

Northeast Indiana's Creative Economy Strategic Plan

FINAL REPORT

SUBMITTED TO:

Northeast Indiana Regional
Development Authority



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- Jessa Campbell, director of destination development and communications, Visit Fort Wayne
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- Amanda Shepard, vice president and COO, Fort Wayne Museum of Art
- Dan Swartz, executive director, Start Fort Wayne; founder, Wunderkammer Company
- Kelly Updike, president and CEO, Embassy Theatre

Introduction

The creative economy is a powerful driver of growth, innovation, and community identity. In Northeast Indiana, creative work—from design and media to performing arts, culture, and handcrafted products—shapes the region’s character, creates jobs, and attracts talent and investment. Yet, for many years, creative work was often undervalued compared to traditional “blue collar” or “white collar” jobs, with its economic impact overlooked. Today, researchers, policymakers, and community leaders increasingly recognize the importance of the creative sector, and cities and regions are investing in workforce development, entrepreneurship, and other programs to support creative industries and the goods and services these industries produce.

CREATIVE ECONOMY DEFINITION:

Organizations, individuals, and companies whose products and services have their origin in artistic, cultural, creative, and/or aesthetic content.

This report takes a close look at the creative economy of Northeast Indiana, examining its strengths, challenges, and opportunities to better leverage its creative assets to benefit residents, businesses, and communities. It is part of a statewide arts and cultural planning initiative funded by the Lilly Endowment. While similar efforts are underway across Indiana, this report focuses specifically on Northeast Indiana.

NORTHEAST INDIANA GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE:

The 11 counties in Northeast Indiana include: Adams, Allen, DeKalb, Huntington, Kosciusko, LaGrange, Noble, Steuben, Wabash, Wells, and Whitley.

The Northeast Indiana Regional Development Authority (RDA) led this effort on behalf of the IEDC, bringing together local partners as a steering committee to guide the project. Together, they selected Mt. Auburn Associates (MAA) to conduct the research and develop the plan. MAA worked closely with the creative economy steering committee, comprising community leaders from across the region, whose input shaped the process, from framing the questions to refining the strategies presented here.

A strong foundation

Northeast Indiana already has a strong foundation of knowledge and enthusiasm around the creative economy. Across the region, stakeholders understand that creativity is not just a cultural amenity but a driver of innovation, talent attraction, and economic opportunity. This plan builds on this foundation and draws on previous local and regional studies that have generated valuable insights and recommendations, giving the region a rich base of knowledge to guide future efforts.

The soon-to-be-released **Sound Diplomacy music study** will add even more depth by exploring one of the region’s key creative sectors—music—and its potential to strengthen both economic and cultural vitality. Combined with new funding from the Lilly Endowment, this is an exciting moment for Northeast Indiana to move from planning to action, turning ideas into tangible benefits for communities across the region.

How this plan was developed

MAA used a mix of **data analysis and community input** to understand the region’s creative economy. The team’s research included document and data review, desk research, and interviews and focus groups with people working across the creative sector.

Document review

The team reviewed a wide range of recent studies and plans to understand ongoing creative economy efforts. These included projects focused on Fort Wayne as well as broader regional initiatives, providing valuable context and insight.

Data review

MAA analyzed IRS Form 990 data to better understand the nonprofit arts landscape and reviewed employment data for industries tied to the creative economy using North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) codes.

Desk research

The team identified creative assets in each county and assessed opportunities across five key creative segments: culture and heritage, design, film and media, performing arts, and visual arts and handcrafted products. It also examined support structures for creative work, including arts support and funding, K–12 and higher education, public libraries, entrepreneurial resources, and community and economic development entities.

Interviews and focus groups

To capture the region’s perspectives, MAA conducted 30 in-depth interviews with leaders from arts organizations, philanthropy, business and tourism, higher education, government, and cultural heritage. About one-third of the interviewees were based in Allen County, while the rest represented surrounding counties or regional and statewide perspectives.

MAA also facilitated three virtual focus groups, one with library professionals, one with tourism leaders, and one with college students pursuing creative degrees. These discussions, along with insights from the 2023-2024 Artist Needs Assessment, which surveyed and held listening sessions with local creatives, helped ensure the plan reflects the voices of the people who live and work in the region. For a complete list of interviewees and focus group participants, see Appendix 1.

EXISTING STUDIES:

- Allen County Together (ACT) plan (2021)
- Indiana Arts Commission's Creative Economy Report (2016)
- Arts and Economic Prosperity 6 (2022-2023)
- Fort Wayne Music Strategy draft (2025)
- Fort Wayne Public Art Master Plan (2024)
- Indiana Arts Commission Artist Needs Assessment (2023-2024)
- Start Fort Wayne’s Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Strategy (2022)
- Statewide Creative Economy Plan (2024)
- Tourism Master Plan for Fort Wayne and Allen County (2023)

What is the creative economy and why is it important?

Defining the creative economy

Policymakers and researchers increasingly acknowledge the vital role of creative industries and workers in driving local and regional economic growth. The definition of creative industries and occupations used in this report draws on a comprehensive review of global practices for defining the creative sector. The creative industry includes five key segments: culture and heritage, design, film

and media, performing arts, and visual arts and handcrafted products. These segments capture both traditional creative fields, such as cultural institutions, performing arts, and visual arts, and more technical creative industries, including businesses involved in design and architecture, film and media production, publishing, and advertising.

The creative economy expands beyond these creative industry segments to include creative occupations, or individuals with creative jobs. Many individuals work in creative positions within the creative industry, such as a museum curator, a dancer or actor working for a performing arts company, or a video editor at a film studio. Other industries also employ creative workers, including musicians at a church and designers within a manufacturing company.

A comprehensive assessment of the creative economy includes:

- **All jobs in commercial and nonprofit enterprises in the creative industry segments.** In keeping with all standard economic analysis, this includes creative occupations and non-creative occupations, such as architects and the clerical and management staff working in these firms.
- **Jobs in creative occupations that fall outside the creative industry segments.** Many other industries depend upon creative talent, such as graphic artists working for financial service firms or industrial designers working for manufacturers.
- **Jobs associated with freelance and self-employed work.** A large number of creative workers earn their living as sole proprietors, contractors, or freelancers rather than as “employees.”

Figure 1 illustrates the interconnectivity of creative occupations across industry segments. The yellow and green sections represent the creative occupations, which include all creative workers, both in creative industries and other industries, and those who are self-employed (sole proprietors).

CREATIVE INDUSTRY SEGMENTS:

Culture and heritage
Museums, historical sites, libraries and archives, antiques, and preservation.

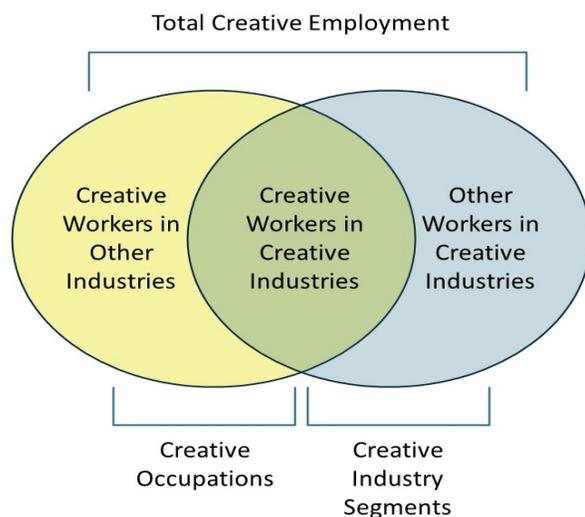
Design
Graphic design services, architecture, landscape architecture, interior design, industrial design services, printing, and other specialized design.

Film and media
Motion picture and video industries, sound recording, radio and television broadcasting, internet publishing, newspapers, advertising, bookstores, books and periodical publishers, public relations agencies, video game development, and independent writing.

Performing arts
Performing arts companies, promoters of performing arts, music and dance schools, musical instrument manufacturing and supply stores, and self-employed actors, dancers, directors, and musicians.

Visual arts and handcrafted products
Photography, sculpting, painting, jewelry, pottery, textiles, pressed and blown glass, art dealers, galleries, craft making, and craft stores.

Figure 1. Understanding the full economic significance of creative industries



The economic importance of the creative economy

The creative economy is more than culture; it is a vital driver of jobs, income, and economic well-being. A **2022 statewide survey** found that **88 percent of local government leaders** and **96 percent of tourism and community foundation leaders** agreed that arts and culture represent an economic development opportunity.

Creative enterprises, people, and the institutions that support them play an active role in growing a region's economy. They generate new wealth through jobs, income, and investments, and they increase productivity and competitiveness among companies. They also help attract and retain talented workers and businesses, while stimulating innovation. The following framework illustrates the economic value of the creative economy.

Creative enterprises: direct and indirect jobs and income

First and foremost, the creative economy includes enterprises that are a direct and often undercounted source of economic growth. Creative businesses, organizations, and individuals are enterprises, and just like enterprises in other parts of the economy, they generate income, hire workers, and purchase goods and services. In measurable terms, such as jobs and earnings, the creative industries represent a large slice of the economy. Yet their full contribution often goes unnoticed because they span multiple sectors, and conventional economic data often fails to capture the many self-employed workers in creative fields.

According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, in 2023,¹ arts and cultural economic activity in the U.S. was valued at approximately \$1.17 trillion, representing about 4.2 percent of U.S. GDP. Total employment in arts and cultural industries (wage and salary jobs) reached about 5.4 million, and arts and cultural exports exceeded imports by approximately \$36.8 billion,² generating a trade surplus.

Data on states found that the creative economy in Indiana is a significant contributor to employment and wages. In 2023:

- 92,643 workers³ were employed in arts and cultural production, representing 2.8 percent⁴ of total employment in the state.
- These jobs generated \$5.5 billion⁵ in compensation, with an average salary of \$59,749.⁶

¹ U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. (2025, April 2). *Arts and Cultural Production Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2023* (BEA 25-13). <https://www.bea.gov/news/2025/arts-and-cultural-production-satellite-account-us-and-states-2023>

² National Endowment for the Arts. (2025). *The U.S. arts economy in 2023: A national summary brief* (p. 9). https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/2025_National_Brief-final.pdf

³ Bureau of Economic Analysis & National Endowment for the Arts. *Arts and Cultural Production Satellite Account: Indiana 2023* [PDF]. U.S. Department of Commerce, 2024. <https://www.arts.gov/impact/research/arts-data-profile-series/37>

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

- Between 2022 and 2023, the number of jobs in the creative industries has grown 5.5 percent in Indiana, compared with an increase of 0.3 percent for the United States.⁷

The creative economy is also a major regional driver. In Greater Fort Wayne, nonprofit arts and culture organizations generated \$26.6 million in organizational spending and \$38.9 million in audience-related expenditures in 2022, for a total economic impact of \$65.6 million. This activity supported 1,137 jobs, generated \$33.9 million in household income, and contributed \$14 million in local, state, and federal tax revenues.⁸

Looking at Northeast Indiana (based on 2016 regional data):

- **3,753 creative occupation jobs** were within creative industries.
- **5,737 creative occupation jobs** existed outside creative industries (for example, a graphic designer in manufacturing).
- **9,344 additional jobs** were in creative industries, but in non-creative roles, such as administrative or finance staff in arts organizations.
- **534 creative business establishments** operated in the region.⁹

These numbers show that the creative economy extends far beyond artists and performers, supporting entrepreneurs, businesses, and workers across multiple sectors.

Creative places: attracting and retaining talent and contributing to community well-being

The vibrancy of a community’s arts, culture, and public space plays a decisive role in attracting and retaining talent, especially in places striving to grow their workforce and strengthen regional appeal. In essence, when a region invests in welcoming places with diverse cultural amenities, it signals to talented individuals (whether early-career, mid-career, or entrepreneurial) that this is a place to live, not just work. The combination of walkable urban districts, thriving arts scenes, curated public spaces, and engaging cultural events becomes a competitive advantage in the talent marketplace.

In short, for Northeast Indiana, creative placemaking is more than “nice to have.” It serves as a strategic lever in the talent equation, helping transform a region from a low-cost location to a place where people *choose* to live, raise families, and build careers.

Creative convergence: enhancing the growth and development of other regional industries, such as tourism and manufacturing

The third element of the creative economy’s economic importance is the recognition that creative talent, creative places, and creative enterprises enhance the competitiveness of other economic clusters, such as tourism and manufacturing. The arts and culture sector plays a crucial and

⁷ U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. (2025, April 2). *Arts and Cultural Production Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2023* (BEA 25-13). <https://www.bea.gov/news/2025/arts-and-cultural-production-satellite-account-us-and-states-2023>

⁸ Americans for the Arts. (2023). *Arts & Economic Prosperity 6: The economic & social impact study of nonprofit arts & culture organizations & their audiences in Greater Fort Wayne* (pp. 6-7).

⁹ Community Research Institute at Indiana University–Purdue University Fort Wayne, & Indiana University Public Policy Institute, School of Public and Environmental Affairs, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis. (2016). *Indiana Arts Commission creative economy report* (pp. 37–38).

multifaceted role in sustaining and growing tourism. In Northeast Indiana, it serves as both a magnet for visitors and a way to broaden the region's appeal beyond traditional tourism draws. Cultural offerings encourage visitors to stay longer and return more often. For a region with strong manufacturing, agribusiness, and logistics identities, arts and culture help shift the tourism narrative and elevate the place brand.

This sort of cultural clustering communicates to visitors that the region is more than utilitarian; it offers rich, immersive attractions. This helps Northeast Indiana stand out from larger metro-area competitors. Tourism thrives on events that draw out-of-town audiences, and the arts sector contributes heavily to this. Cultural festivals, public art tours, and mural walks give local destination marketing organizations meaningful content to promote. When visitors attend performances, exhibitions, or cultural tours, they spend money at local restaurants, hotels, retail establishments, and transportation services. Tourism policy research consistently shows that arts and culture visitors are more likely to stay overnight and spend more per trip.

Creativity can also enhance the competitiveness of manufactured products and services. Talented firms and individuals create products, experiences, and even processes that have added value because they are more aesthetically appealing or functional. Most notably, the success of the region's orthopedics cluster depends on the intersection of medical science, engineering, and creative design, ensuring devices are effective, functional, and usable for a wide range of patients. With multiple companies in the region having product design capabilities (not just manufacturing), this strengthens the cluster narrative: Northeast Indiana isn't just a "make" zone; it's a "design + make" zone in orthopedics.

Creative economy assets by county

Northeast Indiana is a region full of variety, from the dynamic urban atmosphere of Fort Wayne to the quainter rural attractions just outside the city. The 11 counties—Adams, Allen, DeKalb, Huntington, Kosciusko, LaGrange, Noble, Steuben, Wabash, Wells, and Whitley—that comprise the Northeast Indiana region each offer unique cultural and creative resources that contribute to the region's burgeoning creative economy. Eight counties—Adams, Allen, DeKalb, Huntington, Noble, Steuben, Wells, and Whitley—are part of the Fort Wayne-Huntington-Auburn Combined Statistical Area (CSA). In addition, there are five micropolitan areas (Angola, Auburn, Decatur, Huntington, and Kendallville).



Figure 2. Map generated by Co-Pilot

Allen County

Allen County, home to **Fort Wayne**, is the cultural and economic heart of Northeast Indiana. As the region's most populous county and one of the Midwest's fastest-growing metropolitan areas, it houses over half of the region's residents. Its central location along **Interstate 69** and other major highways makes it a hub for business, transportation, and creative activity.

The county's economy is diverse, with strong sectors in manufacturing, healthcare, retail, finance, and insurance. Allen County is also home to some well-known creative companies, including Vera Bradley, a luggage and handbag company, and Sweetwater Sound, a leader in music technology. Sweetwater's Fort Wayne campus includes its corporate headquarters, recording studios, a music academy, performance venues, a retail store, and a distribution center, making it a hub for music education, performance, and industry.

As the region's cultural capital, Allen County boasts a vibrant arts scene, including museums, galleries, and theaters. Key creative destinations include:

- Arts Campus Fort Wayne, led by Arts United of Greater Fort Wayne, brings together the Arts United Center, Fort Wayne Museum of Art, and the Auer Center for Arts and Culture.
- Performance venues such as the Clyde Theatre, Embassy Theatre, and Sweetwater Performance Pavilion, as well as public spaces like Freimann Square, The Landing, and Promenade Park, host live performances and community events.
- Local galleries include the Orchard Gallery, Gallery 02, and the Ruth Koomler Art Gallery. The Fort Wayne Museum of Art also hosts exhibitions.
- Historical and cultural institutions include the History Center and the Allen County-Fort Wayne Historical Society.

The **Allen County Public Library system** is another significant creative asset, welcoming over **1.7 million visitors in 2024**. Its branches, which include Fort Wayne, Georgetown, Hessen Cassel, and Shawnee, house The Studios at the Library, offering maker spaces, workshops, and creative resources for community members of all ages. The library also hosts the Fred J. Reynolds Historical Genealogy Department, one of the largest public genealogy collections in the country, offering access to over 1.3 million physical items.

Higher education institutions further strengthen Allen County's creative economy. University of Saint Francis (USF) and Purdue University Fort Wayne (PFW) are well-regarded for their arts and music programs. USF's Music Technology Center features recording studios, practice spaces, and a 2,000-seat auditorium. PFW's upcoming Surack-Sweetwater Music Industry Building (opening 2026) will expand studio and recording opportunities. Ivy Tech Community College offers courses in design, entrepreneurship, culinary arts, and technology.

Outside Fort Wayne, Allen County is mainly agricultural, with 65 percent of its land used for farming. The county also hosts a small Amish community, known for high-quality furniture production and craftsmanship, adding another creative and cultural layer to the region.

Adams County

Located along Indiana’s eastern border, **Adams County** is known for its deep **Swiss heritage**, large **Amish and Mennonite communities**, and vibrant culture of craftsmanship and manufacturing. The county’s four incorporated cities, **Berne, Decatur, Geneva, and Monroe**, contribute to a distinctive blend of industry, creativity, and tradition that helps define the area’s identity.

Berne, often called “the furniture capital of Indiana,” has a long history of skilled manufacturing and design. **Amish-owned furniture workshops** and companies reflect the region’s artisanal excellence, producing high-quality handcrafted furniture known throughout the Midwest. Among the leading employers is **Smith Brothers Furniture**, a century-old manufacturer employing more than 500 people across two factories. Smaller local shops, such as **Bernhaus Furniture** and **Habegger Furniture**, continue this tradition of local craftsmanship.

Cultural heritage remains central to Adams County. The **Swiss Heritage Village & Museum** in Berne is one of the largest outdoor museums in northern Indiana. The 22-acre site features restored pioneer-era buildings and interpretive exhibits that celebrate the county’s Swiss roots. The **Swiss Heritage Society** organizes annual events such as **Swiss Days** and the **Swiss Heritage Festival**, both of which draw regional visitors and showcase traditional music, food, and folk arts.

Decatur has emerged as a hub for contemporary public art. The **Decatur Sculpture Tour**, launched in 2012, has become one of Indiana’s most recognized community art programs. It features dozens of sculptures by artists from across the United States, including works by local artists **Ralph Hurst** and **David Smith**. The tour integrates public art into the downtown streetscape, enhancing both local pride and tourism. The **Hive Art Gallery** complements this effort with rotating exhibits, creative workshops, and community art shows.

Adams County’s creative ecosystem is strengthened by active community engagement and arts education. Local schools and organizations, such as the Adams County Community Foundation and the Adams Public Library System, provide small grants, exhibit space, and youth programs that promote creative learning and expression. Together, these efforts preserve Adams County’s rich heritage while supporting new generations of makers and artists.

DeKalb County

Situated along Indiana’s northeastern border with Ohio, **DeKalb County** blends a proud **automotive and transportation legacy** with a local arts scene. Communities include **Auburn, Butler, Garrett, and Waterloo**, and surrounding smaller towns. Despite its relatively small population, DeKalb County features a network of museums, festivals, and creative organizations that celebrate both its industrial heritage and its artistic strength.

Known as the “**Hub of Transportation Heritage**,” DeKalb County has an enduring connection to America’s automotive story. The city of **Auburn** was home to the Auburn Automobile Company, whose iconic Auburn, Cord, and Duesenberg cars remain symbols of American innovation and design. Today, Auburn continues this legacy through multiple museums, including the **Auburn Cord Duesenberg Automobile Museum**, the **National Auto & Truck Museum**, and the **Early Ford V-8 Foundation Museum**. Collectively, these institutions attract tens of thousands of visitors annually and contribute significantly to the region’s tourism and creative economy.

DeKalb County also celebrates this automotive artistry each year during the **Auburn Cord Duesenberg Festival**, which brings together collectors, designers, and enthusiasts from across the country. This multi-day event blends history and creativity, featuring car parades, art shows, live music, and cultural exhibitions that highlight Auburn's ongoing role as a center of design and craftsmanship.

The county's creative energy extends beyond its transportation heritage. The county hosts the **Garrett Museum of Art**, a cultural institution that showcases rotating exhibitions by regional and national artists. The **Excelsior Arts Academy and Youth Theatre**, a nonprofit organization based in Garrett, offers arts and performance education through workshops, classes, and stage productions for young people.

Huntington County

Located southwest of Fort Wayne, **Huntington County** blends a strong manufacturing and agricultural base with a growing creative sector rooted in education, media production, and community arts. Major industries include **advanced manufacturing, commercial printing, agriculture, and food processing**. One of its creative businesses, **Our Sunday Visitor**, is the largest Catholic publishing company in the United States.

At the heart of the county's creative life is **Huntington University**, a private four-year Christian liberal arts college and a regional center for media arts and creative education. The university is widely recognized for its **film, television, and animation programs**, offering degrees in **film production, broadcast media, animation, game design, studio art, and graphic design**. Students produce award-winning feature films, documentaries, and digital content as part of the curriculum, often in collaboration with regional partners. The **Merillat Centre for the Arts** serves as the university's creative hub, providing performance and rehearsal spaces, photography and printmaking studios, and the **Robert E. Wilson Gallery**, which displays student and faculty artwork.

Huntington University's **Digital Media Arts Center** and **Department of Film & Media** have also established strong connections with Indiana's emerging film sector, hosting screenings, internships, and student projects that build a professional creative pipeline in Northeast Indiana.

The broader Huntington community offers a variety of cultural and artistic experiences for residents and visitors alike. The **LaFontaine Arts Council** promotes and supports the arts across the county through its arts education programs, artist showcases, and partnerships with local schools. The **Huntington Art Center** is a unique community asset where residents can sign up for arts programming and participate in art shows. The center also provides space for Artists-in-Residence, including apartments and private studios, kitchens for culinary classes and caterers, and workshop studios.

Live performance is a long-standing tradition in Huntington County. The historic **Pulse Opera House** in Warren has been producing community theatre since the 1880s and continues to offer a year-round calendar of plays, musicals, and youth theatre programs. The **Huntington Theatre Guild** and **Community Choirs of Huntington County** further enrich the performing arts landscape, providing opportunities for residents to engage in local productions and choral performances.

Cultural heritage and preservation also play an essential role in the county's identity. The **Huntington County Historical Museum** and the **Forks of the Wabash Historic Park** offer exhibits and programs that explore the county's pioneer past, Native American heritage, and local traditions.

Kosciusko County

Just outside the Fort Wayne-Huntington-Auburn region, **Kosciusko County** is best known for its entrepreneurial spirit and global reach. The county seat, **Warsaw**, proudly holds the title "*Orthopedic Capital of the World*," and is home to major employers like **Zimmer Biomet** and **DePuy Synthes**, along with more than a dozen other orthopedic manufacturers that anchor the local economy. Beyond its industrial reputation, Kosciusko supports a lively and growing creative community that enriches the region's quality of life.

At the heart of that scene is the **Wagon Wheel Center for the Arts**, one of the county's signature cultural assets and one of the longest-running professional summer stock theaters in the nation. This 836-seat nonprofit theater produces a full slate of professional and community performances each year and has helped launch the careers of actors who have gone on to Broadway and Disney. The **Symphony of the Lakes**, Wagon Wheel's professional orchestra, features over 100 musicians and performs throughout the county, enriching community life with live music. The center also offers youth and adult training in theater and music, nurturing local creative talent.

Downtown Warsaw has a vibrant visual arts scene with 10 murals and sculptures, and three art galleries, including **Lakeland Art Gallery** operated by **Lakeland Art Association**, which was founded in 1957, **Atelier**, and **City Hall Gallery**, as well as a longtime art anchor, **Warsaw Cut Glass**. Art is also on exhibit at other galleries in the county, including **Artista Art Gallery**, **The Mount Memorial Hall Art Gallery**, and the **Water Lily Art Gallery**.

Performance art also flourishes in Warsaw, with groups including **Community Arts Program**, which presents diverse choral works, and its **Vocal Vibes** group, which performs jazz styles, many drawn from the **Great American Songbook**. In addition, **Everyone's Tiffany** improv group performs regularly in Downtown Warsaw, and the **Grace College Worship Arts Program** and the **3:16 Community Theatre** offer faith-based performances. The **Lake Area Community Band** contributes original performances and free summer concerts in local parks, while the **Warsaw Parks & Recreation Department** animates the local arts scene with its **Summer Concert Series**, bringing local and regional musicians to downtown's Central Park Plaza on Winona Lake.

Creative education and training are also a key part of the picture. The **Community Arts Program** offers vocal training and choir opportunities for K-10 students, while the **Lee Anne Stewart Dance School**, home of the **Fusion Dance Team**, provides instruction in ballet, jazz, tap, hip hop, and contemporary dance. **Ivy Tech Community College's Warsaw campus** supports the county's creative workforce through technical and business training that benefits creative entrepreneurs, designers, and media professionals.

Kosciusko County's lakeside communities, especially around **Winona Lake**, host seasonal arts and craft festivals such as the **Village Art Fair**, which features plein air painting and showcases regional artisans. The **Village at Winona**, a restored turn-of-the-century resort community on the shores of Winona Lake, hosts the art fair and has become a creative destination in its own right, featuring artisan shops, galleries, and other annual events like the **Fat & Skinny Tire Fest**, blending recreation, craftsmanship, and community celebration.

LaGrange County

Nestled in the heart of northern Indiana’s Amish country, **LaGrange County** is a place where creativity and craftsmanship are part of everyday life. Best known for its rolling farmland, handmade furniture, and traditional way of life, the county blends old-world artistry with a growing tourism and cultural economy centered around the town of **Shipshewana**.

Shipshewana has become one of the Midwest’s leading destinations for authentic handmade goods, antiques, and small-town charm. It is home to the famous **Shipshewana Auction & Flea Market**, one of the largest in the region, which draws thousands of visitors each year and showcases the creative spirit of local makers, woodworkers, quilters, and artisans. The county also hosts several historical societies dedicated to preserving and showcasing local culture and history, including the **Shipshewana Area Historical Society, the LaGrange County Historical Society, and the Howe Historical Society**. The **Menno-Hof** is another cultural site within the community dedicated to educating visitors on the faith, practice, and way of life of the Amish and Mennonite communities in LaGrange.

Nearby, the **Blue Gate Theatre** anchors the county’s performing arts scene, hosting year-round live entertainment ranging from Broadway-style musicals and family shows to nationally touring musicians. The **Blue Gate Performing Arts Center**, a newer addition, has expanded the county’s cultural offerings by bringing in well-known artists and large-scale concerts to its 1500 seat venue. Other venues include the **Michiana Event Center**, which provides a large arena for trade shows, conventions, and concerts.

Visual and craft arts are deeply embedded in local tradition. The region’s **Amish and Mennonite artisans** are known for their exceptional woodworking, quilting, and leatherwork—skills passed down through generations that continue to define LaGrange’s identity as a center for handicraft and design. Visitors can explore these traditions through **artisan shops, quilt gardens, and driving tours** across the Heritage Trail. **LaGrange County Arts** provides exhibition space, art classes, and youth programs, and an annual Summer Arts Festival, and the **Kingsbury Arts & Event Center** provides a community center for residents to take art classes, attend local performances, and view public art. Both centers help sustain the local creative ecosystem beyond the tourism sector.

Cultural festivals further strengthen community life and attract visitors from across the Midwest. Annual events such as the **Shipshewana Ice Festival, Mayfest, and the Shipshewana Lights of Joy** holiday drive-thru display celebrate creativity in all forms, from sculpting and music to culinary arts and design.

Noble County

Noble County is a mix of rural communities, small towns, and lakefront tourism areas, with strong manufacturing and agricultural presence. The city of **Kendallville** supports visual and performing arts activities in the county.

The **Community Learning Center** in Kendallville is an important creative asset that serves as a community space that houses several local organizations. The space is also used for arts education and classes in pottery-making, performance arts, culinary arts, needle arts, and fine arts. The county also provides other creative resources specifically for writers and performers. The **Gaslight Playhouse** offers residents a local community theatre experience, and **Supporting Playwrights and**

Creative Expression (SPACE) provides female playwrights with writing space to support their creativity and craft through solo retreats. Noble County's numerous lakes and parklands, particularly around **Sylvan Lake**, host seasonal arts and craft festivals, including craft fairs that attract visitors and highlight local artisans.

Steuben County

Steuben County, in the northeastern corner of Indiana, is rich in natural resources with 101 lakes that support the county's tourism industry.

The county is home to **Trine University**, a private university based in Angola that offers degrees in a variety of fields. In the creative realm, Trine offers programs in Design Engineering and Communication, along with minors in Theatre, Game Design and Esports, Entrepreneurship, and Music. Trine also offers numerous spaces for student performances throughout the year, including the **Fabiani Theatre**, **T. Furth Center for the Performing Arts**, **Ryan Concert Hall**, and **Wells Theatre**. These venues are also used for community events and performances, making them an asset within the larger community.

A standout arts nonprofit is the **Steuben Arts Scene**, formerly the Steuben County Council for the Arts, which provides artistic opportunities for community members and local artists through exhibits, classes, lectures, and special events. The organization also serves as a hub for established and aspiring local artists to access resources and support for their artistic careers. The **Angola Performing Arts Academy** also offers arts education and training for youth in theater and performing arts, and hosts events such as the annual **Angola Art Fest**, which celebrates creativity and art in the community.

Wabash County

Wabash County, west of Huntington County, is home to the city of **Wabash**, recognized as the world's first electrically lit city. Today, the county has a strong focus on engaging community members in the arts through a variety of venues and programmatic offerings.

The Honeywell Foundation, a nonprofit that operates numerous performing arts venues and provides arts and music education in the region, is a unique creative asset based in Wabash County. Its **Honeywell Center** houses the **Ford Theater**, which hosts national and regional performances in music, theatre, and dance. The Center also includes the **Clark Gallery**, which displays artwork by regional and local artists and offers music classes for youth, music education training for educators, and community events for residents. Other Honeywell venues include the **Eagles Theatre**, a recently renovated arts and entertainment facility; the **Honeywell House**, which hosts educational programs, solo recitals, chamber music concerts, and lectures; historic homes; a drive-in movie theater; and a horticulture center. The foundation offers a suite of educational offerings, including workshops, art programming in local schools, and the Honeywell Arts Academy, which provides specialized music training workshops for up-and-coming artists and musicians from around the globe.

Wabash County also hosts several performing arts organizations, including the **Manchester Symphony Orchestra**, a local orchestra that partners with citizens of Wabash and Manchester University, and **Wabash Valley Dance Theatre**, a performing arts and dance training school that offers dance classes for youth and adults and specialized music training for emerging musicians. Performing arts also remain active through organizations such as the **Wabash Area Community**

Theater, which stages productions for all ages, and the **Wabash Community Band**, which provides seasonal concerts.

Downtown Wabash is another unique community asset in the region. Downtown Wabash is **one of two designated Indiana Cultural Districts** in the region. The district is anchored by the performance art venues and galleries housed at the Honeywell Center, the Eagles Theatre, the Wabash County Museum, and local boutique shops, historic buildings, and public art.

Students can also access local arts education at the postsecondary level. **Manchester University**, a private liberal arts university, has its main campus in Wabash County (with a satellite campus in Fort Wayne). The university offers degree programs in a variety of creative fields, such as video game development and digital media arts, with minors in art and creative music technology. It also has several art galleries, including the **Gallery G** and **Link Gallery**, that display student artwork, and several auditoriums, including the Link Auditorium, Flory Auditorium, and the Cordier Auditorium, that host events, performances, and concerts for students and community members.

Through a combination of **historic venues and arts education opportunities**, Wabash County maintains a vibrant and accessible creative economy that supports local talent.

Wells County

Wells County, south of Fort Wayne, is largely rural, with a manufacturing and agricultural base. The county seat, **Bluffton**, serves as the hub of creative and cultural activity.

Bluffton is home to the **Creative Arts Council of Wells County**, which promotes visual and performing arts, as well as arts education, across the county. The council provides gallery space, hosts exhibitions, and organizes workshops for both youth and adults. It also offers theater opportunities for individuals of all ages through its Creative Arts Theater Department, which hosts seasonal productions.

Performing arts are also active through smaller music ensembles, dance programs, and youth choirs, which contribute to cultural life. Festivals and community events, such as the **Roanoke Days Fall Festival** and the **Bluffton Street Fair** (one of the oldest and largest street fairs in Indiana), provide additional opportunities for residents and visitors to engage with local artists and artisans.

Whitley County

Whitley County, west of Fort Wayne, is a rural county that combines traditional industries of manufacturing and agriculture. **Columbia City** serves as the cultural center with a small network of creative businesses, organizations, and cultural events.

The county is home to **Fox Products Corporation**, a world-renowned instrument manufacturer that makes double-reed instruments such as oboes, bassoons, and English horns. Fox Products is one of the world's largest bassoon manufacturers and makes a vast majority of the bassoons sold in the United States.

In terms of creative resources, the **Columbia City Arts Commission** promotes arts events, public artwork, and community collaborations to support local artists in Whitley County. Whitley County also hosts several **cultural community events and festivals** that highlight local arts and heritage,

including the Whitley County 4-H Fair, an annual Autumn Festival, the Whitley County Farmers Market, and the historic Turtle Days festival. In addition to these events, residents can connect with local artists at **Art in the Alley 92** or enjoy a community-based theater performance put on by the new **Harold Company Performers**.

The regional support ecosystem

Leveraging and building out the creative economy requires a strong regional infrastructure and support system. This support system broadly refers to organizations, businesses, and institutions that provide financial, administrative, or educational services that help individuals, organizations, and businesses thrive within the creative economy. Key components of the support system include:

- **arts support and funding** organizations such as local and regional arts councils, arts nonprofits, and local and national foundations supporting the creative economy both directly and indirectly;
- **educational** institutions, including K-12 schools, as well as specialized training for creative arts for both children and adults;
- **higher education** institutions, which not only offer opportunities for learning through degree programs, but also house cultural institutions and venues and provide connections to industry professionals and employment;
- **public libraries**, which can provide access to essential materials and equipment for creatives, offer venues for artistic and creative activities, and, in some communities, serve as hubs for networking and entrepreneurial support;
- **entrepreneurial support organizations**, which assist individual creatives and small businesses in starting and growing their enterprises; and
- **community and economic development** entities, including chambers of commerce and tourism offices, which elevate the economic value of the creative industries to support business growth, attract talent, and draw visitors.



This section of the report provides an assessment of the region’s existing support ecosystem for the creative economy.

Arts support and funding

Northeast Indiana benefits from a diverse and evolving network of organizations that provide essential support to the region’s artists, cultural institutions, and creative enterprises. This network includes local nonprofits that offer organizational and professional development assistance, county-

based arts councils that coordinate community-level cultural programming, and foundations and public sector agencies that provide financial resources to sustain and grow the creative sector.

While these supports are robust in the Fort Wayne and Allen County area, access to similar resources in rural counties remains limited. This imbalance underscores the need to strengthen arts support and funding infrastructure across the entire region.

Regional arts leadership

At the center of this ecosystem is Arts United of Greater Fort Wayne, the only regional arts agency serving Northeast Indiana. Arts United provides a broad range of services, including advocacy, fundraising, technical assistance, grantmaking, and economic development for the creative sector. It supports more than 70 nonprofit arts and cultural programs and, through its Regional Arts Council, offers administrative and financial assistance to over 50 member organizations. The organization serves as a key convener for collaboration and capacity building across Northeast Indiana.

Arts United owns and manages four of the seven facilities on Arts Campus Fort Wayne: the Arts United Center, Auer Center for Arts and Culture, Hall Community Arts Center, and Parkview Physicians Group ArtsLab, all of which provide shared performance, exhibition, and community spaces for local artists and organizations.

Starting in 2019, Arts United of Greater Fort Wayne transitioned from a United Arts Fund to a Local Arts Agency. This shift stemmed from funders' preference for giving directly to the organizations they wanted to support rather than using Arts United as a pass-through entity. As a result, Arts United grants to local arts organizations have declined significantly. While the organization still provides targeted grants for Regional Arts Council members and other specific grant programs, offers back-office support, and facilitates capacity-building grants and professional development opportunities, it is no longer funded to provide operating support for grants. This has been challenging for local arts organizations already operating in a fragile funding environment.

County-level arts support

In more rural areas of Northeast Indiana, smaller arts councils and community-based nonprofits play an important role in sustaining creative activity. Examples include the LaFontaine Arts Council in Huntington County and the Creative Arts Council of Wells County. These organizations coordinate local arts programming, organize community events, and provide training and exhibition opportunities for artists.

Several county-level arts councils became inactive following the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to gaps in programming and access to resources for creatives in rural counties. Despite these challenges, new and existing organizations such as the Auburn Arts Commission, LaGrange County Arts, and the Steuben Arts Scene, among others, continue to engage residents and visitors through community events, art fairs, and workshops.

Municipal and county support

City and local governments also play an increasingly important role in supporting the creative economy through public art programs and commissions. In Fort Wayne, the Public Art Commission (PAC) oversees the city's Public Art Program, advising on the integration of art into public spaces and managing initiatives that fund and promote local artists. One notable example is the PAC SHOUT-

OUT: Fort Wayne initiative, which empowers neighborhoods to celebrate their unique identities through permanent public art projects.

Other communities are adopting similar models. The Columbia City Arts Commission in Whitley County promotes public art through seasonal festivals, the annual Artist's Studio Tour, and countywide art markets. In Kosciusko County, the Warsaw Public Arts Commission has invested over \$450,000 in downtown public art.

Philanthropy

Philanthropic organizations play a vital role in sustaining arts and culture in Northeast Indiana. Community foundations and regional funders, including the Surack Family Foundation, Lilly Endowment, James Foundation, and Dekko Foundation, provide essential grant funding that supports program delivery, expands access to the arts, and strengthens organizational capacity.

State and federal support

State and federal investment in the arts has declined in recent years, creating a more competitive and uncertain landscape. Reductions in support from agencies such as the Indiana Arts Commission, Indiana Humanities, the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) have had ripple effects across the region, placing additional pressure on local governments and private philanthropy to fill the funding gap.

Education and youth arts programs

Northeast Indiana offers abundant opportunities for young people to explore the arts, develop creative skills, and pursue specialized training in music, dance, theater, and visual arts. From community programs to dedicated arts academies, the region provides diverse pathways for youth to engage in creative learning both inside and outside the classroom.

Arts and performance training organizations

The region is home to numerous dance companies, theater programs, and music studios that nurture young talent. Organizations such as Impact Dance Studio and Wabash Valley Dance Theatre offer structured dance instruction and performance opportunities for children and teens. Across the region, youth theater programs and music studios offer instrumental lessons, vocal coaching, and stage experience, helping students develop artistic skills and confidence.

The Fort Wayne Museum of Art offers programs and workshops for children and teens that introduce them to art history, design, and studio practice. Similarly, the Fort Wayne Ballet provides exceptional dance education through the Auer Academy of Fort Wayne Ballet, one of only ten schools in the country certified by the American Ballet Theatre®. The Auer Academy offers classes and pre-professional training for dancers of all levels and ages, using the American Ballet Theatre® National Training Curriculum to ensure a high standard of instruction.

School-based arts programs

Several schools in the Fort Wayne area integrate arts and creative learning into their academic programs. Croninger Elementary School and Memorial Park Middle School, both Arts/STEAM magnet schools, combine instruction in the visual and performing arts with a strong emphasis on

science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. This interdisciplinary approach helps students connect creativity with problem-solving and innovation.

The AMP Lab at Electric Works serves hundreds of Fort Wayne high school students, offering project-based learning experiences in music production, graphic and visual arts, agriculture, and entrepreneurship, allowing students to explore creative industries while developing career-ready skills. Its satellite program at the Pearl Arts Innovation Institute provides focused training in music industry entrepreneurship, exposing students to the business side of creative careers.

The Academy of the Arts at Canterbury School is another regional asset for high school students pursuing intensive artistic training. The audition-based program prepares students for college-level arts programs by offering specialized instruction and mentorship in music, theater, and the visual arts. In addition to these schools, several public schools in the region have strong arts programs, such as the Performing Arts Center at Warsaw Community High School, which offers courses in band, chorus, orchestra, theater, and dance that align with state academic standards.

Community-based arts academies

Nonprofit organizations across the region expand access to creative training for youth from diverse backgrounds. The Angola Performing Arts Academy in Angola and the Excelsior Arts Academy & Youth Theater in Auburn both offer performing arts instruction, workshops, and productions designed to build skills and confidence in young performers. The Honeywell Foundation in Wabash and Pearl Arts in Fort Wayne serve as additional hubs for arts and music education, hosting camps, classes, and performances that reach students throughout the region.

YOUTH CREATIVE TRAINING

Across Northeast Indiana's 11 counties, schools, nonprofits, and cultural organizations provide classes, camps, and pre-professional training in music, dance, theatre, and visual arts.

Regional Highlights

- **Adams, Wells, and Whitley counties:** County arts entities, including the Creative Arts Council of Wells County and the Columbia City Arts Commission, offers a mix of art classes open to youth as well as performing arts programs.
- **Allen County (Fort Wayne):** Fort Wayne Youtheatre, Fort Wayne Dance Collective, Auer Academy of Fort Wayne Ballet, Fort Wayne Children's Choir, Philharmonic Youth Orchestras, Sweetwater Academy of Music & Technology, Purdue Fort Wayne's Community Arts Academy, and AMP Lab at Electric Works provide extensive training opportunities across the arts. *Notable schools:* Canterbury School's Academy of the Arts, Croninger Elementary, Memorial Park Middle, and Weisser Park Elementary (Arts/STEAM magnets).
- **DeKalb County:** Excelsior Arts Academy & Youth Theatre and the Garrett Museum of Art provide youth theatre and art training, while the DeKalb Outdoor Theatre hosts community and youth performances.
- **Huntington County:** LaFontaine Arts Council and Huntington Arts Center support K–12 arts education; Huntington University offers film, theatre, and design camps; Pulse Opera House engages youth in theatre performance.
- **Kosciusko County:** Wagon Wheel Conservatory, Symphony of the Lakes, Lakeland Art Association, Community Arts Program, and Fusion Dance Team offer youth theatre, music, and dance instruction.
- **LaGrange County:** LaGrange County Arts provides workshops and exhibits; Blue Gate Theatre hosts student matinees and youth events.
- **Noble and Steuben counties:** Community Learning Center (Kendallville) and Angola Performing Arts Academy provide classes in visual arts, music, pottery, and theatre; Trine University offers youth arts camps.
- **Wabash County:** The Honeywell Foundation and Honeywell Arts Academy deliver premier youth arts programs in theatre, music, and visual arts; Manchester University supplements with community workshops.

Other providers—libraries and community resources

Beyond formal instruction, many public libraries, community centers, and youth-serving nonprofits across Northeast Indiana have introduced maker labs, creative studios, and arts workshops as part of their educational offerings. These programs give young people access to tools and provide mentorship in areas such as digital design, photography, and multimedia production, helping to develop both artistic and technical skills.

Together, these efforts reflect a comprehensive and growing ecosystem of youth arts engagement in Northeast Indiana. By linking schools, nonprofits, cultural institutions, and community-based programs, the region continues to foster the next generation of creative talent while strengthening the foundation for its broader creative economy.

Higher education

Higher education institutions and local colleges play a pivotal role in building Northeast Indiana’s creative talent pipeline. These institutions provide specialized degree and certificate programs, hands-on learning experiences, and access to professional-grade facilities that prepare students for careers in creative industries. In addition to formal instruction, campuses often serve as cultural and community hubs, hosting performances, exhibitions, and collaborations that strengthen the broader creative ecosystem.

Strength in music technology

Music technology is a particular strength in Northeast Indiana’s higher education landscape. The region is home to **Sweetwater Sound**, the nation’s largest online retailer of musical instruments and audio equipment, which has helped position Fort Wayne as a center for music innovation and industry training. According to the draft *Sound Diplomacy Economic Impact Analysis: Fort Wayne Music*, Allen County is experiencing sustained growth in music-related economic activity.

Two regional universities anchor this strength with nationally recognized music technology programs:

- **University of Saint Francis (USF)** offers degree programs across multiple

CREATIVE PROGRAMS ACROSS UNIVERSITIES IN NORTHEAST INDIANA

Grace College:

- Art, Digital Photography, Drawing, Illustration, Visual Narrative, Visual Communication Design, Ecological Art
- English, Film Studies, Journalism, Theatre Arts
- Music Production Major (Nashville Contemporary Music Concentration; Worship Leadership Concentration)

Huntington University:

- Fine Arts (BA), Graphic Design (BS), Studio Art (BS), Animation (BS - Animation, Visual Effects)
- Film Production Capstone (BS), Game Development (BS - Animation, Computer Science)
- Television Production (BA, BS), Entertainment Technology (BFA)

Manchester University:

- Art, Digital Media Arts, Community Arts Organization Concentration, Studio Art Concentration
- Art (Minor), Creative Music Technology (Minor)
- Audio Production (Certificate)

Purdue University Fort Wayne:

- Art (BA, BFA), Music Education, Music Technology, Performance
- Music: Commercial Music, Music Industry, Outside Field, Music Therapy
- Theatre (BA), Musical Theatre (BFA)

Trine University:

- Theatre (Minor), Music (Minor), English, Communication, Arts

University of Saint Francis:

- Animation (BA), Dance (BA), Game and Application Development (BS), Graphic Design (BA)
- Music Technology (BS), Studio Art (BA, BFA)

creative disciplines, notably a Bachelor of Science in Music Technology. The USF Music Technology Center includes a 2,000-seat auditorium, dedicated practice spaces, recording studios, and mixing suites. Students also gain practical experience through the student-run Record Label Project, which provides exposure to marketing, production, and business management in the music industry.

- **Purdue University Fort Wayne (PFW)** offers a wide range of music and performance programs, including an MBA with a Music Specialization and opportunities for students to work with Gold Top Music Group, an independent record label run by students and faculty. Gold Top promotes local musicians and provides experiential learning for students interested in music performance, production, and management. PFW is also developing the Surack–Sweetwater Music Industry Building, which will feature state-of-the-art studios and performance spaces for students and community members when completed.

Film, media, and digital arts

Huntington University has emerged as a regional leader in creative education, particularly in film, media, and animation. Its Film and Digital Media Arts program has received national recognition. The *BEA Festival of Media Arts* ranked Huntington as the top award-winning Christian university film and video program in the United States. The curriculum provides hands-on experience in animation, radio, television, and digital storytelling. Its Film Capstone Track allows seniors to work alongside industry professionals on feature-length productions.

Huntington University has also advocated for Indiana’s film tax credits, contributing to new opportunities for regional film production. In 2025, the university received the first installment of a \$1 million grant from the Northeast Indiana Strategic Development Commission to launch the Creating a Talent Pipeline (CTP) initiative. This initiative provides high school students with professional training to prepare them for careers in the film and digital media industries, further strengthening Northeast Indiana’s creative workforce.

Entrepreneurship and business development support

Several colleges in the region support creative entrepreneurship through coursework, mentorship, and competitive funding:

- **Ivy Tech Community College Fort Wayne** hosts the **Garatoni School of Entrepreneurship & Innovation**, where students can earn an associate degree or a Certificate in Entrepreneurship. The program offers training, networking, and mentorship to help students transform creative ideas into viable businesses. Ivy Tech’s campuses in Fort Wayne and Kosciusko also provide technical certificates in entrepreneurship, and graduates are eligible to compete in the New Venture Competition, where winners can receive up to \$40,000 in seed funding.
- **Indiana Tech** offers a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration with a concentration in Entrepreneurial Studies, and a certificate program covering marketing, business planning, and start-up evaluation.
- **Trine University** in Angola connects students to the business community through Trine Innovation 1, a program that engages students in real-world projects focused on prototyping, product design, and process improvement. This initiative helps bridge academic learning with applied experience in creative industries.

Creative hubs for community engagement

In addition to their academic programs, these higher education institutions also serve as community anchors for creative activity. Galleries, performance venues, and innovation centers regularly host exhibitions, concerts, and workshops open to the public, showcasing student work, fostering community participation, and supporting a culture of creativity throughout the region.

Together, the region's higher education institutions form a comprehensive network for developing creative talent, integrating technical training, business acumen, and artistic excellence. By expanding partnerships among campuses, local industries, and cultural organizations, Northeast Indiana is well-positioned to continue growing a robust and competitive creative workforce.

Public libraries

Public libraries play a vital role in the creative economy by offering resources, venues, and specialized programs for the broader community. Across the Northeast Indiana region, 31 public library systems and standalone libraries provide creative opportunities for youth and adults. Public libraries support artists and crafters through markets, galleries, and performances, while also hosting hobbyist gatherings such as knitting, sewing, and photography clubs. In rural areas, libraries expand access to creative programming and resources that residents might otherwise lack.

Libraries also provide tools and training for local entrepreneurs. Programs such as the *Studios at the Library*, located at five Allen County Public Library branches, and *The Bridge* at the Noble County Albion Public Library offer makerspaces with access to specialized equipment, including 3D printers, a heat press, and laser cutters. For local artists and creatives, public libraries serve as venues for displaying their work and talents through art shows, performances, and residencies.

Libraries across Northeast Indiana, particularly in Allen County, offer extensive genealogy resources that attract visitors from around the world. The Allen County Public Library system houses one of the largest public genealogy collections in the United States, with over 1.3 million physical items and more than 6 million items in its digital collection. The Genealogy Center within the county public library further supports tourism and community engagement.

Entrepreneurial and business support organizations

Northeast Indiana offers a growing network of organizations that help entrepreneurs and small businesses launch, grow, and sustain their enterprises. These resources provide access to capital, technical assistance, education, training, and networking opportunities. While the region has many strong business support assets, coordination among these entities and awareness among creative entrepreneurs remain key challenges.

Entrepreneurial ecosystem and regional support

The Northeast Indiana Innovation Center serves as one of the region's leading business incubators and entrepreneurial hubs, connecting entrepreneurs to resources, mentors, and training programs while coordinating the broader regional entrepreneurship ecosystem. Additional assistance is available through the Indiana Small Business Development Center and the SCORE Northeast Indiana Chapter, both of which provide free business counseling, marketing and branding advice, and legal support to startups and small businesses.

Fort Wayne, the region's largest business hub, is home to the Summit City Entrepreneur and Enterprise District (SEED), which offers small business resources, short-term entrepreneurship courses, incubator space, and modest grant programs. SEED partners with Fuse NEI, a regional collaborative that connects entrepreneurs with funding and training, and Start Fort Wayne, a nonprofit providing coworking space and access to a professional network of entrepreneurs, support organizations, and investors.

In 2022, Start Fort Wayne released the *Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Strategy for Allen County*, which identified both strengths and gaps in the region's entrepreneurial landscape. The study revealed that many entrepreneurs were unaware of existing resources or found them difficult to access. The strategy recommended better communication, coordinated mentorship, and shared infrastructure, though implementation has been slowed by staff turnover and limited operational funding among partner organizations.

Beyond these resources in Fort Wayne, several additional organizations provide support for entrepreneurship and small business development across Northeast Indiana:

- Brightpoint Development Fund, a certified Community Development Financial Institution, offers affordable small business loans, business coaching, and development services for entrepreneurs who may not qualify for traditional financing.
- The Community Development Corporation of Northeast Indiana offers alternative financing options, including revolving loans and incentive programs, to help new and growing businesses expand.
- The Whitley County Economic Development Corporation's Small Business and Entrepreneurship Initiative provides hands-on support for start-ups and early-stage businesses, including incubation, training, and access to local financing.
- The city of Fort Wayne's Emerging Business Enterprise Program helps economically disadvantaged and minority-owned businesses compete for city contracts and access local development funds, an important pathway for creative entrepreneurs seeking to grow through public projects.

Entrepreneurs and creative businesses across the region can access funding from multiple sources:

- The Federal Home Loan Bank of Indianapolis' Elevate Small Business Grant provides capital, workforce training, and technical assistance to help small businesses grow.
- The Indiana Legend Fund offers loans to underrepresented entrepreneurs, improving access to business capital.
- Elevate Ventures and the IEDC invest in early-stage, high-growth companies across industries, including creative and cultural enterprises.

For artists and creative professionals, the Indiana Arts Commission (IAC) plays a crucial role in connecting creativity and entrepreneurship. The On-Ramp Creative Entrepreneur Accelerator provides intensive business training for creatives, covering strategic planning, community engagement, and financial management, with individualized coaching and the ability to apply for a \$2,000 implementation grant. The IAC's Creative Leap program offers a six-week virtual workshop focused on business strategy and growth for established creative entrepreneurs.

However, recent state and federal funding cuts have placed future IAC programs at risk. The most recent state budget reduced IAC’s allocation by 33 percent, following broader national reductions in arts funding, threatening a critical bridge between arts practice and business training in the state.

Gaps and opportunities

Despite Northeast Indiana’s rich network of resources, creative entrepreneurs often remain disconnected from available programs. Most business development organizations are concentrated in Fort Wayne, leaving rural communities with limited access. Moreover, many traditional small business programs are not tailored to the specific needs of creative professionals, who face unique challenges such as project-based work, intellectual property management, and variable income streams. Expanding outreach and designing programs tailored to these needs represent a key opportunity to strengthen the region’s creative economy.

Community and economic development entities

Multiple organizations dedicated to fostering business development, investment, tourism, and community revitalization serve the Northeast Indiana region. While these entities provide valuable support, the network is not fully streamlined and lacks optimal alignment to support the creative economy.

Regional engine

The Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership (NEI), founded in 2006, functions as the principal public–private economic development body for the 11-county region. NEI operates as a single point of contact for business attraction and expansion, offering services such as site selection, workforce data, research, and stakeholder coordination.

County municipal economic development organizations

At the county level, Northeast Indiana benefits from a **comprehensive network of economic-development organizations (EDOs)** that collectively provide strong geographic coverage and institutional depth. Each of the 11 counties has a dedicated county or multi-county EDC that serves as the central hub for business attraction, retention, and expansion. These organizations range from well-established,

NORTHEAST INDIANA REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP

Founded in 2006, the Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership (NEI) is a **public–private collaboration** serving 11 counties—Adams, Allen, DeKalb, Huntington, Kosciusko, LaGrange, Noble, Steuben, Wabash, Wells, and Whitley. Guided by the **Regional Opportunities Council (ROC)**, a network of more than 130 business and civic leaders, NEI sets strategic direction and oversees major regional initiatives.

NEI’s long-term vision, outlined in *Vision 2030*, positions the region as a destination of choice for businesses and talent committed to innovation and market leadership. Its core functions include:

- **Business attraction and expansion:** Serves as the region’s central point of contact for companies seeking to locate or grow in Northeast Indiana.
- **Economic research and data services:** Provides site selection data, workforce analysis, and cost comparisons.
- **Regional coordination:** Aligns efforts among local economic development organizations (LEDOs) through the LEDO Council.
- **Marketing and promotion:** Leads regional branding and communications efforts to attract investment and talent.
- **Strategic partnerships:** Connects business, education, and community leaders to advance regional priorities.

NEI’s initiatives complement and strengthen the region’s creative economy by:

- Integrating creative talent and design industries into broader economic development.
- Supporting place-based investment that highlights arts and culture.
- Promoting a unified regional identity that enhances tourism and talent attraction.

professionally staffed entities such as Greater Fort Wayne, Inc. (Allen County), Kosciusko Economic Development Corporation, and the Steuben County EDC, to leaner entities like the LaGrange County EDC, Wells County EDC, and Region 3A Development and Regional Planning Commission, which supports multiple rural counties. County-level organizations typically coordinate directly with NEI on regional marketing, site readiness, workforce initiatives, and state-level business recruitment, while also partnering with local municipalities and chambers of commerce.

Municipal economic development capacity is anchored in a mix of city departments, redevelopment commissions, and local economic development commissions, each operating under Indiana's statutory framework but tailored to local needs. Larger municipalities such as Fort Wayne, Huntington, Kendallville, and Warsaw maintain formal offices or commissions with professional staff who manage business attraction, redevelopment planning, and incentive programs in close collaboration with county and regional partners. Smaller cities and towns, including Angola, Auburn, Bluffton, Columbia City, Decatur, Ligonier, and North Manchester, typically administer economic-development functions through their redevelopment commissions or community development departments, often sharing resources with county EDCs. This structure ensures that nearly every municipality in the region has at least some capacity to engage in business growth and site development, though staffing levels and program sophistication vary. The system's strengths lie in its broad geographic coverage and local responsiveness, while its primary challenge remains the coordination and resource disparity between larger urban centers and smaller towns. Strengthening collaboration among municipal, county, and regional entities is essential to ensure a cohesive approach to investment, quality-of-place enhancement, and long-term economic competitiveness across Northeast Indiana.

Overall, the county EDO network provides a solid foundation for local economic development leadership, strong business-community relationships, and a shared commitment to regional collaboration. However, capacity varies: larger counties can sustain full-time professional staff and robust incentive tools, while smaller or more rural counties often operate with limited budgets and rely on partnerships to deliver programs. Addressing these disparities through shared services, regional project teams, and cross-county training or technical assistance would strengthen the region's collective ability to attract investment and support long-term economic growth.

Business advocacy and local chambers

At the county level, each Local Economic Development Organization (LEDO) coordinates with NEI's LEDO Council, an advisory forum of county development leaders. Across the region, **17 chambers of commerce** provide advocacy and business support at the local level.

Tourism and placemaking

Each county has a tourism or convention and visitors bureau that leverages cultural and creative assets to promote visitor activity. Examples include Visit Fort Wayne, Visit Noble County, and the LaGrange County Convention & Visitors Bureau.

Multiple **Main Street programs**, including Waterloo Main Street, South Whitley Main Street, and LaGrange Main Street, support downtown revitalization by emphasizing historic preservation, placemaking, and creative-sector activation. The region features two state-designated cultural districts that enhance creative identity and support economic development:

- Arts Campus Fort Wayne in Allen County, home to key institutions such as Arts United of Greater Fort Wayne, Fort Wayne Civic Theatre, the History Center, and the Fort Wayne Museum of Art.
- Wabash Cultural District in Wabash County, which integrates performing arts venues, public art installations, trails, new housing, and small business growth.
- In addition, Main Street Warsaw launched its Cultural District Arts Plan in the fall of 2025 and plans to participate in the Indiana Arts Commission's revamped Cultural Pathways in 2026 with aspirations to become a state-designated Indiana Cultural District.

Gaps and opportunities

Although many stakeholders operate across business development, cultural tourism, and placemaking, the system remains **fragmented**, with overlapping jurisdictions, inconsistent coordination, and limited regional alignment. For the creative economy to fully thrive, Northeast Indiana must improve alignment among economic development, arts and culture, tourism, and workforce systems.

Creative economy: strengths and challenges

A comprehensive understanding of Northeast Indiana's creative economy begins with recognizing both the region's distinctive strengths and the challenges that may hinder future growth. Extensive research, interviews, and regional engagement reveal a dynamic network of creative assets, ranging from cultural institutions and historic downtowns to vibrant local festivals, creative entrepreneurs, and educational partners that contribute to the region's cultural identity and economic vitality.

At the same time, the analysis highlights structural and organizational challenges that constrain the full potential of the creative sector. These challenges include limitations in implementation capacity, uneven access to resources and networks across counties, and a need for stronger regional collaboration and sustained investment.

The following section summarizes the key **strengths** that position Northeast Indiana for continued advancement in its creative industries, as well as the **challenges** that it must address to build a more connected, resilient, and competitive regional creative economy. Understanding both dimensions provides the foundation for the strategic recommendations that follow.

Distinctive strengths

Youth education

The region is strong in youth arts education across multiple disciplines, including visual arts, theater, and dance, with a specific specialty in music. Select schools offer robust STEAM programs that integrate arts and music into their curricula. Cultural institutions across Northeast Indiana also play a key role in providing youth arts programming.

Strong cultural institutions and creative business

Northeast Indiana is home to a diverse network of performing arts organizations, art support groups, museums, and creative enterprises. Major institutions and venues include the Auburn Cord Duesenberg Automobile Museum in DeKalb County; Arts Campus Fort Wayne, the Embassy Theatre,

and the Fort Wayne Museum of Art in Fort Wayne; Wagon Wheel Center for the Arts in Kosciusko County; the Blue Gate Performing Arts Center and the Blue Gate Theatre in LaGrange County; the Community Learning Center in Noble County; and the Honeywell Foundation and its arts and entertainment venues in Wabash County. The region also boasts a rich cultural history, with the History Center in Fort Wayne and numerous local historical societies, such as the Noble County Historical Society and the Kendallville Heritage Association, each with its own historical center.

Prominent performing arts organizations include the Fort Wayne Philharmonic, Fort Wayne Ballet, Symphony of the Lakes, and smaller community ensembles, such as the Huntington Erie Community Band and the Lake Area Community Band.

Leading creative businesses include Sweetwater Sound, one of the nation's largest online retailers of musical instruments and audio equipment; Vera Bradley, a nationally recognized design company; and Fox Products, a leading manufacturer of double reed instruments, including oboes, English horns, bassoons, and contrabassoons.

Philanthropy

The region benefits from a strong philanthropic network that plays a vital role in supporting the creative economy. This network includes community, national, and private foundations, as well as family endowments. The Community Foundation of Greater Fort Wayne is a significant philanthropic force, holding \$219 million in assets, while each county in Northeast Indiana has its own community foundation that funds a range of local creative and cultural activities. Private and family foundations, such as the Dekko Foundation, Don Wood Foundation, Surack Foundation, James Foundation, and Wilson Foundation, also contribute significantly to creative and cultural initiatives. Many of these funders represent homegrown wealth, reflecting a deep commitment to community investment. The Surack Foundation, for example, funded the new music technology building at PFW and the Pearl Arts Music Academy. In addition to these local funders, several national funders, such as the Lilly Endowment and the Knight Foundation, also invest in the region, expanding the philanthropic resources that sustain and grow its creative economy.

Culture and heritage

Northeast Indiana's cultural assets reflect its rich and diverse history. Across all 11 counties, historical societies, museums, and preserved properties showcase the depth of Indiana's heritage. The History Center in Fort Wayne stands out as a key institution, housing an extensive collection of historical artifacts and documents that tell the region's story and hosting community events that engage both residents and visitors. Each county in Northeast Indiana also maintains its own historical societies and museums, preserving local history and traditions. All library systems in the region contribute to this effort by providing access to genealogical resources and professional support. The Allen County Public Library's Genealogy Center, for example, draws thousands of visitors annually to explore one of the nation's largest genealogy collections. The region also benefits from the rich cultural history of the Miami Tribe, as well as the Amish and Mennonite communities. It is also home to distinct international groups, including notable Burmese, German, and Macedonian populations, as well as a growing Middle Eastern community.

★ Artisan products

Northeast Indiana produces a wide range of artisanal goods that reflect both its cultural traditions and emerging creative talent. Shippshewana is known for high-quality Amish craftsmanship, including handmade furniture, woodcrafts, quilts, and rugs. Other examples include commercial craft producers such as the Warsaw Cut Glass Company and Folkcraft Instruments in Woodburn. The region also has a thriving network of wineries, breweries, and specialty food producers, ranging from cheese to honey and baked goods, all supported by the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network.

★ Festivals

Festivals, fairs, and markets play a vital role in showcasing local creativity and culture throughout the region. A diverse mix of hosts, including local government, nonprofit organizations, and private businesses, organize these events. Most fairs and festivals focus on engaging residents, with popular examples including the Kendallville Apple Festival, Wabash County Fair, Huntington Heritage Days, and the LaGrange Summer Arts Festival. Allen County also features Bloom Fest, Taste of the Arts Festival, and the West Central Neighborhood ArtFest.

The region draws visitors from across the Midwest with larger events like Middle Waves, an indie rock festival, and the Johnny Appleseed Festival. In DeKalb County, the Auburn Cord Duesenberg Festival celebrates the county's automotive legacy and attracts car enthusiasts from around the country to experience what many consider the world's greatest classic car show.

Farmers' markets also contribute to the region's vibrancy. Allen County hosts more than ten, and each surrounding community offers at least one. The Barr Street Market in Fort Wayne stands out as the city's oldest, operating since the 1840s.

★ Public art

Communities across Northeast Indiana have made visible investments in public art, using murals, sculptures, and interactive installations to enhance quality of life and strengthen local identity. These initiatives also create employment opportunities for artists and encourage community engagement. Fort Wayne has multiple public and private programs that support community art, including a dedicated Public Art Commission. The commission oversees the city's Public Arts Program and collaborates on public art projects such as Downtown Fort Wayne's Public Art Trail SoundWalk, an interactive experience that pairs visual art with original music and narration.

While Fort Wayne plays a central role, public art thrives across the region. The Wabash Cultural District features a cluster of public art installations, and Huntington County has a vibrant mural trail and a growing public art scene. Kosciusko County has also embraced public art, offering residents and visitors the Public Art Trail Challenge to encourage exploration of its numerous installations, many of which are in downtown Warsaw. Regional efforts have focused on public murals for several years. Fort Wayne alone displays at least 30, and during the 2020 Make It Your Own Festival, organizers installed 11 murals in 11 days, one in each Northeast Indiana county. Municipalities like Kendallville have embraced this movement, showcasing a unique set of blacklight-reactive murals. Fort Wayne artist Jayne Wall will soon unveil a new 2,000-square-foot mural at Riverfront Fort Wayne.

Sculpture also plays a prominent role in the region’s public art landscape. The Fort Wayne Museum of Art features outdoor sculptures, Decatur hosts an annual sculpture tour, and the Sculpture with Purpose initiative installed 50 artistic bike racks throughout Fort Wayne.

★ Design

Design-related occupations and small design companies represent a growing strength in the regional creative economy. Fort Wayne has a variety of full-service advertising and design firms, including Asher Agency, MSKTD & Associates, Design Collaborative, and Martin Riley, which employ commercial artists, illustrators, architects, and designers. The region’s manufacturing base, which includes furniture, vehicles, musical instruments, and orthopedic devices, relies heavily on creative professionals for industrial design, branding, packaging, and visual marketing materials. While declining, the region’s printing and publishing industry still provides significant job opportunities for designers.

Challenges

▼ Limited implementation capacity

Northeast Indiana has developed numerous thoughtful plans and recommendations to grow the creative economy. Recent initiatives, including the Fort Wayne music study, Allen County strategic plans, and other community-level efforts, offer actionable strategies for workforce development, entrepreneurship, and cultural investment. However, the region faces a challenge in **translating these ideas into action**. While the vision is clear, limited leadership, staffing, funding, and organizational capacity make cross-county implementation difficult. Without dedicated and sustained personnel, coordination, and investment, many promising ideas risk remaining on paper rather than being realized.

▼ Fragmented regional collaboration

Although Northeast Indiana has pockets of regional thinking, such as the NEI Regional Partnership and Arts United, there is **no widespread habit of collaboration across county lines**. Many organizations, artists, and community leaders tend to focus on their own communities rather than the broader 11-county region. This limits the ability to leverage resources, share best practices, or create **economies of scale** that could amplify the impact of cultural initiatives. Developing a stronger **regional mindset** would allow the creative sector to pool talent, audiences, and funding to the benefit of the entire 11-county region.

▼ Declining federal and state resources

Federal and state funding for the arts has declined in recent years. Reductions to programs at the **Indiana Arts Commission, Indiana Humanities**, and federal agencies like the **IMLS** have limited the resources available to support both individual artists and organizations. As funding tightens, cultural institutions struggle to maintain facilities, expand programs, and provide professional development. This creates a **resource gap** that can slow growth in the creative sector and limit opportunities for emerging creatives, particularly in smaller or rural communities.

▼ Underappreciation of arts and culture

In many parts of Northeast Indiana, arts and culture are often **undervalued** compared to other community priorities. Some residents and policymakers view creative industries as nonessential or

secondary to sectors like manufacturing or healthcare. This mindset makes it challenging to secure **public support, sponsorships, and funding**, especially outside Fort Wayne. Raising awareness of the economic, social, and community benefits of the creative economy is essential for shifting perceptions and broadening support.

▼ Challenges in attracting and retaining creative talent

Retaining locally trained creatives and attracting new talent remain persistent challenges. Many young artists, designers, and performers leave Northeast Indiana for larger urban centers, such as Indianapolis, which they perceive as offering more vibrant creative ecosystems and career opportunities. Limited affordable housing and a lack of entrepreneurial supports further hinder retention. Developing and expanding programs, incentives, and career pathways for both **emerging and experienced creatives** is critical to strengthening the region's talent base.

▼ Potential overbuilding of performing arts venues

Northeast Indiana has a significant number of performing arts venues, including theaters, concert halls, and multipurpose spaces. These facilities expand performance opportunities and support community engagement, yet many **struggle to attract consistent audiences**. At the same time, new projects are being proposed, which could **oversaturate the market** and strain resources. Without coordinated planning to grow audiences, develop marketing strategies, and support venue operations, additional investment could weaken rather than strengthen the region's performing arts ecosystem. While this is a concern, it may not apply throughout the region. Smaller communities may have an interest in new venues so residents do not have to travel up to an hour to see performances in Fort Wayne, keeping cultural dollars local. Nevertheless, such projects, if undertaken, should demonstrate sufficient market demand, avoid negatively impacting existing venues in the region, be appropriately sized for its market, and show a clear need from local artists before moving forward.

▼ Insufficient funding for sustainability and operations

Cultural leaders consistently cite challenges in **maintaining existing facilities and programs over time**. Many nonprofits prioritize creating new spaces or programming but lack long-term funding plans for operations, staffing, and facility maintenance. Without sustainable funding strategies, both new and existing institutions risk **financial instability**, threatening the region's ability to sustain consistent arts and cultural offerings.

▼ Limited formal and informal networks

While Northeast Indiana has some creative networks, gaps remain, particularly in **rural counties**. Professional development, technical assistance, and networking opportunities for artists, performers, and creative entrepreneurs are **less accessible outside major cities**. Informal networks, where creatives can collaborate, mentor, and share opportunities, are also underdeveloped. Strengthening these networks would enable **peer support, cross-county collaborations, and knowledge sharing**, all of which are critical to sustaining a thriving creative economy.

▼ Creative ecosystem centered in Fort Wayne

Fort Wayne serves as the creative hub of Northeast Indiana, with a concentration of museums, theaters, galleries, and creative businesses. While these assets are substantial, **spreading the benefits and influence beyond the city** remains a challenge. Many neighboring counties have

smaller-scale arts initiatives that could grow with **support and connection to Fort Wayne's infrastructure**, audience base, and professional expertise. Aligning regional strategies to leverage Fort Wayne's strengths while building capacity elsewhere is essential to achieving a **balanced, resilient creative economy** across all 11 counties.

Strategic plan for supporting the creative industries

The creative economy plays an increasingly important role in driving innovation, fostering community identity, and supporting economic resilience across Northeast Indiana. Research and engagement conducted as part of this strategic planning process have revealed a clear and achievable vision for the region's creative future.

Strategic framework

Vision

The region recognizes and supports the creative economy as a vital driver of innovation, new employment opportunities, increased income for creatives, and enhanced quality of life for residents across the region.

Achieving this vision requires targeted, coordinated, and sustained action. The following goals identify the major areas of focus necessary to strengthen and expand the region's creative economy, positioning it as a core component of regional growth and competitiveness.

Goals

1. Retain and attract a sustainable talent pool that supports both creative industries and the broader regional economy.
2. Expand cultural tourism to attract visitors, extend their stays, and generate increased spending across the region's creative and hospitality sectors.
3. Strengthen and grow creative enterprises by supporting entrepreneurs, organizations, and businesses that form the foundation of the creative ecosystem.

The strategies that follow are guided by a set of core principles designed to ensure that the work ahead is coordinated, sustainable, and aligned with the region's broader economic and community development objectives.

Guiding principles

- **Alignment:** Incorporate and build upon existing strategic planning efforts relevant to the creative economy.
- **Distinctiveness:** Leverage and amplify the region's unique creative strengths and cultural assets.
- **Focus:** Prioritize a small number of high-impact, transformational strategies over a broad array of smaller initiatives.
- **Momentum:** Capitalize on existing successes and partnerships to maintain forward progress.

- **Sustainability:** Ensure that strategies are financially and organizationally sustainable over the long term.
- **Regional collaboration:** Promote initiatives with regional scope and benefit, encouraging cooperation across all 11 counties.

Approach

To implement this vision and achieve the stated goals, the plan identifies five overarching strategies that together form a comprehensive framework for regional action. The region should:

1. Strengthen the music and film/media industries through targeted programs, support services, and investment opportunities.
2. Develop a robust creative talent pipeline by attracting, training, and retaining individuals who wish to live and work in Northeast Indiana.
3. Increase public awareness and appreciation of the creative economy’s contributions to regional prosperity and quality of life.
4. Invest in creative infrastructure, including facilities, networks, and support systems that sustain long-term growth.
5. Enhance regional cultural tourism through coordinated marketing, programming, and partnerships across arts, culture, and tourism sectors.

These strategies provide a clear roadmap, positioning the creative economy as a central driver of innovation, economic vitality, and community well-being across Northeast Indiana.

Strategies

1 STRENGTHEN THE MUSIC AND FILM/MEDIA INDUSTRIES

Action 1. Promote the music cluster

Fort Wayne’s music sector stands out as a defining strength of the region’s creative economy, thanks in large part to the influence of Sweetwater Sound. Sweetwater’s impact extends beyond retail into education, industry attraction, and local infrastructure. Recognizing and building on this foundation is essential for any creative economy strategy. By further investing in Northeast Indiana’s music industry, the region can boost visibility, attract tourism, enhance quality of life, and, most importantly, generate jobs and income for creatives. Multiple recent studies, including the *Fort Wayne/Allen County Tourism Masterplan* and the *Allen County Together (ACT) Plan*, highlight music as a key growth opportunity, and there is both buy-in and momentum from local stakeholders to pursue this opportunity area.

In early 2025, Visit Fort Wayne and key stakeholders across the city, county, and region commissioned Sound Diplomacy to conduct an in-depth analysis of Fort Wayne’s music landscape and provide strategic recommendations to strengthen the sector. These strategies build on the region’s existing assets, including its strong music education programs and globally recognized companies such as Sweetwater Sound and Fox Products. According to the draft Sound Diplomacy Music Study, soon to be released, the local music ecosystem already serves as a significant economic

driver, supporting 6,986 jobs (5.4 percent of local employment) and generating \$3.1 billion in total output. Although the study focuses exclusively on Fort Wayne, continued growth in the city's music industry is expected to generate positive spillover effects across the broader Northeast Indiana region through increased national visibility and tourism. Growing the music industry in the region requires both expanding performance-based music activity *and* investing in career pathways for young adults and enterprise development and attraction.

Because many creatives struggle to find sustainable employment and often leave the region due to limited opportunities, stakeholders should prioritize implementing the study's recommendations to strengthen the industry's employment base and create stable, long-term career pathways for local talent. Key recommendations include developing a music industry training program, strengthening the professional pipeline for students, and establishing an accelerator hub.

Action 2. Grow the film and media industry

Over the past several years, Northeast Indiana partners have been steadily laying the groundwork for a thriving film and media sector, conducting planning, piloting projects, aligning institutions, and securing early wins. This momentum provides a compelling rationale for prioritizing the sector within the creative economy strategy, ensuring that existing efforts are aligned, amplified, and supported. Expanding the film and media industry presents a significant opportunity to strengthen the regional economy, workforce, and creative ecosystem. Film production has the potential to support small businesses, from catering to post-production services, and creates jobs across a wide range of technical and creative professions, such as set designers, camera operators, sound engineers, editors, and grips. Beyond these direct impacts, a thriving film sector could enhance the region's quality of place, support digital media, and position Northeast Indiana as a vibrant creative destination.

Momentum is building. In summer 2025, Indiana enacted a statewide film and media tax credit, providing incentives for both in-state and out-of-state producers to film in Indiana. This policy offers a tool to attract production investment to the region. Coupled with Huntington University's growing film and digital media program, which cultivates homegrown talent in cinematography, animation, and virtual production, the region now has a strong foundation for sector growth.

Building on these assets, a local collaborative, including the Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership, Huntington University, the city of Huntington, and the Little River Land Trust, launched an ambitious development initiative to establish Huntington as a regional hub for film, virtual production, and creative industries. Anchored by the proposed Huntington Creative Village, this initiative combines physical infrastructure, such as studio space and production facilities, with workforce pipelines, investor outreach, marketing, and supportive policies. As described in the September 22, 2025 NEI Regional Partnership memo, the team's strategy is to "pair site-ready infrastructure and investor outreach with workforce pipelines, marketing, and policy levers" to catalyze long-term growth.

Given the potential economic value of the film industry, Huntington University's role as a creative anchor, and alignment with statewide incentives, regional stakeholders should prioritize support for the Huntington Creative Village initiative. Doing so would position Northeast Indiana to capture a growing share of national production activity, retain creative talent, and reinforce the region's identity as a Midwest center of innovation and culture.

2 DEVELOP A ROBUST CREATIVE TALENT PIPELINE

Action 1. Increase awareness of creative career paths

The region cultivates creative talent through youth programs, school curriculum, and specialized college and university training. However, many individuals ultimately leave Northern Indiana because they do not see viable job opportunities or clear pathways to apply their creative talents to sustainable careers. Information about creative occupations is often scarce due to their evolving nature, the lack of standardized titles or documented skill sets, and their focus on freelancing and microenterprises, pathways not typically promoted by high schools or higher education. Workforce discussions also tend to emphasize large-scale industries, such as healthcare, automotive, information technology, and energy, further limiting visibility into creative careers.

CREATIVE CAREER AWARENESS

The **city of Seattle** offers a suite of programs that showcase career pathways in creative sectors. Its free **Creative Economy Career Day** invites teens and young adults (ages 14-24) to explore opportunities across audio, visual, business, and technology fields. Participants gain direct access to industry professionals through networking, experiential learning, and live performances that highlight a wide range of creative careers.

City partners also collaborate to fund **Northwest Folklife's Cultural and Creative Workforce Development Internship Program**, which provides paid internships for young creatives to develop skills and connections in the sector.

The city's Office of Arts and Culture supported the creation of Seattle Public Schools' **Media Arts Skill Center**, offering students a clear pathway of courses, clubs, and school activities focused on media arts, helping them prepare for careers in creative and technical fields.

By educating career counselors, placement offices, and workforce investment centers about creative sector opportunities, students will gain a better understanding of and appreciation for career opportunities and potential career paths within the creative economy. This requires equipping guidance counselors, career counselors, and employment services with better economic and employment information about creative fields, including entrepreneurial ventures, freelance, and gig work. Once well-informed, these advisors can consistently share information and opportunities with high school and college students. The region can further emphasize and encourage these pathways by hosting inspiring, interactive, and fun creative career events.

Action 2. Expand work-based learning

Providing students with hands-on work-based learning experiences is essential. These experiences give students direct exposure to different creative occupations, connect them with employers, and give them a jumpstart to building a professional network. A region-wide internship program placing students in short-term creative roles with small businesses, larger companies, and cultural organizations would allow them to experience firsthand the possibilities of creative careers.

Establishing such a system requires building an ecosystem rather than a single program. Its success depends on a coordinated regional effort that brings together education, industry, and the arts. A "backbone" organization should serve as an intermediary, connecting local school districts, postsecondary institutions, workforce boards, chambers of commerce, and regional entities such as the Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership and Arts United. Together, this network would recruit employers across design, media, film, performing and visual arts, literary arts, and creative

entrepreneurship, while the coordinating organization manages logistics, including matching, training, and stipends. Although building this system requires significant investment and sustained commitment, it has the potential to establish a strong pipeline of creative talent and strengthen the region’s creative economy.

Action 3. Support creative entrepreneurship

Students in music, design, media, and other creative fields often pursue careers that are likely to lead to self-employment or entrepreneurship. Yet, secondary and postsecondary education programs in the arts or design rarely include sufficient entrepreneurial training. As a result, creative professionals often lack the business acumen needed to launch and grow successful enterprises. While small business services exist, many artists cannot afford specialized consulting and may lack familiarity with key markets. The region could benefit from developing a special entrepreneurial service targeting creatives working in art and design, offered through existing entrepreneurial service providers or independently, with subsidies from government or private sources. Promotion should be intentional and widespread to ensure uptake.

CREATIVE ENTREPRENEURIAL SUPPORT

Montana’s **Artrepreneur** program was first developed at a two-year college in Great Falls to help creative arts enterprise students build sustainable businesses and become “market ready.” The Montana State Arts Council subsequently adopted and expanded the program statewide, creating 35 practical tools to guide artists through steps such as researching potential customers, developing promotional materials, building budgets, and writing business plans. The program now serves as a market-ready certification for creative entrepreneurs.

The New York Foundation for the Arts’ **Artist as Entrepreneur** program offers a multi-day “boot camp” that immerses visual, literary, and performing artists (among others) in the business and management skills necessary to market their work and themselves.

In 2022, Northeast Indiana partners published a ten-year *Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Strategy* for Allen County. While its scope is not region-wide, the strategy’s data and tactics directly relate to creative entrepreneurs in the region. Developing targeted support for creative business ventures aligns with existing efforts and builds on demonstrated interest in strengthening the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Action 4. Launch a regional artist residency program

Artist residency programs strengthen a region’s creative ecosystem by providing time, space, and resources for artists to deepen their practice. Residencies nurture creative talent, foster long-term connections with local communities, enrich cultural life, and inspire emerging talent. When artists lead workshops in schools, host public talks, and collaborate with local creatives, they spark new ideas, broaden perspectives, and encourage young talent to pursue careers in the arts. Residencies also signal regional commitment to creativity, reinforcing the message that artistic work is valued and viable in Northeast Indiana. Over time, such programs cultivate the talent and sense of belonging that motivate artists to live, work, and build sustainable careers in the region.

A regional residency program would build on existing efforts while amplifying their impact by engaging multiple counties and disciplines. For example, a folk artist, a visual artist, and a performing artist could simultaneously participate in the program in different parts of the region. This distributed model would allow artists to experience the breadth of Northeast Indiana’s creative and cultural assets, while local residents gain exposure to high-level artistic practice and new professional pathways. Visiting artists may extend their stays or return, deepening the pool of creative professionals contributing to regional vitality.

The Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership could partner with local arts organizations, schools, historical societies, and municipalities to host residencies (three months or longer), initially prioritizing Indiana-based college graduates. Over time, the program could expand to attract national and international artists, positioning Northeast Indiana as a destination for creative experimentation and exchange.

Successful implementation will require multi-year funding to pilot and refine the model, ensuring time for measurable outcomes such as increased public participation, artist retention, and regional visibility. Funding sources could include state arts grants, philanthropic foundations, and contributions from local governments or businesses seeking to support community vitality. Coordinating across several host organizations would expand access to cultural experiences, foster cross-county collaboration, and stimulate local spending and tourism.

Action 5. Position the region as a center of excellence in arts education

High-quality arts education programs attract students with talent and ambition, offering rigorous training, mentorship, and exposure to professional networks that prepare them for sustainable creative careers. Complementary events, such as summer programs, festivals, and exhibitions, allow students and visitors to experience the region’s creative culture firsthand, connecting with local artists and exploring pathways for professional growth. Consistent investment in arts education and complementary events fosters a sense of belonging, professional opportunity, and encourages emerging talent to stay and contribute to the local economy. This approach may also convince visitors to entertain a move to the region, particularly those who appreciate the arts and would like to raise a family in a region that prides itself on excellence in art education.

The region already exhibits excellence in arts education. Branding it as a center of excellence and developing events that highlight creative assets can showcase career opportunities and entice visitors, particularly those with children, to consider relocating to Northeast Indiana.

RESIDENCY PROGRAMS

In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, **BOOM Universe** hosts McKnight Foundation fellows as part of the McKnight Artist Residencies Consortium Partner Program. The program connects visiting residents with cultural and arts organizations and actively fosters connections between visiting and local creatives, generating opportunities for new collaborations and cross-community exchange.

Southern Constellations is a curated, month-long residency program for five artists based in or raised in the Southern United States. Now in its seventh year, the program cultivates a regional network of experimental practitioners, engages artists in intensive creative work, and promotes collaborations, with support from the National Endowment for the Arts.

3 INCREASE PUBLIC AWARENESS AND APPRECIATION OF THE CREATIVE ECONOMY

Action 1. Elevate the creative economy through storytelling

Sharing local stories that highlight the economic and community impact of creative activity can be one of the most effective ways to build public and institutional appreciation for the creative economy. Storytelling translates artistic expression into tangible outcomes such as jobs, income generation, and vibrant communities.

Featuring stories of individual artists, creative entrepreneurs, and organizations across Northeast Indiana builds a shared narrative that reinforces civic pride and positions creativity as a key driver of economic growth and quality of life. These stories strengthen the creative ecosystem by helping creatives see themselves as part of a larger, interconnected network that contributes to the region's vitality.

A regional storytelling initiative yields multiple benefits:

- **Public awareness:** Demonstrates how creative work supports the economy, tourism, and community identity.
- **Advocacy and policy influence:** Provides evidence for including creative industries in regional economic development, workforce, and tourism strategies.
- **Investment attraction:** Raises the region's profile as a creative destination, drawing outside attention and funding.
- **Community connection:** Encourages collaboration and mutual recognition among creatives across all 11 counties.

To be most effective, these stories should highlight the diversity of creative industries and individuals beyond Fort Wayne, showcasing rural and smaller communities.

Potential outlets for sharing these stories include traditional and digital platforms such as 89.1 WBOI, whatsup, PBS Fort Wayne, Fort Wayne Magazine, Input Fort Wayne, and the Fort Wayne Business Journal, as well as regional tourism materials and communications coordinated through the Indiana Arts Commission.

A coordinated communications strategy, supported by regional partners, tourism bureaus, and chambers of commerce, will ensure continuous, inclusive, and visible storytelling. Over time, these stories will cultivate a stronger creative identity, reinforce public appreciation for the arts, and underscore creativity's role as a cultural and economic asset.

Action 2. Establish a "creative ambassadors" program

To complement storytelling, the region should establish a creative ambassadors program, a network of respected artists, creative professionals, and cultural leaders who advocate for the creative economy across Northeast Indiana. Ambassadors would deliver presentations and engage with elected officials, community groups, chambers of commerce, and business organizations to raise awareness of the creative sector's economic and social value.

By humanizing data and personalizing the message, ambassadors can foster cross-sector understanding and collaboration. They would link creative activity to local priorities such as workforce development, downtown revitalization, and tourism. To be successful, ambassadors should be equipped with key data, impact stories, and practical examples to demonstrate how investment in the creative sector produces measurable returns, ranging from employment growth and entrepreneurship to enhanced quality of life. Consistent messaging, supported by regionally aligned materials and talking points, will ensure ambassadors communicate a unified vision for the creative economy.

Over time, this effort can lead to deeper public understanding and sustained investment in creative industries. By elevating trusted local voices to champion the cause, the creative ambassadors program strengthens Northeast Indiana's identity and fosters sustained investment in creative industries.

4 INVEST IN LONG-TERM CREATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE

Action 1. Create sustainable funding for cultural institutions

Northeast Indiana's rich network of cultural institutions is a key regional asset, yet the ongoing maintenance and operational costs of these facilities are rising and are an increasing concern. Developing a comprehensive funding plan for operational support, especially maintenance, is critical to ensuring these institutions continue to deliver cultural, educational, and economic value.

One approach is a significant capital infusion from the philanthropic sector to address deferred maintenance while signaling the cultural and civic importance of these institutions to the broader community. For long-term sustainability, the region must also establish a dedicated, recurring funding source for ongoing operations.

Potential strategies to support cultural facility maintenance include increasing the existing County Innkeeper's Tax (CIT), currently set at 5 percent in most of the nine counties where it applies, and 8 percent in Allen and LaGrange counties, or allocating a dedicated portion of CIT revenues

CREATIVE AMBASSADOR PROGRAMS

City of San José Office of Cultural Affairs, California: San José's *Creative Ambassadors* program invites local artists to serve one-year ambassador roles, lead community-based creative projects, and represent the city's cultural identity.

City of Austin Cultural Arts Division, Texas: Austin's *Creative Ambassadors Program* designates local creatives to travel, promote the city, and engage in advocacy and networking on behalf of Austin's creative economy.

City of Boise Cultural Affairs, Idaho: Boise's *Cultural Ambassador program* highlights and promotes Boise's cultural and creative community while creating global connections. Each year, the city names a single individual or organization as the cultural ambassador. The program aims to raise awareness of the individual or organization, expand their cultural impact on the community, and broadly promote Boise's cultural life.

SUSTAINABLE FUNDING

In 2024, King County, Washington, enacted **Doors Open**, a 0.1 percent sales and use tax dedicated to supporting nonprofit organizations in the arts, heritage, science, and preservation sectors. 4Culture is administering this program. It also administers the long-standing King County Public Art program, funded by the 1 percent Art Ordinance, which began in 1973.

Under this ordinance, 1 percent of eligible portions of county-funded construction project budgets are allocated for public art. In addition, King County directs a portion of its lodging tax revenues to 4Culture to sustain its broader portfolio of cultural programs.

for cultural infrastructure. For example, in Hamilton County, Indiana, as of January 2024, the CIT rate is 8 percent, with 5 percent supporting tourism promotion and 3 percent directed to a Tourism Capital Improvement Fund for transformative visitor infrastructure. While increasing the CIT may face resistance, particularly in Allen County, where the last increase occurred in 2019, sustaining the region's cultural institutions, combined with the other recommendations in this plan, could boost tourism and generate a net positive impact for local lodging establishments and the region as a whole.

Additional options to develop funding streams could involve directing a share of parking fees and fines toward cultural upkeep or partnering with community foundations to create targeted grant programs focused on operational support.

While politically sensitive, the need for sustainable funding is real. Regional leaders can assess stakeholder interest and political feasibility while building awareness of the creative economy's importance. Together, these actions can strengthen the case for public and private investment in the long-term care of the region's cultural infrastructure. Explicit criteria for fund distribution, prioritizing need and impact, will ensure transparency and equity.

Action 2. Develop a regional arts funding clearinghouse

Artists and arts organizations in Northeast Indiana often rely on a patchwork of small, time-limited funding sources to sustain their work. These opportunities, ranging from grants and sponsorships to business loans and philanthropic funds, can be difficult to locate and even harder to access without professional grantwriting or technical support.

To address this challenge, stakeholders should establish a regional clearinghouse for arts and creative funding, a centralized digital platform that aggregates and shares up-to-date funding opportunities from public, private, and nontraditional sources. Paired with technical assistance, such as grantwriting workshops and one-on-one coaching, this platform would help artists, nonprofits, and creative organizations secure resources and strengthen long-term organizational sustainability.

A lead coordinating entity, ideally a regional organization with cross-sector reach, should manage the clearinghouse. This entity will require both financial and human resources to design, launch, and sustain the platform. Its responsibilities would include aggregating funding data, regularly updating listings, coordinating communications and outreach efforts, and providing user support.

To maximize reach, the clearinghouse should integrate with existing communication channels used by arts, economic development, and business support organizations. Partnerships with chambers of commerce, tourism bureaus, and entrepreneurial networks will help connect both individual creatives and organizations to available funding resources.

Tracking engagement metrics, such as the number of users, grant applications submitted, and total dollars awarded, will provide a clear measure of the initiative's effectiveness over time. These insights can help refine the platform and demonstrate the tangible return on investment in creative sector infrastructure.

5 GROW REGIONAL CULTURAL TOURISM

Action 1. Align tourism partners around a unified regional approach

Northeast Indiana boasts a rich array of public art and historic landmarks that together tell a powerful story of the region’s creativity, heritage, and sense of place. Yet these assets are rarely marketed or experienced as part of a unified regional narrative. The *Make It Your Own Mural Fest*, an 11-day celebration in which artists created 11 murals across the region’s 11 counties, demonstrated the power of cross-county collaboration to elevate visibility, attract visitors, and spark regional pride. Building on that momentum, Northeast Indiana now has a unique opportunity to position its public art, sculptures, historic sites, and cultural landmarks within a cohesive, region-wide experience, one that connects communities, celebrates local identity, and invites broader engagement.

A coordinated regional approach can transform these individual assets into a robust cultural tourism network, encouraging exploration, celebrating local identity, and strengthening Northeast Indiana’s reputation as a vibrant destination for arts, culture, and history. While some cities and counties already maintain public art maps or heritage trails, connecting these local initiatives under a shared regional brand amplifies their impact, increasing visitation and community engagement across county lines.

As a first step, local stakeholders, including arts councils, historical societies, tourism bureaus, and community foundations, can collaborate to create a regional database of public art installations and historic sites as the foundation for a Northeast Indiana Cultural Trail. Shared branding, digital mapping, coordinated signage, and joint marketing materials (e.g., themed itineraries such as “Murals & Mills,” “Modern Makers & Historic Towns,” “Rivers, Rails, and Revival”) will encourage multi-day exploration.

To sustain public interest, partners could also host rotating regional events, such as an annual “Cultural Discovery Weekend” or seasonal “Arts Along the Trail” celebration, spotlighting featured communities and assets under a unified regional banner. Partners could also explore opportunities for joint branding of artisanal products made in Northeast Indiana. Funding to support this regional approach could come from a blend of local tourism revenues, foundation grants, and regional marketing collaborations. Aligning tourism partners around a regional approach will tell Northeast

REGIONAL TOURISM

The **Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation** was established in 2008 under Virginia statute (§ 2.2-2734) to promote economic development in Southwest Virginia by expanding cultural and natural heritage ventures and tourism-oriented enterprises. The Foundation’s mission is to coordinate and lead the region’s creative-economy effort across a large, multi-county rural geography of 19 counties and four independent cities, advancing assets such as artisan networks, music heritage trails, craft tourism, and cultural gateway infrastructure. By uniting multiple rural jurisdictions under a single regional identity, the Foundation demonstrates how culture and heritage can drive collaborative rural development.

The **Discover Appalachia Alliance** is a cooperative tourism initiative connecting five East Tennessee counties along the Cherokee Heritage and Ocoee River corridors. Recognizing that travelers often experience destinations regionally rather than along county lines, these local tourism agencies formed a partnership to jointly market their combined outdoor recreation, Appalachian heritage, and craft culture assets under a single cohesive brand. The Alliance operates as a voluntary coalition of county tourism agencies, chambers of commerce, and local governments. Each county contributes financially, through lodging-tax revenues or tourism marketing budgets, to a shared fund that supports cooperative advertising, website development, print materials, and digital marketing. Leadership rotates annually among the partners, ensuring equal representation and shared ownership.

Indiana's story more cohesively, strengthening both regional identity and economic vitality through culture.

Implementation of the strategic plan

To move from plan to implementation, stakeholders must engage in a coordinated, intentional process that translates this creative economy strategy into actionable steps. First, Steering Committee members should **prioritize strategies and associated actions**, balancing early wins that build momentum with long-term initiatives that may benefit from Lilly Endowment funding. This will require leadership from the Northeast Indiana Regional Development Authority to convene the committee.

The Steering Committee will then need to **identify responsible parties**, clarifying who will lead and who will support each action. These parties may include arts agencies, economic development partnerships, or tourism bureaus, with key collaborators across sectors. The existing momentum around growing the music and film and media industries is benefiting from organizations that have taken on leadership roles to move the work forward. Advancing the strategies in this plan to make similar progress will require select entities to step up and take on a leadership role. Identifying leaders and support organizations will be critical to the success of plan implementation. Once leadership for each action is established, representatives from those organizations should **outline clear steps** for each action with near-term, mid-term, and long-term milestones to track progress.

Finally, **identify and secure necessary resources**, including funding, technical assistance, and policy support, to ensure successful implementation. This may involve leveraging local philanthropic and public sources, pursuing state and federal grants, and cultivating private partnerships.

By following these steps, Northeast Indiana can create a structured, transparent roadmap that advances its creative economy, strengthens regional collaboration, and delivers lasting benefits for communities, creatives, and the broader economy.

Appendix 1

The following individuals shared their perspectives through interviews or focus groups.

Interviewees:

- Jordan Adams, artist services program manager, Indiana Arts Commission
- Réna Bradley, neighborhood planner, city of Fort Wayne
- Shane Christ, owner, Acres Away Vineyard
- Ryan Christner, president and CEO, OrthoWorx Indiana
- Lance Clark, dean of the arts, Huntington University
- Sam Engle, communications and donor relations coordinator, Wagon Wheel Center for Arts
- Stéphane Frijia, CEO, Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership
- Dave Haist, commission chair, Indiana Arts Commission
- Alex Hall, founder and artist, Art This Way
- Colleen Huddleson, vice president and chief program officer, Fort Wayne Museum of Art
- Rick James, founder, chairman/CEO, Metal Technologies, Inc.
- Jon Kay, director of traditional arts, Indiana University Bloomington; associate professor of folklore and ethnomusicology; interim executive director for arts and humanities, Indiana University Bloomington
- Kendra Klink, executive director, the James Foundation
- Josh Lapp, principal and co-founder, Designing Local
- Tom Leedy, president, Dekko Foundation
- Brad Little, president and CEO, Community Foundation of Greater Fort Wayne
- Susan Mendenhall, vice president of programs, the Don Wood Foundation
- Miah Michaelsen, executive director, Indiana Arts Commission
- Maddie Miller, owner, Maddie Miller Studio
- Tod Minnich, president and CEO, Honeywell Arts and Entertainment
- Jeff Ostermann, senior vice president and chief people and culture officer, Sweetwater Music
- Todd Maxwell Pelfrey, executive director, the History Center
- Dan Ross, president and CEO, Arts United of Greater Fort Wayne
- Chuck Surack, founder, Sweetwater Sound
- Dan Swartz, founder/executive director, Start Fort Wayne; founder, Wunderkammer Company
- Terry Sweeney, downtown development director, Main Street Warsaw, Indiana
- John Urbahns, president and CEO, Greater Fort Wayne Inc.
- Zach Vessels, founder, Creator Space
- Curt Witcher, manager, Allen County Public Library Genealogy Center
- Andy Zay, Indiana State Senator - District 17

Focus group participants:

Tourism-related stakeholders

- Lorry Amieva, Smiley Face Media, Huntington, Indiana
- Rick Amieva, Smiley Face Media, Huntington, Indiana
- Grace Caswell, CEO, Noble County Convention and Visitors Bureau
- Audry Dudley, project assistant/tourism coordinator, Wells County Chamber of Commerce
- Kristen Guthrie, vice president of marketing and communication, Visit Fort Wayne, Allen County
- Dave Haist, commission chair, Indiana Arts Commission, Wabash County
- Cori Humes, executive director, Kosciusko County Convention and Visitors Bureau
- June Julien, executive director, Steuben County Tourism Bureau
- Mark Knecht, president, Chautauqua-Wawasee
- Sharon Metzger, director, Huntington Main Street
- Sonya Harman-Nash, executive director, Shipshewana LaGrange County Convention and Visitors Bureau
- Terry Sweeney, downtown development director, Main Street Warsaw, Indiana

Libraires

- Sandy Petrie, director, Noble County Public Library
- Rich Weiland, systems administrator/makerspace manager, Adams Public Library System
- Andrea Zwiebel, director, North Manchester Public Library

College students in creative majors

- Jaymee Gallagher, senior, Purdue University Fort Wayne, music industry major
- Aliyah Gordy, May 2025 graduate, Purdue University Fort Wayne, music industry degree, from the Elkhart area, now lives in Fort Wayne
- Michael Gregson, senior, University of Saint Francis, music technology major