community through a more formalized mechanism, i.e., stickers or a campaign.

### Non-Profits

- Top of mind is cultivating the new generation of donors and fundraising. The previous generation was more philanthropically minded, and it's harder to find supporters among the younger generation.
- Communication amongst organizations is a challenge and creating a shared communication mechanism would be a huge benefit to all.
- Some perceive cliques in the arts community. It's important to cultivate a sense of welcome for all.
- There is a feeling of disconnectedness in the neighborhoods.
- There are vacant lots and inactivated spaces in underserved parts of Rockford, and a desire for more cohesive community bonding.
- Pride in Rockford is growing and needs to be harnessed.
- Nonprofits want to collaborate more. For example, Mercy Health wants to have more events and form partnerships.

## State of Culture

- Volunteerism is a huge opportunity; people want more exciting ways to volunteer, and this could connect with arts and culture.
- Rockford is great for people with most disabilities, art that everyone can enjoy. Most of the art IS accessible to people with disabilities. (Though other meetings for this process suggested ADA compliance was uneven and thus an obstacle.)

## Arts Education

- There is a lack of a central method of communication between all arts educators in the area's school districts.
- There is only one education coordinator position in Rockford; many organizations have education departments but not a dedicated position.
- Equal opportunities for students in different districts are top of mind.

## Black Community

- Black professionals fight suppression and struggle to be seen, which drives them away.
- Trust is broken creating challenges in finding and using available resources. There is a painful history, i.e., when Auburn's murals were painted over. The Arts Council is mistrusted by some.
- There are too many "one-off partnerships" that end with BIPOC artists and organizers finding their work replicated without credit/compensation or inclusion in future events or programs.
- Funding is top of mind.
- There are biases around certain geographic areas that lead to a lack of integrated support and participation for events and programs, i.e., West side (historically Black communities) disinvestment.
- The Irving Avenue Strong Neighborhood House was cited as a program that had great success, but unfortunately was dismantled. The program was a partnership of the New Genres Art Space, Rockford Area Arts Council, and United Way of Rock River Valley, which ran the Strong House at 312 Irving Ave. on Rockford's West side. Led by Steve Nofsinger, who creates artwork under the name Karate Horse, the program was a seven-week workshop in which young people from seven to 17 learn the intricacies of the audio and visual arts and 3D printing.<sup>19</sup>
- An exciting opportunity is ArtsPlace 20, the summer partnership between Rockford Area Arts Council, RPS 205, and Washington Park Community Center (WPCC). At ArtsPlace, students attended a six-week intensive program. With approximately 90% BIPOC youth, it's an amazing program where kids were inspired, learned entrepreneurship and videography. However, funding is extremely difficult to maintain.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.dailyherald.com/article/20200816/news/308169997>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.rps205.com/205vibe/205-vibe-blog/family-friends/default-post-page-clone/~board/family-and-friends/post/arts-partnership-gives-rps-205-students-confidence-art-knowledge-creative-outlet>





A class of young neighborhood residents learn how to design, scan, and print objects in three dimensions at United Way's Irving Avenue Strong House on Thursday, July 30, 2020, in Rockford, Ill. (Scott P. Yates/Rockford Register Star via AP) (Associated Press)

### **Business Leaders**

- Greater collaborations between business and arts community.
  - There are opportunities for the business sector to be more involved in funding of arts and culture organizations.
  - Rockford could benefit from hosting regular financial literacy events or trainings for individual artists to empower local artists to activate the store fronts in the city.
  - Create volunteer programs for the community.
  - Businesses can provide professional development opportunities to artists, with representatives from banks, City government, and professional services, to teach financial literacy, marketing, and business planning - perhaps as a quarterly event.
- Blight and underused property are issues.
  - A lot of vacant retail space along 7th Street could ideally be paired with artists. Rockford Art Deli is a success story and model.
  - Blight in the Rockford area extends to residential areas as well due to absentee landlords.
  - R1's landbank could be a partner for arts and culture uses of vacant/underutilized property.
- Development and policy to develop and finance more creative spaces
  - Rockford is not a home rule city - would prefer that be one (but 2018 home rule referendum narrowly lost in 2018).



## State of Culture

- There is a need to attract and work with more developers, i.e., via a Percent for Art program.
- Leverage a rich tradition of TIF districts and set aside a TID district specifically for arts and culture.
- Cultural district idea
  - River district has discussed the idea of having a subsidized storefront for arts uses and building mosaic walls involving the community.
  - Attracting live/work use to have more businesses that are residents, and residents who have businesses. Art Overlay zoning ordinance could be a starting point.
  - State cultural district program could work with the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity. The Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity's (DCEO) Office of Minority Economic Empowerment (OMEE) is launching the State-Designated Cultural Districts Program to establish districts throughout the state that build on existing strong cultural identities and promote economic development. <https://dceo.illinois.gov/omee/state-cultural-districts-nodo.html>. The state of Illinois is investing \$3million into these districts.
- Marketing needs
  - Public safety perceptions are a concern
  - Challenge of online media - more fractured online landscape
  - Have to fight planning fatigue (Transform Rockford)
  - Struggle with perception that Rockford Public Schools are not good

## Creative Businesses & Individual Artists

- Rockford needs to create a robust strategy for public art.
- Many working artists cannot survive solely on their work. They have supplemental jobs in other industries and sectors.
- Rockford lacks a local art supply story other than big chains.
- Permitting is hard - it can take 10 weeks to get permission for a mural. Rockford would benefit from a simpler permitting process.
- Better transportation options are needed to connect the area like bike shares or regular buses, or partnerships with ride share companies.
- There should be an open-source calendar and resource hub for businesses and artists to see what is going on and identify possible partnerships.
- A communal studio space would be extremely helpful. Arts Overlay District can be a start for mixed use residential/commercial real estate.
- We need to collaborate more with hotels and the Rockford Area Development Council.
- Collaborations between arts organizations is a big opportunity, i.e., concerts at the art museum where audiences can be exposed to additional art forms.

## Educators

- We need to activate Rockford alumni to help build awareness and support. Just recently, Rock Valley College alumni, Brothers TJ, and Aaron Hill's film "A Cloudy Moon" was shown at the Cannes International Film Festival in France.
- There are some events people feel very connected to. How can we extend our most successful events to reach more of the community?
- Work with Rockford Promise to show how there are pathways to creative careers, i.e., in design, fashion, music, technology.



## State of Culture

- Rockford needs to strengthen the ties to colleges. If Rockford wants to retain its creatives, barriers need to be addressed from high school to college and back to the Rockford creative work force.
- Rockford Public Library's new maker space is a huge new asset in the community, offering a sewing lab, 3D printing, embroidery machine, T-shirt press, and more in about 8,000 square feet.
- Library Nordlof Center has excellent performance space and an artist-in-residence program, currently Moon Dog Theater:  
<https://www.100fmrockford.com/2023/10/13/local-underground-guerrilla-theater-company-named-rockford-public-librarys-artist-in-residence/>
- Northern Illinois University School has four theaters and a new director of Art and Design and NIU may be much more open for business moving forward.

## Faith Leaders

- Houses of worship have resources including space, instruments, etc. to share with artists, but need to be able to network with the creative community in a more formal way.
- Rockford needs a directory for who to call for planning events or programs and a communication tool that spreads awareness for arts and culture events already happening.
- Exposure to the arts in the south and southwest of Rockford is desperately needed. Each side of town has unique needs.
- Places of worship already have strong ties to seniors and youth through afterschool programming. Arts and culture can be integrated into those interactions.
- Faith leaders recognize that art can be a powerful vehicle for community conversations, i.e., around racism or gaining understanding of other religious traditions. Eliminate Racism 815 is a great model (the Spring 2023 summit was a success). Rockford can do a better job of using arts and culture for expanding cultural competency around the area. "We don't understand each other."
- The faith community can leverage their connections to the community to help artists and vice versa - for example, there are services in Swahili.
- Artists can be extensions of evangelical teams.

## Seniors

- Transportation is top of mind. Some organizations have transportation methods, but it is not throughout the city or a regularly offered service.
- There is a lack of involvement of senior community members of color outside of churches in the arts and culture community in Rockford.
- Seniors can be assets to the arts and culture ecosystem; they are an untapped resource in terms of support and participation.
- Many seniors of color are very involved in their houses of worship. Churches and other houses of worship can be good places to host cultural events.
- Community centers and assisted living centers can be collaborators. Booker Washington Center has good senior programs. Wesley Willows takes their residents to cultural shows, but other centers may have fewer resources. The Luther Center has buses that could be used to bring seniors to cultural events.

## South Asian Community

- The number one obstacle to participation from the South Asian populations in Rockford is the language barrier.



## State of Culture

- Norms are changing – past generations aimed to assimilate, but today’s youth from other cultures want to know their culture more.
- Many South Asian communities in Rockford are intimately tied to arts and culture. They want to share their culture through food, festivals, and events.
- The Rockford Gifted Academy is extremely diverse and has created a great program for immigrant families.

## Philanthropy

- The philanthropy community wants to collaborate more, to have a greater collective impact, while also addressing overlap and duplication of effort.
- Awareness is a huge challenge. Many people don’t know what others are doing. Many businesses and philanthropies do not fully understand what the Arts Council does and would get more deeply involved if they did know.
- Funders need to better understand how the arts intersect with their other priorities. For example, literacy is a major priority for the United Way, so it would help to demonstrate how the arts foster literacy.
- Marketing is a huge issue and it could be beneficial for organizations to collaborate on marketing, i.e., The Coronado and the Rockford Symphony.
- To foster collaborations, the Arts Council could help coordinate and be a mechanism to measure results.

## Elected officials

- Rockford punches above its weight and has great assets: the Coronado, summer concerts in the park, festivals, the Queer AF art show, the West Side Show Room, and its sports culture.
- For the arts, it’s very important to ensure the average person understands how the arts applies to them.
- The business community increasingly is interested in arts and culture. Talent attraction and retention is our greatest challenge, and arts and culture can help with that.
- Communications is a huge challenge and no one wants to spend money on communications. HR departments are a key resource to tap for communications.
- In messaging to elected officials about arts and culture, data is key, as is tying the data to workforce and economic development. Collecting data, leading with data, and being data driven will help with elected officials.
- Arts could be funded with public safety dollars since there is so much data about preventing crime with the arts. The sheriff’s budget has increased greatly but the money is directed to after the fact of crime, instead of preventative measures, which arts can impact.
- The city gives \$75K to the arts council (increased by \$50K) which is very small given an overall budget of \$180 million. Rockford would benefit from more financial support from the other municipalities in the region.
- The City of Rockford and the county communities need to get to know each other more – spend more time together. “Culture can bring us together. We have to work at the speed of trust.” Ward meetings and neighborhood groups are a great place to surface arts and culture as solution-based approach to community issues. The Arts council’s members should ask all city council and county board members to attend ward meetings.
- Board development is another key issue as board intentionality – ensuring we appoint people to boards who bring value.



## State of Culture

- Many have fond memories of the Waterfront festival, even though it lost money. Instead, Rockford could aim to have more geographically diverse festivals. Somerville, MA is a model with festivals like Porchfest, where the whole city has people perform music on their front porches. Or Fluff fest, celebrating Marshmallow Fluff (invented in Somerville). Rockford could do a local version.

## Collar communities

- Loves Park public art program evolved with support from Rockford Public Schools and Harlem Township schools, partnering with principals and students to create artwork for public benches. The area otherwise is primarily sports driven and lacks a real city center, though currently there is some talk with R1 about a potential box market.
- Rockton's downtown has seen a huge resurgence in the last 10 years with art galleries, such as, Rockford Art Guild artists collective, Yeti Fest, Pelican Fest, and the two murals along the public art trail. Rockton school system is one of the top school systems. Rockton has a small town feel with great support from the downtown business community. There have been discussions for residents to fund mosaics to memorialize their loved ones.
- The geographical divide between Rockford and collar communities needs to be addressed. Rockford has an "escape from Rockford" reputation, connected to white flight after the People Who Care lawsuit.
- Collar communities tend to be less diverse, but the goal is to be more diverse.
- Establishing boundary agreements is a huge opportunity to clarify who maintains parts of public space. Maintenance of artwork is a huge issue.
- An overall marketing strategy would help. If Rockford and the collar communities co-marketed, i.e., included collar communities in Art Scene.
- Loves Park just had its first year of musical festivals, featuring "Rhythm of the Heart," and "Old Settlers Day," which were huge draws.
- We need to have more meetings with the collar communities. South Beloit would be super supportive, and likely Machesney Park. RACVB has monthly board meetings, but Loves Park no longer participates. RAEDC used to be a mechanism but have had upheaval in last 10 years and now more fractured.
- There is huge competition for retail. Costco was a big battle.
- Home rule would give municipalities more power but right now, they have to obey what the state decides.
- Having region-wide public art would be huge win.





### **Arts Anchor Institutions**

- Space is an issue. There is a desire to have access to civic facilities.
- Sports collaborations are of interest – for example, having cultural events at Beyer Stadium.
- Public school prioritization of arts education is top of mind. Arts organizations need the public schools to better integrate the arts. Some arts organizations are in discussion with the school district after years of disengagement. With leadership changes, there is the potential to be better involved with the public schools.
- Rockford benefits from its location – we can attract visitors from Chicago and surrounding states, allowing us to charge more for our events. The reenactment ticket prices have increased by 50-60% and demand is there for high quality products.
- Funding is a major issue. Not all arts organizations have the same success with tickets – given trends of audiences not yet returning to pre-pandemic levels, arts organizations need additional public and corporate support.
- Awareness is a huge challenge – not enough people know about options.
- Rockford has amazing nature and there are great arts programs in Rockford’s outdoor spaces. But transportation is a huge challenge – how to provide low-cost transportation to underserved populations and attract visitors to sites that are harder to access.
- More collaboration is desired. During COVID, Rockford’s arts and culture organizations did a great job working together and collaborating. Co-creating programs with the same grant dollars could be a useful strategy.
- Film, design, web, and photography are industries where Rockford can grow in strength. The recently launched City Stages is a force to help Rockford grow its capacity to compete with nearby markets like Chicago.
- A shared calendar and shared marketing is an ongoing question.

### **Major Employers**

- Employee resource groups can benefit from arts and culture.
- Employees are interested in giving back to the community but need to clearly understand what opportunities there are.
- COVID interrupted relationships with nonprofits. There is a need to build back those relationships.
- Return to office can benefit from more artistically designed workplaces. Trend with “hotelling” spaces leads to sterile workplaces – arts and culture can make spaces more vibrant with good design.
- Buying blocks of tickets to events for employees can help both employees and nonprofits.
- DEAI is increasingly important in workplaces, but if there is volunteer work that fulfills DEAI goals, employees need to be clear on what they are being asked to do, especially in industries that are stretched thin with employees, i.e., engineering.
- Racism is a public health crisis. One way to counter is with more equitable hiring in a workforce which matches the demographics of the community.
- Professional recruitment efforts could better integrate arts and culture to attract new workers.
- An approach to improving Rockford can be looking at many little things. Example: sirens and flashing lights on emergency vehicles in Rockford are run 80% of the time versus much less frequently in other communities. The cumulative impact of that frequent of lights and sirens is to perpetuate fear or an anxiety that things are more dangerous than they really are.
- Rebranding Rockford is key – to tell a more positive story.



### **Thriving Communities**

- HUD is funding transportation and housing projects in Rockford, along the full length of southern part of downtown Rockford. The conversion of 9th Street to a two-way street, with the first phase of the Whitman exchange coming down just north of City Hall. When the exchange comes down, 11 acres of land will be free for Rockford to develop a housing plan.
- The housing needs assessment will be done by 2024.



## B. AMBASSADOR FINDINGS

### AMBASSADORS AND PARTICIPANTS

We had five ambassadors who hosted conversations and sent notes. They are:

- Ambassador Mustafa Abdall: had a conversation with 140 non-English speakers.
- Ambassador Nicole Landreth: had three separate conversations with about 30 participants. The conversations were Inscape Collective — artist collective, events, retail shop, Womanspace — community center, 317 Art Collaborative — artist collective studio and gallery.
- Ambassador Magda Mohamed: had two conversations with about 20 people at a birthday party and roasting coffee meeting.
- Ambassador Sarene Shariff: had conversations with three parents and 10 children, who are Muslim homeschooling families.

Total people engaged were about 203.

### Strengths:

- Murals, art on electrical boxes, the sculptures, art along the bike path
- The history and culture
- Summer events like music, cultural festivals, farmers market, Greenwich village art fair
- Art scene (though it is expensive to participate)
- Veterans memorial, midway village, beautifying memorials, women's suffrage plaza, local talent

### Weaknesses/gaps:

- There is a lack of a centralized place to list events and activities. There should be more.
- There is a need for cooperation and co-listing between websites and a centralized community calendar.
- Southwest Rockford is a cultural desert, there is nothing happening there in arts and culture.
- Better communication with the community. (I only hear about art or happenings through Facebook really).
- Expand community support
- Non-involvement of school board culture
- Feels old and white
- There is no representation of Eastern Art.



### **Challenges:**

- Finances
- Location disbursement around the city
- East vs. West dichotomy
- More support for community centers
- Artists' education
- Zip code 61107 has no arts and culture
- Responsible representation
- Language accessibility and language barriers to sign up for things and share their culture

### **Opportunities:**

- 7th Street empty storefronts
- City/RAAC support in rentals/artists
- Perception of West side as unsafe
- Leverage TV and radio stations
- Installation art as part of infrastructure
- Expand the pool of artists for murals
- Connecting with teachers and students
- RAAC small grants
- Collaboration with Rockford Ready
- Uplifting neighborhoods with art
- Appreciation for architecture: buildings and the history they have of where we are
- Expand arts to people outside of art scene (One parent had no idea that Rockford has an art museum, even though they visit the museum campus multiple times a month because they take their kids to the Discovery Center).
- A late-night café culture (ex: Ole tea bar in Chicago)
- More non-European ethnic festivals
- Calligraphy and henna as art forms
- More classes in geometric art and other hands-on cultural arts from around the world for the kids to learn about different cultures
- More offerings for children and teens





## C. COMPARABLE CITIES

### Des Moines, Iowa

Des Moines is the capital of Iowa and is in Polk County. Des Moines has a council/manager Ward form of government and voters elect the mayor and city council. Catch Des Moines, the tourism authority counts over 17 museums and cultural attractions in the city and neighboring towns. That number does not include the concerts and live music venues, films, cinemas, galleries, etc. that offer arts and culture to the area and state. There are both outdoor offerings, like at the sculpture park, and indoor at the I.M. Pei wing of the Des Moines Art Center. The city also hosts festivals and events.

#### **GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE OF THE ARTS:**

- The regional arts council of the area is called Bravo Greater Des Moines, Bravo for short. It was formed in 2004 by nine central Iowa local governments to help secure funding for arts organizations. The council now has 17 government partners and eight community partners.
- Within the Des Moines area, the city of West Des Moines has a Public Arts Advisory Commission. It is made up of seven mayor-appointed members, who serve four-year terms.

#### **CULTURAL PLANNING EFFORTS:**

- In 2016, Bravo commissioned a Central Iowa Regional Cultural Assessment (RCA). The purpose of the plan was “to identify opportunities to leverage arts and culture as essential drivers of quality of life and economic development in Central Iowa.” The four key cultural priorities of this assessment were:
  - Every Day, Everywhere Art
  - Cultural Tapestry
  - Strengthen the Creative Economy
  - Youth Connections
- In February 2020, a process started to add measures and targets to the RCA. That process is currently paused because of the global pandemic.
- The Greater Des Moines Public Art Foundation created a Strategic Plan for 2020-2024.

#### **CULTURAL POLICY:**

- The Greater Des Moines Public Art Foundation, a 510(c)(3) is the lead organization to envision, develop, advance, fund, administer, and advocate for public art in public places. The foundation was established in 2001 by the Des Moines City Council passing Ordinance No. 14, 005, with a goal of annually funding the City Public Arts Program at a level equal to 1.5% of the general obligation funds of the city appropriated for capital improvements.



### FUNDING MECHANISMS AND PARTNERSHIPS:

- The Iowa Cultural Trust and Trust Fund is a state-funded program that supports the arts and culture sector in Iowa. The Trust was created in 2002 with the goal of providing long-term financial stability for arts and cultural organizations in the state.
- The trust fund provides grants to arts and cultural organizations in Iowa to support a variety of activities, including:
  - Arts education
  - Public art
  - Cultural tourism
  - Arts programming
- The trust fund is funded by a variety of sources, including:
  - A portion of the state's general fund appropriation
  - Interest earned on the trust fund's investments
  - Private donations
- Bravo has a partnership with 17 communities who commit a portion of their hotel-motel tax revenue specifically for investment in arts, culture, and heritage. Bravo funds their grants programs with that money. Some of Bravo's grant programs include Capitol Projects Grants, Public Art Grants (first introduced in 2019), and its newest partnership with the Iowa Confluence Water Trails (ICON). This grant provides funding for public art projects on ICON access points along any of nine major river systems.
- Greater Des Moines Public Art Foundation receives funds from government agencies, individuals, private foundations, and corporations.

### SUCCESSES IN ADDRESSING COMMUNITY ISSUES:

- Des Moines Art Center is a museum dedicated to Modern and Contemporary Art, with free admission for all. The Art Center's Community Access Program, and studio classes not immediately a part of CAP, have the same goal - to increase access to art and art making. The Studios at the Art Center is an onsite space that is programmed with studio art classes for youth, teen, and adult studios at all levels of experience.
- There are daily offerings in the morning, afternoon, and evening. The programming aims to "provide an accessible and safe space for all creative outlets." The Art Center's Community Access Program (CAP) has 40 local partner organizations that include human health organizations, schools, and other community groups. All Community Access programs are free to attend. The CAP programs include the same art teaching onsite and also out in the community.
- The CAP has four groups of programming: community resilience, identity affirming, educational enrichment, and adaptive arts. Some of the onsite programming as part of CAP includes Art Spectrum (for children with autism and their families), Deaf Community Art Gatherings, and LGBTQIA+ Teen Art Gatherings. CAP also presents two onsite exhibitions each year. Donors Fred and Charlotte Hubbell are the main sponsor of all CAP programs. As part of their 75th anniversary fundraising efforts, the Art Center is campaigning for resources to expand the CAP.



## Fort Wayne, Indiana

Fort Wayne, Indiana's second largest city, is in the northeast part of the state, in Allen County. Local government is mayor-council form, with the mayor as head of executive branch. Part of the city known as Arts Campus Fort Wayne is an Indiana State Cultural District designated by the Fort Wayne Common Council and the Indiana Arts Commission. There are a lot of art and cultural offerings in the city, including the state's only professional ballet company, Fort Wayne Ballet, the Fort Wayne Philharmonic, Fort Wayne Museum of Art, which is accredited by the American Alliance for Museums, the Embassy Theatre, and the Fort Wayne Children's Zoo.

### GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE OF THE ARTS:

- The Indiana Arts Commission is an agency of the state government. One of their programs is the cultural district designation. Arts Campus Fort Wayne was designated in 2021 by the Indiana Arts Commission as part of the Indiana Cultural District Consortium. The nonprofit Arts United manages the district.
- Fort Wayne is part of the Northeast Indiana Regional Arts Council.

### CULTURAL PLANNING EFFORTS:

- In 2020, the city published Art For All | Fort Wayne Public Art Master Plan, a document that outlines the City of Fort Wayne's vision for public art over the next 10 years. The plan was developed through a community engagement process that included over 2,000 residents, and it reflects the values and priorities of the Fort Wayne community.
- The plan has three main goals:
  - To create a more accessible and inclusive public art program.
  - To support the work of local artists and creative professionals.
  - To leverage public art to revitalize neighborhoods and promote economic development.
- In 2015, Arts United led a cultural planning initiative with 30 community leaders. The resulting document was called "The Platform for Cultural Advancement."

### CULTURAL POLICY:

- The Fort Wayne Public Art Program is a citywide initiative that aims to enhance the visual environment and strengthen the positive reputation, brand, and stature of Fort Wayne and its neighborhoods by promoting and integrating public art throughout the city.
- The program is overseen by a 13-member volunteer Public Art Commission, which is made up of appointments from arts organizations, schools, as well as the city council and mayor's Office. The commission governs the City's Public Art Program and can also advise other entities on public art projects.

The commission is responsible for developing and implementing the city's public art policy and guidelines, as well as reviewing and approving proposals for new public art projects.

- One of the program's recent projects is call the Painted Pavement Art Program. This project is a result of the Public Art Master Plan. The City of Fort Wayne Division of Public Works ("DPW") assisted neighborhoods or other citizen groups by placing artistic designs

## State of Culture



on public streets in the City of Fort Wayne. This program is in partnership and helps supplement the Community Led Traffic Calming Demonstration Program.

### FUNDING MECHANISMS AND PARTNERSHIPS:

- The Public Art Program is funded through a combination of public and private sources. The city allocates a portion of its capital improvement budget to the program, and the program also receives funding from grants, donations, and sponsorships.
- The Indiana Arts Commission's "Arts Trust" license plate is a special license plate that supports the arts in Indiana. Proceeds from the sale of Arts Trust license plates go to the Indiana Arts Commission Trust Fund, which is used to support arts programming and grants across the state. You can choose a design that features a work of art by an Indiana artist, or you can choose a design that promotes a particular arts organization or event in Indiana.
- Arts United of Greater Fort Wayne is a private non-profit arts agency and the nation's second oldest community-wide arts organization. The organization manages the state-designated cultural district, Arts Campus Fort Wayne. The organization is going forward with being categorized as a Local Arts Agency.

### SUCCESSES IN ADDRESSING COMMUNITY ISSUES:

- The Hobnobben Film Festival presented by the nonprofit Fort Wayne Cinema Center is in its eighth year and the festival is 100% female led. This annual festival not only features films from a wide variety of artists from around the world, but the films also cover a broad range of topics. The goal is "to showcase diverse stories and voices" from the historically marginalized communities and creators in film. In 2023, some of the shorts explored topics such as addiction, toxic masculinity, and postpartum depression. There are also full-length features. Tickets are available for both in-person screenings at multiple venues and virtual viewing, allowing people in the immediate local area and afar to participate in the festival. Showcases include the Iranian filmmaker showcase and stories from Ukraine. In total, the 2023 lineup had films from 30 countries in 27 languages.

This variety allows for an array of people to find films from many cultures. There are also opportunities to learn about the art of film making, career building, and networking opportunities for the filmmakers themselves. Hobnobben Film Festival is a fundraising event for Cinema Center. Funding sources include local sponsorships, community grants, and private donations.

- Clean Drains Fort Wayne: Be River SmART is a three-year collaborative initiative between Friends of the Rivers and Fort Wayne City Utilities. The program works with mural artists to provide education and community outreach/engagement around environmental issues in the community.
- Sculpture with Purpose is an initiative made possible by Indiana University-Pursue University and consists of 50 sculptures that are also bike racks by artists from around the country. For sculptures on city sidewalks, the City of Fort Wayne ceded rights of way to Arts United, chartered with caring for the sculptures throughout their lifetime.



## Grand Rapids, Michigan

Grand Rapids is the second-most populated city in Michigan and sits in Kent County. City government is divided into three wards and governed by a combination of elected and appointed officials. The city is known for its festivals and is the leader in producing office furniture, including high-design Herman Miller. The Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, one of the world's 100-most visited art museums, is on the outskirts of town.

### CULTURAL PLANNING EFFORTS:

- The City of Grand Rapids published a strategic plan in April 2019 and then provided an update in October 2022. The City of Grand Rapids Strategic Plan is a comprehensive multi-year plan that outlines the city's goals and priorities for the future. The plan was developed through a community engagement process that included over 1,000 residents.
- The plan identifies three key goals:
  - To create a more equitable and inclusive community.
  - To grow a vibrant and sustainable economy.
  - To provide high-quality public services and infrastructure.

### CULTURAL POLICY:

- The Grand Rapids 1100-06 Public Art and Memorials policy establishes criteria and procedures for the acceptance of public art, memorials, and related gifts as public property owned by the City of Grand Rapids.
- The policy states that the City Commission encourages the donation of art, memorials, and related gifts as a means for enhancing the visual and cultural aesthetics of the City of Grand Rapids. Memorials to be erected on city-owned property shall be in remembrance of a person or persons, concept, or event that has positive meaningful significance to the Grand Rapids community.

### GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE OF ARTS:

- The City of Grand Rapids has an art advisory committee, and the office of the city manager is the department in charge of the board. Members are appointed by the city manager. The committee gives recommendations to the city manager on whether donated art, murals, and street art should be accepted by the city.
- Grand Rapids is known for its many festivals and events. City government has an Office of Special Events (OSE) with a public commitment to "generating year-round, high-quality events and activities that welcome all and display our community's vibrancy and diversity."
- The Arts Council of Greater Grand Rapids dissolved in 2011, after 40 years. In 2019, 20 different Grand Rapids arts organizations came together as a collective called Arts Working Group and were active during the beginning of the global pandemic.
- The Michigan Arts and Culture Council serves the state of Michigan.



### **FUNDING MECHANISMS AND PARTNERSHIPS:**

- The Office of Special Events has a sponsorship program. Priority is given to those events that align with the city of Grand Rapids' strategic plan.
- Grand Rapids Community Foundation awards grants in a variety of categories, including arts and culture under its 'Engagement' section of its granting programs.
- Downtown Grand Rapids Inc. is a nonprofit organization that partners with the city to handle the development of Grand Rapids' urban core.
- A newer partnership worth noting is between Kendall College of Art and Design of Ferris State University and the city to continue the ArtPrize festival. Started by DeVos family heir (Amway fortune), ArtPrize began in 2009 and was free and open to the public. For 18 days, art was exhibited throughout the city in public spaces and venues of all kinds. It was a huge success and brought major visibility to Grand Rapids. In 2022, after 13 years, ArtPrize announced it was dissolving. The company gave its creative, technological, and communications platforms to the City of Grand Rapids and Kendall College of Art and Design of Ferris State University.
- Gerald R. Ford International Airport has an art program in partnership with the Frey Foundation. This public art program has oversight by a committee with representatives from the airport and Frey Foundation.
- Experience Grand Rapids, the convention information bureau, partners with the arts and cultural organizations to offer 'Culture Pass.' The mobile pass offers reduced/free admissions to a variety of the city's cultural offerings.

### **SUCCESSES IN ADDRESSING COMMUNITY ISSUES:**

- Grand Rapids is known for its festivals and public art. The arts and culture organization and production company DisArt creates public art events that cultivate and communicate a disability culture. The organization presents contemporary art done by disabled artists from around the world. In 2019, they produced the North American premier for the groundbreaking dance troupe Drag Syndrome. The show was called Disability Drag Show. In 2023, the organization received funding from the Grand Rapids Community Foundation to expand community engagement efforts, with a focus on the intersections of race and disability. The goal of the community engage efforts are to advance equity and inclusion.

## **Akron, Ohio**

The City of Akron is northeastern Ohio and is part of Summitt County. The city governance is by mayor and also three city councilors, one per ward. There was a mayoral election for a new mayor in November 2023. The most recent mayor, who did not seek re-election, and other previous mayors have supported the arts in Akron. Some of the large-scale arts and culture organizations include the Akron Art Museum, National Center for Choreography in Akron and ArtsNow (an independent nonprofit organization), University of Akron, and the Akron Civic Theatre. There is also a Historic Arts District in downtown Akron.

### **CULTURAL PLANNING EFFORTS:**

- In 2019, Akron and Summitt County launched a cultural plan that covers 2020-2035. This is the city's first cultural plan. The process was co-led by the City of Akron and ArtsNow, though no public money funded the project. The cultural plan includes an online map of art

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assets that is continuously updated by organizations/locations that submit requests to be included. ArtsNow announced a new regranting program to provide resources to support the cultural plan and its ten key priorities.

### CULTURAL POLICY:

- The Public Art Program is funded through a Percent for Art TIF Share ordinance which requires all new ORC 5709.41 incentives<sup>21</sup> to dedicate 1% of the city's net TIF revenue to public art.

### GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE OF ARTS:

- There is a Public Art Program for the City of Akron that is administered by the Office of Integrated Development. The program is governed by a Public Art Commission and administered by a dedicated city staff. The Public Art Commission only reviews public art being commissioned by the city, using city funds, or on public property. "Funding for the Akron Public Art Program may come from Akron's Capital Improvement Project Budget, General Fund, or through the Percent for Art TIF Share, as well as from grants and/or contributions from private entities, other public agencies or philanthropic sources."
- Ohio has a state agency supporting arts and culture called the Ohio Arts Council.

### FUNDING MECHANISMS AND PARTNERSHIPS:

- Percent for Art TIF Share ordinance which requires all new ORC 5709.41 incentives to dedicate 1% of the city's net TIF revenue to public art.
- Downtown Akron Partnership administers the service plan for the 42-block downtown Akron Special Improvement District, Inc.
- ArtsNow is an independent nonprofit organization and area major funder and organization in Summit County. The noted partners on their website include Akron Community Foundation, Bridgestone Tires, Burton D. Morgan Foundation, Knight Foundation, GAR Foundation, Ohio Arts Council, and the Pegis Foundation.
- GAR (Galen and Ruth Roush) Foundation is another larger founder in the Summitt area. The foundation's four priorities are education, economic, workforce, and community development, arts and culture, and basic needs.
- Akron Community Foundation is a foundation that works with financial advisors to help advise and inform people about ways they can donate and use their funds to support causes in Akron. Donors can use gifts of life insurance, real estate, appreciated stock, and more.
- Akron is a Knight Foundation Community. The foundation supports communities where the Knight brothers owned and operated newspapers. Therefore, the city was selected as a home of the Akron Beacon Journal newspaper owned by the Knight brothers.

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<sup>21</sup> ORC 5709.41 is an Ohio law that allows municipalities and counties to create Tax Increment Financing (TIF) districts. TIF districts are used to finance public infrastructure improvements in economically distressed areas.

One of the main incentives offered by TIF districts is the ability to exempt new or improved properties from real property taxes for a period of up to 30 years. This exemption can be used to attract new businesses and residents to the TIF district, which can lead to increased economic activity and job creation.

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- The University of Akron (UA) has an Arts & Culture Council (UAACC) and the university has an ArtsAkron plan to invest in and leverage UA arts programs to benefit downtown and the community at large.

### SUCCESSES IN ADDRESSING COMMUNITY ISSUES:

- Organizations are working to help revitalize downtown Akron. Noted above, the Akron Special Improvement District has made a part of downtown into a special improvement district. Many are using arts and culture to do so. As mentioned in the July update, Curated Storefront is an initiative to revitalize downtown Main Street through the arts. The program began in 2016 as a John S. and James L. Knight Foundation Knight Arts Challenge grantee.
- Another initiative in downtown is led by the University of Akron. Called ArtsAkron, the plan is to invest in and leverage UA arts programs to benefit downtown and the community at large. In 2022, the Knight Foundation committed \$20 million towards a \$42 million capital campaign to turn the University of Akron's Polsky Building into a vibrant gateway from campus to Main Street of downtown Akron. The University of Akron is committed to the development of the arts within the university and greater Akron community.
- The Akron Black Artist Guild is a network of Black artists created in 2021, dedicated to building a thriving community that fosters educational and professional development by connecting Black artists to opportunities and resources.

## 1. Erie, Pennsylvania

Erie is the county seat of Erie County, in Northeastern Pennsylvania. The city is governed by home rule charter of county government. Arts and culture are categorized under quality of life on the "Why Choose Erie" section of website for "Choose Erie," which shows how they value art and culture and see it as a benefit to community. Cultural offerings include theater, annual heritage festivals, children's museum, the Flagship Niagara, historic Warner Theater, the zoo, and Erie Art Museum.

### CULTURAL PLANNING EFFORTS:

- Erie County Cultural Heritage Plan was a component of the Erie County Comprehensive Plan in 2017.
- Erie County also has a 25-year strategy called Emerge 2040. The goal is "to create a more sustainable, resilient, and prosperous Erie County." The plan has an arts, culture, and recreation section.

### GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE OF ARTS:

- Erie Arts & Culture is the current name for the regional arts agency for Northwestern Pennsylvania. The organization was founded in 1960 as the Arts Council of Erie.
- The State of Pennsylvania has the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts.

### FUNDING MECHANISMS:

- The Erie Community Foundation is a single public charity that administers over 800 charitable endowments. Another funder in the area is the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority. This organization invests gaming funds for community and economic development, including arts and culture.







**SUCCESSES IN ADDRESSING COMMUNITY ISSUES:**

- Erie's Views Festival (as featured in July update) had its inaugural run in 2023. It is a two-week festival of street art. It is produced by a collaboration between Erie Arts & Culture, Erie Downtown Partnership, United Way, Erie's Black Wall Street, and arts organizations/creative businesses. Artists from around the world worked alongside Erie artists to create murals. The larger motivation was to help mark safe walking paths for kids who do not have access to public transportation, as a part of Erie Arts and Culture's Purposeful Place Making initiative.
- The Celebrate Erie Festival is a three-day festival about all things Erie County. The goal is to bring people together while showcasing the arts, culture, and heritage of Erie County. The festival site includes areas, called districts, dedicated to family, business, art, culture, and food. There are also chalk artists decorating State Street. There are a range of sponsors from the area. Community members can apply to be a vendor, photographer/videographer, performer, or chalk walk artist. The festival offers opportunities for local businesses, artists, and talent to feature their work. All events are free for attendees. The event increases access to arts and culture, while also supporting those producing the art and culture in Erie County.





## D.TRENDS

### ADAPTIVE REUSE

In a time of changing economies and shifting populations, many cities are left with underutilized, disused, or abandoned homes, industrial sites, and other spaces. The challenge is to reuse these spaces in ways that work for the people who still live in an area such that they are part of the collective imagining of the city's future. Here are a few examples of cities adaptively reusing spaces to meet those challenges.

- **Temporary Installations:** A neighborhood in Liverpool, England, where many houses sit empty because of changing economies and urban revitalization efforts was reinvigorated during the Liverpool Biennial. Artist Ed Purver worked with local youth to create video installations that played in the windows of abandoned houses, temporarily “repopulating” them. This was an attempt to honor the lives of people who had lived in these homes, activate a normally-quiet part of the city, and open a dialogue about the past, present, and future of these homes.
- **Redeveloped Industrial Campuses:** Bethlehem Steel built their home plant in Bethlehem, PA. When the company closed in 2001, the five blast furnaces were left standing. SteelStacks, a 10-acre campus dedicated to arts, culture, family events, community celebrations, education, and fun has been developed at the heart of the former steel plant, housing three outdoor music venues, a contemporary performing arts center, and a community-owned public television station. Now, local residents visit for festivals, art shows, recreation, and more, creating a new life for a former industrial site that would have otherwise remained a symbol of economic loss for the city.
- **Reimagining Single Structures:** An abandoned police precinct in Detroit was temporarily converted into a non-profit gallery and studios, 555 Arts. It housed artists' studios, gallery space, and held community events. In this example, the city and artists worked together to create a new opportunity for artists who needed space, the city which needed its building maintained, and community members who enjoyed the events and art shows.

### CULTURE BEYOND THE WALLS

Many institutions are stepping into their communities in meaningful ways, bringing their collections outside their walls, inviting artists to create work inspired by the collections, and partnering with other organizations to create new opportunities for people to have cultural experiences in diverse and new environments.

- **Arts in Natural & Cultural Heritage Sites:**  
The National Park Service has a robust artist-in-residence program in 50 parks nationwide, providing artists with the opportunity to create works of visual, sound, and written art in natural and cultural heritage settings within the parks. Lodging is often provided, and artists are frequently invited to share their process with the public through workshops and programs, and the finished artworks through public display.  
**Arts in the City**  
The Detroit Institute of Art's Inside|Out program brings reproductions of works of art to the streets and parks of the city, often in clusters that are walkable or bikeable. The DIA is also creating educational opportunities and fun activities in partnership with the host communities, such as tours and games.
- **Arts in Public Parks**  
Performing arts events in parks and other public spaces allow unique opportunities for the public to have an unexpected encounter with the performing arts and for organizations to work together. The Alabama Department of Archives & History is located within the



capitol complex in Montgomery, Alabama. Evenings and weekends in the area are very quiet as legislators and workers head for home. Each year, the Montgomery Symphony Orchestra Jubilee Pops holds a concert on the front terrace of the Alabama Archives building to kick off Memorial Day weekend, an opportunity for people to bring a picnic to enjoy on the lawn while listening to popular music performed live in an area that they might not usually spend much time in after dark.

## CREATING CONNECTIONS TO OTHER SECTORS

Connections between cultural institutions, citizens, corporations, and governments create new opportunities for innovation by bringing people with different perspectives and strengths together to solve problems. One way to form and facilitate these connections is through formal, organized partnerships. Around the country, partnerships between creative, governmental, community and corporate entities are creating change in cities big and small.

### Arts and Public Health

- IDEAS xLab is a dynamic artist-run nonprofit based in Louisville, KY. The non-profit recently completed a new culturally-responsive public health communications campaign to support childhood lead poisoning prevention, health equity and housing justice.
- Created with Louisville Metro Department of Public Health & Wellness, along with nonprofit partners Play Cousins Collective, Smoketown Family Wellness Center, Family & Children's Place, Americana and La Casita, the campaign features images of voices of community members. To engage the community, we designed arts and education events hosted at each site in various forms. The campaign features billboards and bus shelter ads, digital ads, and a social media campaign.

### Arts and Technology

- Code for America places designers and coders in partnership with local governments in cities around the country to bring design thinking to government and bring good design to the forefront of public service. Projects focus on health and human services, economic development, safety and justice, and communication and engagement in cities like Kansas City, MO, Long Beach, CA, New Orleans, LA, and Salt Lake County, UT.

### Arts and Quality of Life Initiatives

- The Coalition for the East Harlem Waterfront, a coalition of 25 civic organizations recently initiated and led by CIVITAS and Esplanade Friends organized the effort to reimagine the dilapidated East River waterfront in Manhattan that covers 31 city blocks. Following significant support allocated from both State and City government, the Coalition brought in the Museum of the City of New York to curate an exhibit of the winning proposals from a 2012 design ideas competition and participate in community engagement. CIVITAS has also worked with local government and other organizations to create the new plan for continued maintenance and development in 2021.

## LOCAL HISTORY CREATIVE PLACEMAKING

Local history is a shared experience that can help people to connect with each other and with their place. Creative placemaking projects can help to celebrate and amplify local history, and to create new opportunities for people to learn about and appreciate their community's past. Creative placemaking projects can bring people together from different backgrounds and cultures. They can also provide opportunities for people to express themselves and to participate in their community. This can help to create a more inclusive and welcoming society. As per Americans for the Arts, "creative placemaking is generally understood as the use of arts and culture by diverse partners to strategically shape the physical and social character of a

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place in order to spur economic development, promote enduring social change and improve the physical environment." The following examples worked to improve the physical environment, inform people about their local area, and promote social change.

In Chicago, the Chicago Monuments Project and the Black Chicago Heritage Initiative both strive to make the telling of history more equitable. The Monuments Project looks at how history has and has not been memorialized in the municipal art collections. The Project works to create a framework so that more public spaces can have monuments to more people, in a more equitable and accurate way. The Black Chicago Heritage Initiative began through a community effort to gather stories that were collectively important. They worked to ensure heritage unique to the Black experience in the city was preserved and interpreted.

The Sojourner Truth Pop-Up Trail is a collaboration between Scenic Hudson and the City of Poughkeepsie to celebrate the life and legacy of Sojourner Truth, a renowned abolitionist and women's rights activist who was born in Ulster County, New York. The trail consists of a series of modular signs that can be installed in temporary locations throughout the city. Each sign features a different aspect of Truth's life and work, including her escape from slavery, her advocacy for abolition and women's rights, and her famous "Ain't I a Woman?" speech.

The Sojourner Truth Pop-Up Trail is a unique way to learn about the life and legacy of this important historical figure. The trail is also a way to connect with the local community and to celebrate Poughkeepsie's rich history.

## FUNDING

There is no single funding model that is appropriate for all cities or all arts and cultural organizations. By identifying different types of arts funding models, cities can ensure that funding is distributed in a way that meets the needs of their diverse communities and arts and cultural ecosystems. There are also specific reasons why different types of arts funding models may be more or less appropriate for different cities. For example, cities with a large tourism industry may want to focus on funding models that attract visitors and generate economic benefits. Cities with a diverse population may want to focus on funding models that support the arts and cultural needs of all communities.

### Cultural Trusts

- A cultural trust is a public or public/private endowment fund established to benefit cultural endeavors. The Quad Cities Cultural Trust was formed in 2007 to support the region's six core cultural organizations. The trust was created by three of the largest funders in the region, The Bechtel Trusts; the Hubbell-Waterman Foundation; and the John Deere Foundation.

### Government Partnerships

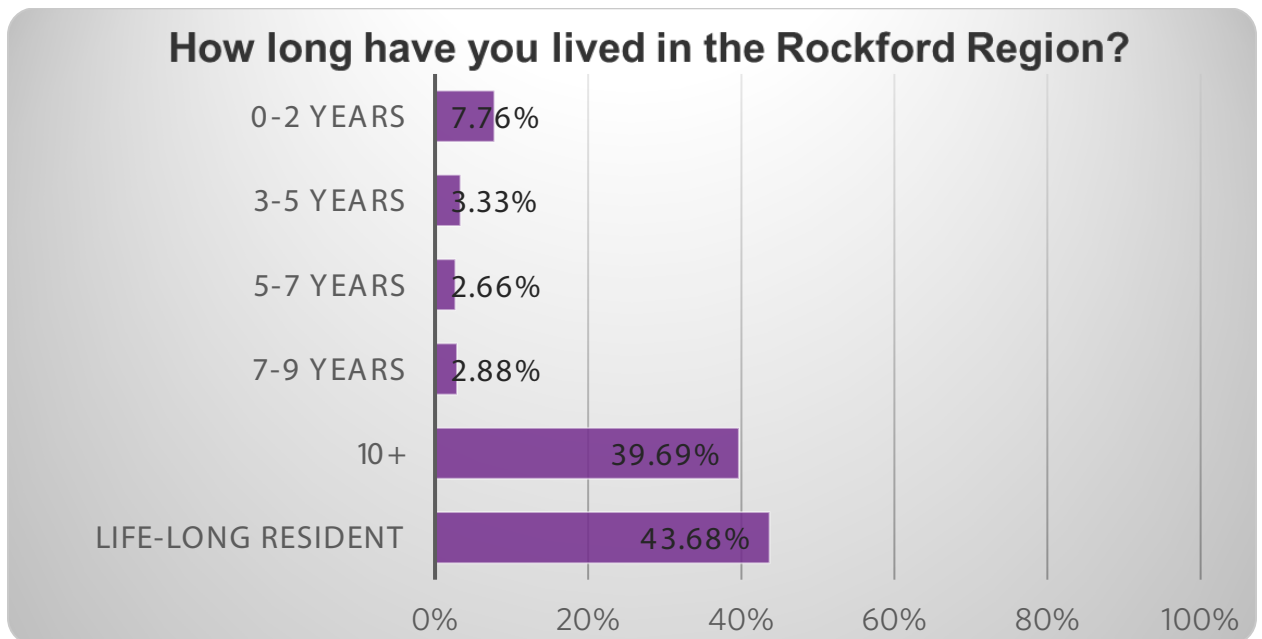
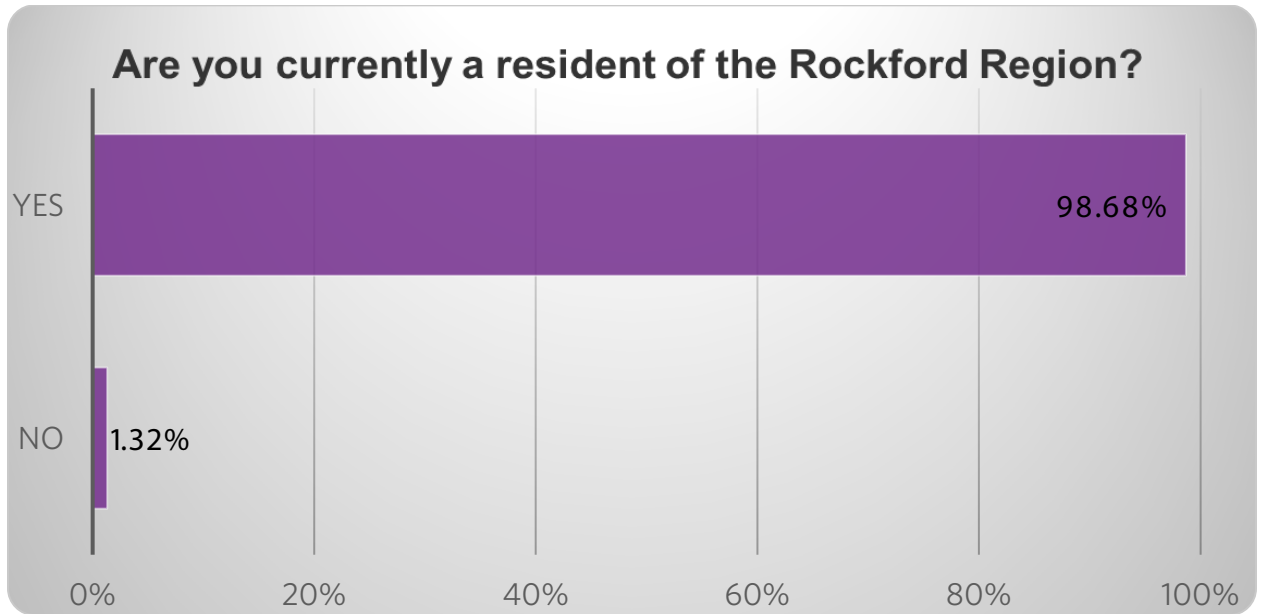
- For nearly two decades, Bravo Greater Des Moines has been a critical partner in strengthening the role of arts, culture, and heritage in central Iowa. Through strategic leadership and investments of hotel/motel taxes allocated by 17 local government partners Bravo has contributed to robust growth in cultural organizations, public art, and creative programming that drive Greater Des Moines' reputation as a thriving, vibrant region.

### Hotel Tax

- Seattle has a strong arts and culture community that is supported by a variety of public and private funding sources. The city government provides funding to arts and cultural organizations through its Office of Arts & Culture. The city also has a dedicated arts and culture fund that is funded by a hotel tax.

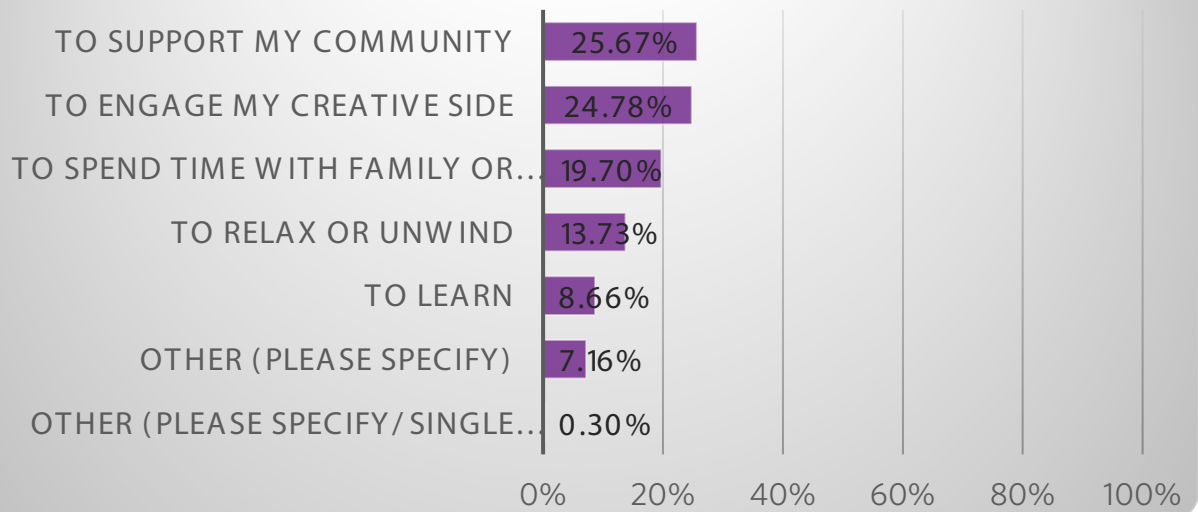


## F. CULTURAL PARTICIPATION SURVEY

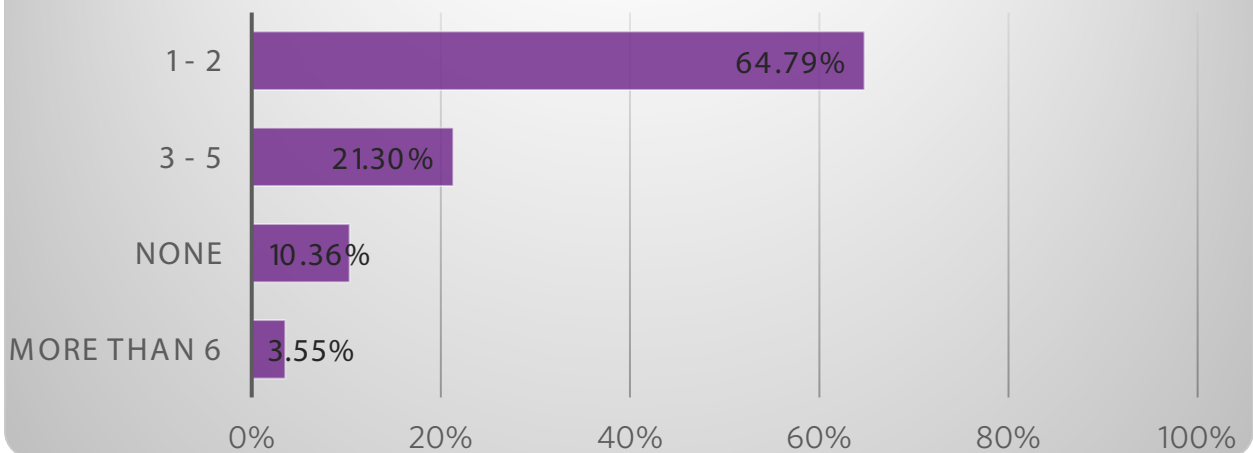


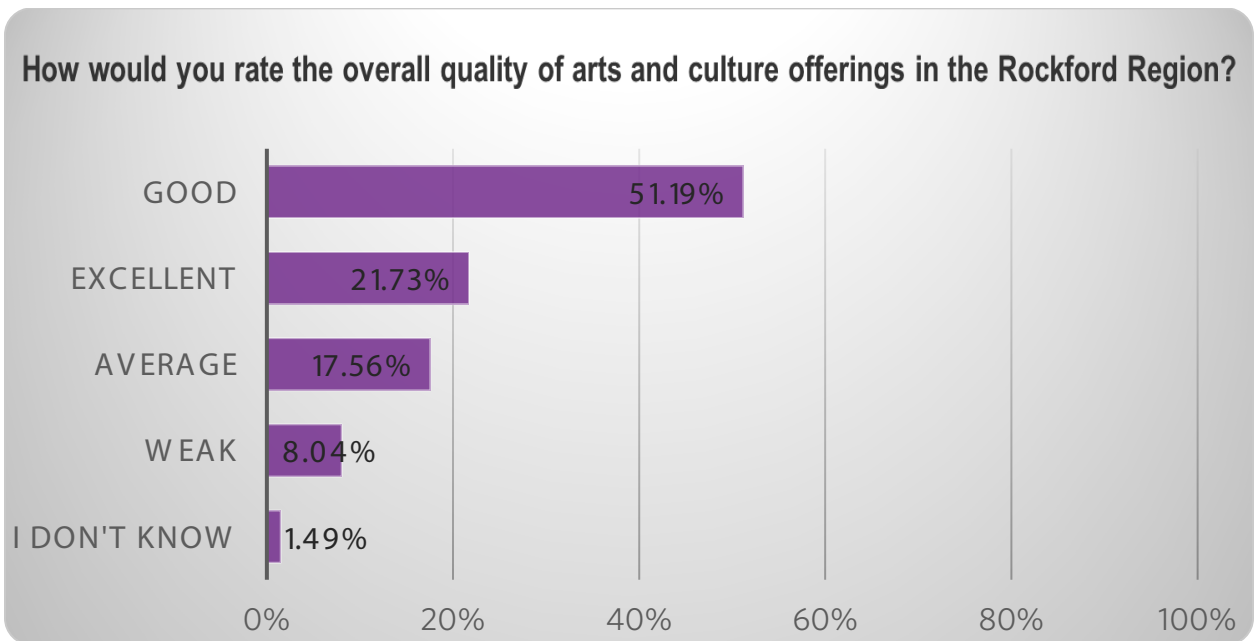
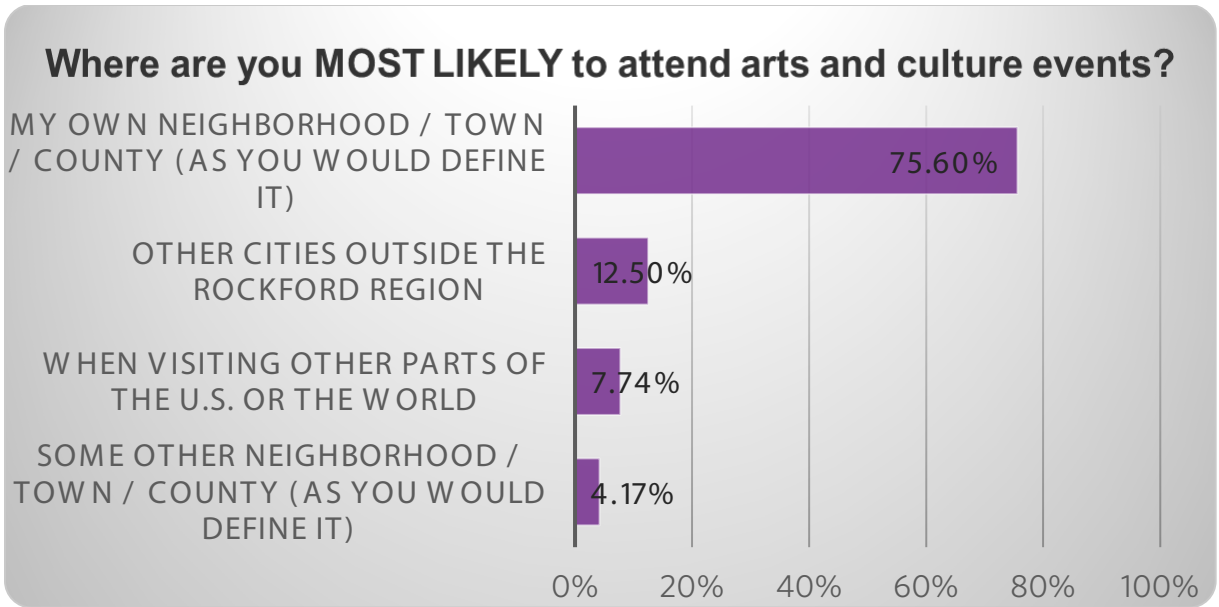


### What is the PRIMARY REASON you attend arts or cultural events?



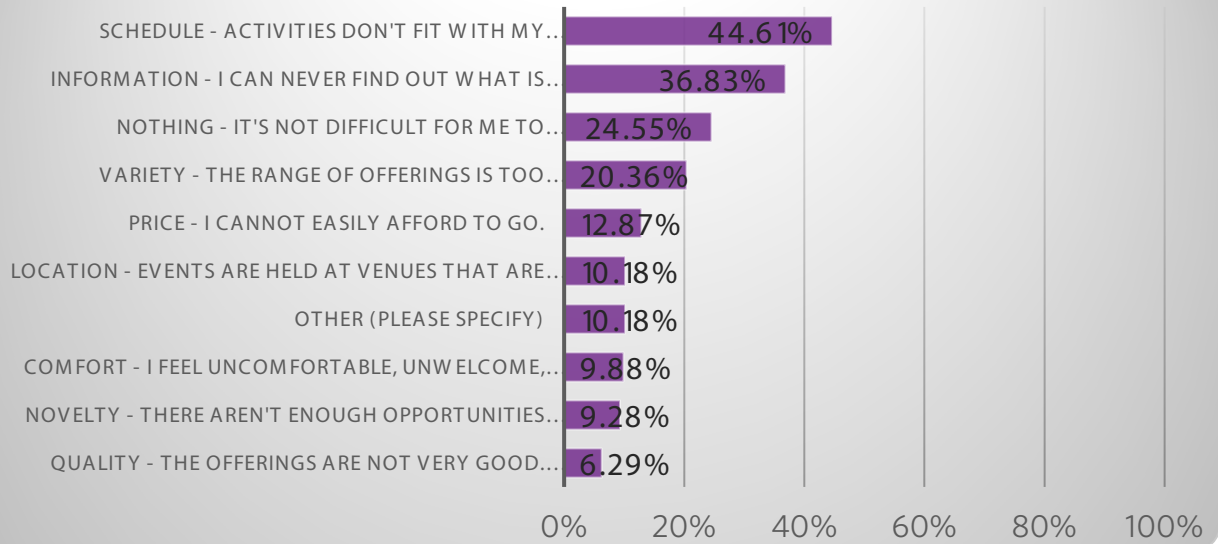
### On average, how many arts or cultural events do you go to in ONE MONTH? (i.e. museums, theater, dance, festivals, art



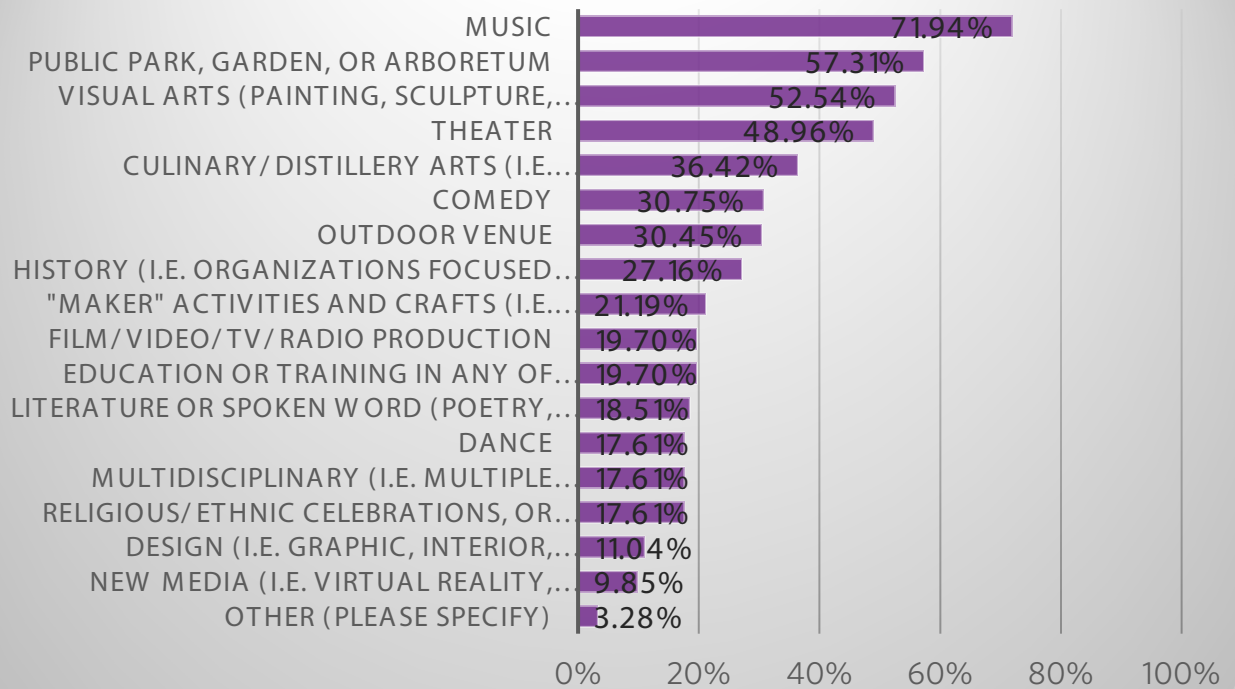




**What makes it difficult for you to participate in the arts and culture scene in the Rockford Region?**



**Looking to the FUTURE, which of the following are you MOST interested in enjoying in Rockford Region?**







## G. SMU ARTS VIBRANCY INDEX DATA

SMU Data Arts, housed at Southern Methodist University, is a key resource for data on arts and culture. Each year, they release an arts vibrancy index. Arts vibrancy includes three main kinds of measures: levels of arts providers, arts dollars, and government support. Rockford's relative ranking at the state and national level is included for each individual measure of arts vibrancy below.

### Summary of Arts Vibrancy Index statistics for Rockford, IL

On overall arts vibrancy, a composite score of 13 different indicators, Rockford ranks fourth in arts vibrancy for the state of Illinois — after Chicago, Bloomington, and Galesburg — of 26 communities. Rockford beat Springfield, IL for that fourth place ranking by a very small margin. Rockford is in the top 28% of communities nationally for vibrancy, it ranks 260<sup>th</sup> of 947 communities across the country.

Arts vibrancy includes three main kinds of measures: levels of arts providers, arts dollars, and government support. Rockford's relative ranking at the state and national level is included for each individual measure of arts vibrancy below.

#### For arts providers:

- Independent artists
  - o Ranks 6<sup>th</sup> in Illinois & top 33% of country (311/947)
- Arts & culture employees
  - o Ranks 2<sup>nd</sup> in Illinois & top 15% of country (138/947)
- Arts & culture nonprofits
  - o Ranks 7<sup>th</sup> in Illinois & top 29% of country (274/947)
- Arts & culture firms
  - o Ranks 9<sup>th</sup> in Illinois & top 45% of country (423/947)

#### For arts dollars:

- Program revenue
  - o Ranks 4<sup>th</sup> in Illinois & top 24% of country (227/947)
- Contributed revenue
  - o Ranks 5<sup>th</sup> in Illinois & top 28% of country (259/947)
- Total expenses
  - o Ranks 5<sup>th</sup> in Illinois & top 28% of country (264/947)
- Total compensation
  - o Ranks 3<sup>rd</sup> in Illinois & top 23% of country (215/947)

#### For government support:

- State arts grants (\$)
  - o Ranks 4<sup>th</sup> in Illinois & bottom 18% of country (717/947)
- State arts grants (#)
  - o Ranks 3<sup>rd</sup> in Illinois & bottom 28% of country (682/947)
- Federal arts grants (\$)



## Rockford Region Cultural Plan

### **State of Culture**

- Ranks 4<sup>th</sup> in Illinois & top 11% of country (103/947)
- Federal arts grants (#)
  - Ranks 6<sup>th</sup> in Illinois & top 25% of country (232/947)
- Total government support (\$)
  - Ranks 4<sup>th</sup> in Illinois & top 20% of country (185/947)



**ROCKFORD REGION 2020 AND 2023**

In addition to the data above pertaining to the City of Rockford, SMU was also able to provide data at the county level for 2023 and compare it to 2020 data collected for the 2021 R1 Rockford study "The Economic Impact of the Arts Industry in Northern Illinois."

**Arts Industry Vibrancy Index**

Each of these measures are scored akin to percentiles, i.e., if your county has a score of 56, it means it did better than 56% of communities on that measure. This study included just over 3,100 counties within the United States.

	Winnebago County 2020/ 2023		Boone County 2020 /2023		Ogle County 2020/ 2023		DeKalb County 2020/ 2023	
Arts Providers	86	80	67	59	63	40	67	60
Arts & Culture Employees	98	94	83	81	74	76	74	67
Arts & Culture Organizations	68	75	59	61	43	37	65	65
Arts, Culture & Entertainment Firms	83	74	58	56	58	52	64	68
Independent Artists	69	80	58	64	75	57	66	69
Arts Dollars	78	86	56	64	50	46	51	45
Program Revenue	80	86	59	77	54	49	58	52
Contributed Revenue	72	85	51	62	46	46	49	44
Total Expenses	78	84	55	58	50	44	51	46
Total Compensation	82	88	62	63	56	55	52	44
Government Support	80	90	55	69	51	58	56	52
State Arts Dollars	78	28	55	26	53	22	64	21
State Arts Grants	68	34	59	29	42	22	61	21
Federal Arts Dollars	80	95	66	80	74	81	64	63
Federal Arts Grants	85	88	69	71	72	74	58	57
Other Leisure	75	89	49	56	43	69	70	66
Hotel Rank	47	71	23	36	34	58	31	57
Restaurant Rank	73	84	51	49	49	48	69	64
Zoo & Botanical Rank	89	43	87	43	76	74	73	12
Cinema Rank	75	7	50	45	43	45	87	91
Professional Sports	68	46	63	46	56	46	71	8
Bar Rank	84	92	77	82	68	88	77	80

SMU DataArts, Arts Vibrancy Report Index Map, <https://sites.smu.edu/Meadows/ArtsVibrancyMap/#>, September 2020.



## H. AEP6 DATA FOR ROCKFORD REGION

Americans for the Arts Arts and Economic Impact 6 study is a major recent source of powerful data for arts advocacy. Below is data related to AEP6, specifically for the Rockford region.

Boone, DeKalb, Ogle, and Winnebago Counties, Illinois were home to 188 arts and culture establishments that employed 1,910 people in 2021, which was 2.0% of all the establishments in Boone, DeKalb, Ogle, and Winnebago Counties, Illinois and 1.2% of the people they employ, compared to the median Illinois county of 0.8%, and the median U.S. county of 0.6%.

In Boone, DeKalb, Ogle, and Winnebago Counties, Illinois, there were 3,716 workers in artistic occupations in 2021, who comprised 1.0% of workers in all occupations. This compares to the median Illinois county of 1.8%, and the median U.S. county of 0.5%.

Arts and culture workers in Boone, DeKalb, Ogle, and Winnebago Counties, Illinois, earned salary and wage compensation of \$84,840,000 in 2021, which comprised 1.0% of all county salary and wage compensation. This can be compared to the median Illinois county of 0.6%, and the median US county of 1.7%.

The Boone, DeKalb, Ogle, and Winnebago Counties, Illinois ACS sector changed between 2018 and 2021, as the number of ACS establishments decreased by 8.9%, compared with the overall county economy where establishment counts decreased by 1.0%. In the broader U.S. economy, there were 7.8% fewer ACS establishments, and 3.6% more establishments in all industries.



<b>ARTS AND CULTURE SECTOR REPORT</b>			
Region: Boone, DeKalb, Ogle, and W Boone, DeKalb, Ogle, and Winnebago Counties, Illinois			

2018			
ACS Industries and Occupations		All Industries and Occupations	
Establishments – County Bus	171	Establishments – County Bus	9,377
Establishments – Implan	241	Establishments – Implan	9,847
Employees – County Bus	1,611	Employees – County Bus	161,646
Employees – Implan	3,109	Employees – Implan	195,878
Payroll \$000 County Bus	67,986	Payroll \$000 County Bus	7,104,704
Wages - Implan \$000	98,585	Wages - Implan \$000	9,659,492
Workers in arts occupations	3,602	Workers in all occupations	215,816

2021			
ACS Industries and Occupations		All Industries and Occupations	
Establishments – County Bus	147	Establishments – County Bus	9,232
Establishments – Implan	229	Establishments – Implan	9,800
Employees – County Bus	1,226	Employees – County Bus	145,764
Employees – Implan	2,595	Employees – Implan	177,504
Payroll \$000 County Bus	59,326	Payroll \$000 County Bus	7,338,934
Wages - Implan \$000	110,353	Wages - Implan \$000	9,203,169
Workers in arts occupations	3,716	Workers in all occupations	194,426

ACS Presence			
2018 Census Population estimate	389,191	2021 Census Population estimate	387,730
Establishments / 10,000 people	5.3	Establishments / 10,000 people	4.8
Median IL County	4.0	Median IL County	3.9



**State of Culture**

Total employment in the ACS establishments in Boone, DeKalb, Ogle, and Winnebago Counties, Illinois decreased by 19.0% in those years, compared with the overall county economy where establishment counts decreased by 9.6%. Across the U.S. economy, ACS employment decreased by 15.0%, and total employment decreased by 4.0%.

In 2018, there were 206 ACS establishments of all kinds, which comes to 4.0 per 10,000 residents. The median county in Illinois had 4.0 per 10,000 residents.

By 2021, with 188 establishments there was a tally of 4.8 establishments per 10,000 residents compared to the median Illinois county of 3.9; the national median was 3.6 per 10,000 residents.

**Source:** County Business Patterns, Implan. Data were gathered on behalf of AFTA  
**Prepared by:** Roland Kushner, October 24, 2023

Change from 2018 to 2021				
	County ACS	County Economy	US ACS	US Economy
Establishments	-8.9%	-1.0%	7.8%	3.6%
Employees	-19.0%	-9.6%	-15.0%	-4.0%
Occupations	3.2%	-9.9%	1.1%	6.5%
Payroll	1.9%	-1.3%	1.6%	4.0%

ACS Share in Boone, DeKalb, Ogle, and Winnebago Counties, Illinois		
	2018	2021
Establishments	2.14%	1.97%
Employees	1.32%	1.18%
Occupations	1.67%	0.96%
Payroll	0.99%	1.03%

ACS 2021 Share In-State Comparison			
	Boone, DeKalb, Ogle, and Winnebago Cou	median IL county	US Median
Establishments	1.97%	1.79%	1.46%
Employees	1.18%	0.82%	0.64%
Occupations	0.96%	1.81%	0.53%
Payroll	1.03%	0.58%	1.69%

ACS 2021 Presence In-State Comparison			
	Boone, DeKalb, Ogle, and Win	Median IL County	Median US County
Establishments / 10,000 people	4.8	3.9	3.6



## I. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### PAC MEMBERS

Laurie Anderson, Rockford Park District  
Janna Bailey, Region 1 Planning Council  
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Nicole Andress, Artist  
Daisy Avila, Makeup Artist  
Nick Barelli, Moon Dog Theater  
Frank Beach, Rockford Alderman, Ward 10  
David Beauvais, Faith Leader

**State of Culture**



Tamir Bel, Deputy Political Director  
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Rabbi Binah Wing, Temple Beth-El  
Denver Bitner, Lutheran Social Services of Illinois  
Nathan Bluvens, Head of constituent services for state rep  
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Christopher Brady, Starlight Theater, Rock Valley College  
Ash Brown  
Amando Cardenes, Arts Council Board Member  
Bo Chaney, Rockford Fire Department  
Mychall Cornejo, BMO Center  
Rhonda Dailing, Burpee  
Carol Davis, Retired school teacher  
Danny Desirio, US Bank  
Tricia Didick, Rockton  
Andy Dolan, NIU  
Benjamin Donovan, IBEW local 384 reps 150K building trade workers  
Laura Eakman, Music Academy Rockford Supt. Ejarham, St. Paul Church of God in Christ  
Mary Fuller, Diocese of Rockford  
Gregg Gimalva, Stateline Church  
Jeremiah Griffin, Pastor Halsted Road Baptist Church  
Laura Gomel, 317 Art Collective  
Kaylene Groh, Rockford Promise  
Ken Hansen, Pastor Life Church  
Amanda Hamaker, Phantom Regiment  
Pastor David Hightower, New Emmanuel Baptist Church  
Rog James, Pastor OSLC  
Carrie Johnson, Rockford Art Museum  
Matthew Johnson, Reverend Unitarian Universalist Church  
Violet Johnicker, Reverend Rockford Urban Ministries, Brooke Road United Methodist Church  
Kimberly Johnsen, Natural Land Institute  
Nicole Landreth, Womanspace coordinator  
Ashley Lange  
Frank Langhoff, Faith leader  
Mary Lee, NAMI  
Sarah Leys

Teraza Malwal  
William Martin, Spirit of Truth Church  
Jenny Mathews, Artist  
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Kurt McCay  
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Andre Quentin, City of Loves Park  
Rachel [need last name], Dietician  
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Jorge Rivera, Rockford Community Trust  
Jim Roberts, Reverend Emmanuel Episcopal Church  
Kim Roush, Winnebago County Manager for RAMP  
Anne Rumble, Rockford Public Schools  
Linda Sandquist, Rockford University  
Angela Sellers, Rep of 19th district for Winnebago County  
Gabriele Serena, Alderwoman  
Josiah Sjostrom, City Stage Studios  
Pastor Sonji, Pastor  
Laura Speer, Anderson Japanese Garden marketing & comm engagement  
Margo Stedman, Rockford Symphony





## Rockford Region Cultural Plan

### State of Culture

Miranda Swanson, Remedies  
Shiraz Tata, Psychologist  
Asha Kasareneni Tewani, Physician  
Julie Thomas, Rockford Symphony  
Gabrielle Torina, Rockford Alderwoman,  
Ward 5  
Jacon Urbelis, Mercy Health  
Janelle Vaiden, Collins  
Joanne Velazquez  
David Weber  
Anne Weerda, Burpee  
Andrew Wright, Rockford Chamber of  
Commerce  
Sarah Wolf, Discovery Center Museum

### MARCH 10, 2023- PRELIMINARY STAKEHOLDER MEETING

Sarah Axelson, RAM  
Ginny Barnett, RPS205  
Jas Bilich, Winnebago County  
Bob Blosser  
Jacob Bradt, Rockford Buzz  
Chris Brady, Starlight Theatre  
Armando J. Cardenas, Rockford Art  
Council  
Clark Colborn, Clark Colborn Band  
Jessica Dobson, Rock+Roll Institute  
Laura Eakman, The Music Academy  
Tim Farrell, Phantom Regiment

Alix Fox, Swedish Historical Society  
Gretchen Gilmore, RAVE/ASM  
Roni Golam, The Underground Gallery  
John Groh, RACUB  
Stephanie Hartman, Tinker Swiss Cottage  
Museum  
Jamie Johannsen, Rockford Dance  
Company  
Carli Marinaro, MainFram  
Jenny Matthews, Rockford Illustrating  
Patrick Mattson  
Patrick Okeefe, Mid Way Village  
Laurie Oliver, Artist's Ensemble  
Miguel Pascual, Hard Rock Rockford  
Asia Peters, Artist/Severson Dells  
Danielle Potter, Rockford Park District  
Caitlin Pusateri, Rockford Chamber  
Pam Clark Reidenbach, NIU  
Micky Rosenquist, Underground Squirrel  
Studio  
Ann Rundall, Eliminate Racism  
Moises Sandoval, Elev8 Culture  
Amanda Smith, Rock Valley College  
Jennifer Smith, Community Fund of  
Northern IL  
Shiraz Tata, Inscape Collection & Belonging  
Initiative  
Spitty Tate, Transform Rockford  
Sarah Wolf, Discovery Center

And thank you to all who attended the public town hall meetings and community conversations.



# ROCKFORD REGION CULTURAL PLAN

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