



# IGNITE THE REGION



Photo credit: Northwest Indiana Forum

## READI 2.0: Arts & Culture Strategy

Final Report  
October 2025

PREPARED BY  
Public Sphere Projects

FOR  
Northwest Indiana Forum



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# Letter from the President & CEO

When we launched *IGNITE the Region* in 2018, Northwest Indiana was poised for change. Our first strategy focused on what we often called the “basic blocking and tackling” of economic development—strengthening infrastructure, aligning our workforce, and building the partnerships necessary to compete at a regional scale.

That foundation has served us well. Over the past several years, we’ve seen new investment, renewed confidence, and unprecedented collaboration among communities and organizations that once operated in silos or *cylinders of*

*excellence*. Great work is underway in each of the existing IGNITE pillars: *Business Development & Marketing, Entrepreneurship & Innovation, Infrastructure, Talent, and Placemaking*.

But as our region has grown, so too has our understanding of what truly fuels prosperity. Economic development is no longer only about jobs and capital—it’s also about culture, identity, and quality of life. To attract and retain the people who will define Northwest Indiana’s future, we must also celebrate what makes this place unique.

The *IGNITE the Region: Arts and Culture Strategy* builds on the momentum of the original plan by placing creativity at the center of our regional vision. It recognizes that arts and culture are not side projects or amenities, but rather, economic drivers, community builders, and essential ingredients in creating a sense of belonging. Through months of engagement and collaboration, this effort reflects the voices of artists, entrepreneurs, educators, civic leaders, and residents who see culture as the bridge between growth and meaning.

This strategy represents a next step in the region’s evolution—one rooted in both ambition and authenticity. I want to thank our partners at the Indiana Economic Development Corporation and Indiana Arts Commission, and the countless organizations and individuals whose insight shaped this plan.

Together, we are demonstrating that Northwest Indiana’s future is not just stronger. It’s more creative, more connected, and unmistakably our own.

**Heather Ennis**

President & CEO  
Northwest Indiana Forum

# Part 1: Discovery



*Kankakee Sands Preserve is home to more than 10,000 acres of protected prairie, savanna, and wetlands, where a nearly 100-member bison herd supports habitat restoration through natural grazing.  
Photo Location: Newton County, Indiana  
Photo Credit: Northwest Indiana Forum*

# Overview

## About the *IGNITE the Region Arts and Culture Strategy*

Northwest Indiana has long been defined by its industrial backbone—steel mills, rail lines, and a vast highway network that powered the region’s rise as a center of manufacturing and logistics. These muscular systems of production and transport shaped the economy, the landscape, and the culture, earning the region a reputation as a hardworking industrial hub. Even today, images of smokestacks and freight corridors remain central to how the region is perceived, both by those who live here and those looking in. It’s a story of grit, resilience, and blue-collar pride.

But that story, while true, is incomplete. Beneath the familiar symbols of industry lies a more complex and evolving regional identity. In late 2017, communities and organizations across Northwest Indiana came together to chart a broader, more inclusive vision for the future. The result was the region’s first comprehensive economic development strategy—*IGNITE the Region: A Regional Strategy for Economic Transformation*—a bold plan covering Lake, Porter, LaPorte, Newton, Jasper, Pulaski, and Starke Counties. Over the course of eight months, a diverse coalition of stakeholders shaped the strategy, which was publicly unveiled in September 2018.

*IGNITE the Region* marked a turning point in how Northwest Indiana viewed its potential—and how it shared its story. Centered on a set of aspirational goals, the plan establishes five pillars for the region’s future economic vitality and growth. These pillars reflect a holistic approach to development—spanning *business development and marketing, entrepreneurship and innovation, infrastructure, talent, and placemaking*—with each supported by targeted strategies and actions for implementation.

From the outset, the *IGNITE the Region* strategy acknowledged that industrial strength alone could not define the region’s future. Northwest Indiana’s legacy assets—both physical and reputational—offered only a partial picture of its promise. Overemphasizing the industrial past risked overlooking the many other historic and emerging strengths found in communities across the seven counties.

Today, artists and makers are cultivating creative enclaves. Birders gather at sunrise along Lake Michigan’s shoreline. Climate scientists pursue bold experiments in sustainability. Midcentury modern architecture stands alongside historic farmhouses and tightly knit urban blocks. Entrepreneurs are reimagining agriculture, energy, and mobility. Local food traditions and musical heritage draw visitors from across the country. This rich and varied cultural ecosystem is not only alive—it’s growing, shifting, and innovating with every passing day.

Recognizing this, the Northwest Indiana Forum launched an update to the *IGNITE the Region* strategy in 2025. This time, the focus was clear: to integrate arts into the region’s economic transformation agenda. Over the course of more than six months, the Forum collaborated with a broad network of partners and communities to expand the strategy’s scope and deepen its impact. The updated strategy was released in September.

This work was made possible through support from the State of Indiana’s Regional Economic Acceleration and Development Initiative (READI) and was led in partnership with Public Sphere Projects, a national planning and placemaking consultancy.

The update unfolded in three phases. *Phase 1: Discovery and Analysis* included a review of the original *IGNITE* framework, a SWOT analysis, best-practice benchmarking, and the development of a stakeholder engagement strategy. In *Phase 2: Stakeholder Engagement and Draft Framework*, the team conducted community meetings and workshops to gather input and shape a working draft. Finally, in *Phase 3: Recommendations and Roadmap*, the strategy was refined, incorporating community feedback and translating ideas into concrete steps organized within the original *IGNITE the Region* strategic pillars. This process culminated in a presentation and handoff to regional stakeholders.

This report presents the outcomes of the 2025 update to the *IGNITE the Region* strategy. It reflects several months of research, conversation, and coordination across the seven-county region. In doing so, it builds on the original strategy while expanding its scope, acknowledging that economic transformation depends not only on infrastructure and industry but also on quality of place, cultural life, and environmental resilience. Notably, this process resulted in the addition of a sixth pillar to the original *IGNITE the Region* plan—arts and culture—elevating the creative sector as a key driver of regional identity, economic growth, and quality of life.

The pages that follow do not prescribe a single path forward. Instead, they offer a set of priorities, observations, and ideas shaped by those who live and work in Northwest Indiana. This information is meant to support ongoing decision-making, providing context, raising questions, and identifying areas where more coordination, investment, or visibility may be needed. This is not a finished product, but a working reference for what comes next.



## About Northwest Indiana Forum

The Northwest Indiana Forum is the regional economic development organization dedicated to business development, capital investment and strategic economic growth in harmony with the environment. With more than 160 investor organizations, the Forum is the voice of NWI business, markets NWI as the place to do business, and stakes out and drives bold initiatives. Funded by investor contributions and grants, an investment in the Northwest Indiana Forum translates to a direct investment in the 7-county region to support growth and economic innovation.

## About Public Sphere Projects

Public Sphere Projects (PSP) is a national planning and placemaking consultancy. We advise place managers on the visioning, strategy, and stewardship of shared urban places through an uncompromising commitment to the values of justice and joy. Our work varies in location and scale: from long-term strategic planning to tactical interventions. But it is always in partnership with place managers, city agencies, community leaders, and property owners who steward the public realm—and always in service to community.



*Photo Location: View of Lake Michigan from Indiana Dunes National Park  
Photo Credit: South Shore Convention and Visitors Authority*

# Key findings from initial research

## Arts ecosystem literature review

Public Sphere Projects initiated the *IGNITE the Region Arts and Culture Strategy* by conducting a literature review and a scan of existing conditions in Northwest Indiana's arts and culture ecosystem to develop a preliminary understanding of the region's assets, opportunities, gaps, and key stakeholders. This foundational analysis was intended to ground subsequent planning efforts in the realities of the region, ensuring they remain practical and responsive—especially when advancing arts and culture as a tool for economic development.

PSP's review of the creative economy examined historic investments by state and philanthropic entities, as well as existing county and regional plans. We analyzed demographic, workforce, and industry data to identify trends and areas of growth within the region's creative sector. Throughout steering committee meetings and community events, we framed these conditions within broader state and national contexts. While not exhaustive, our analysis of grant-making data revealed clear resource gaps and emerging opportunities—insights that can guide not only the *IGNITE* plan but also future strategic initiatives led by the Northwest Indiana Forum.



Participants in a community open house in Rensselaer document their aspirations and ideas for the arts and culture strategy.

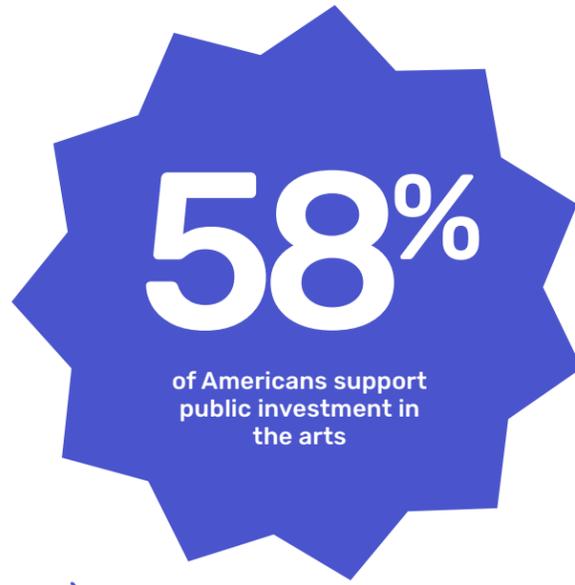
## Why arts and culture?

Across the U.S., people overwhelmingly support the arts, and are drawn to communities with vibrant arts, culture, and creative economies. In fact, 82% of Americans believe arts and culture play an important role in supporting local businesses and the broader economy. A majority—58%—also support public investment in the arts at the municipal and state levels, recognizing that the sector needs systemic support to thrive.

*Source: Americans for the Arts, "Americans Speak Out About the Arts," 2015.*

Federal funding helps catalyze additional investment: according to the National Endowment for the Arts, every \$1 in federal arts funding leverages \$9 from other public and private sources. Arts and culture also play a critical role in tourism. Each year, more than two-thirds of travelers—over 116 million people—participate in cultural, arts, heritage, or historic activities during their trips.

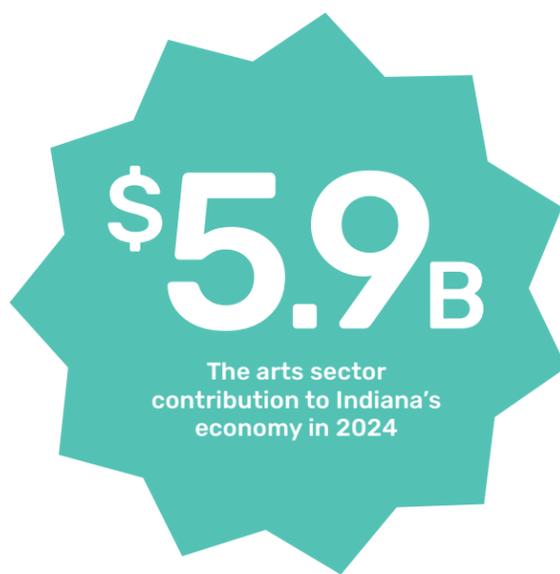
*Source: National Endowment for the Arts, "Quick Facts," 2020*



## Arts and culture in Northwest Indiana

According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, the arts sector contributed \$5.9 billion to Indiana's economy in 2024. In Northwest Indiana alone, arts, entertainment, and recreation contributed more than \$927.6M to the region's gross domestic product.<sup>2</sup>

**Lake: \$758,410,000**  
**Porter: \$38,475,000**  
**La Porte: \$120,182,000**  
**Starke: \$2,051,000**  
**Pulaski: \$1,674,000**  
**Jasper: \$6,828,000**  
**Newton: Unknown\***



<sup>2</sup> U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, "SAGDP2 Gross domestic product (GDP) by state 1" 2024 (accessed Thursday, August 7, 2025). NAICS code, "Arts, entertainment, recreation," includes, "Performing arts, spectator sports, museums and related activities, amusement, gambling, and recreation activities."

Northwest Indiana boasts several marquee cultural assets—the Lubeznik Center For The Arts, Indiana Ballet, and South Shore Arts—as well as a variety of community-based organizations that weave arts and culture programming into their delivery of social and human services. Certainly, there are numerous individual artists, arts advocates, and cultural organizers who energize the region's artistic offerings and are striving to be involved in broader regional planning processes.

Additionally, the region benefits from support from the Indiana Arts Commission (IAC). In 2024 alone, this entity allocated more than \$345,000 in grants for arts programs, media, and events in the region's seven counties, touching more than 83,000 participants and audience members. The IAC has reported that demand for their services increased by at least 20% year after year.

*Source: Indiana Arts Commission*



\* U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, "Indiana Arts, entertainment, and recreation, "Arts, entertainment, recreation," by county 2023. NAICS codes "Performing arts, spectator sports, museums and related activities, amusement, gambling, and recreation activities." Indiana counties, Lake, Porter, LaPorte, Starke, Pulaski, Jasper, Newton search query returned "[D] Not shown to avoid disclosure of confidential information; estimates are included in higher-level totals."

## Key takeaways

### 1. Northwest Indiana's arts and culture workforce was hit hard by COVID-19, but is rebounding.

As with many employment sectors, arts and culture labor was negatively impacted by the pandemic. However, as this sector has stabilized in the past two years, there has never been a better time to test innovative approaches to weaving the culture workforce into larger economic development strategies.

Source: Indiana Department of Workforce Development, 2 Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages EGR 1, 2018-2024

### 2. Indiana's creative economy contributes \$7.6 billion annually to the state's economy.

In 2022, this sector supported 82,813 jobs—2.5% of Indiana's workforce—and generated \$5.2 billion in total employee compensation.

Source: Americans for the Arts Action Fund, "Why the Arts Matter in Indiana," 2024

### 3. The creative sector experiences asymmetry within the 7 counties that comprise Northwest Indiana.

Not every county is the same. The more agricultural counties of Jasper, Pulaski, and Newton, had fewer creatives and creative businesses than their counterparts further north. But that's not necessarily a weakness. A strategic approach to strengthening employment might capitalize on the tourism, proximity to Chicago, and existing arts assets in Lake, LaPorte, and Porter, while finding opportunities to connect creative labor to placemaking and community engagement initiatives in more southern counties.

Source: Creative Industries, Americans for the Arts 2017. Does not include non-profits or individual artists.

### 4. Public funding has played a vital role in sustaining Indiana's arts and culture sector.

In 2024, the state appropriated over \$5.1 million for the arts, while a 2023 NEA grant of \$1 million supported 424 organizations and 115 individual artists across the state.

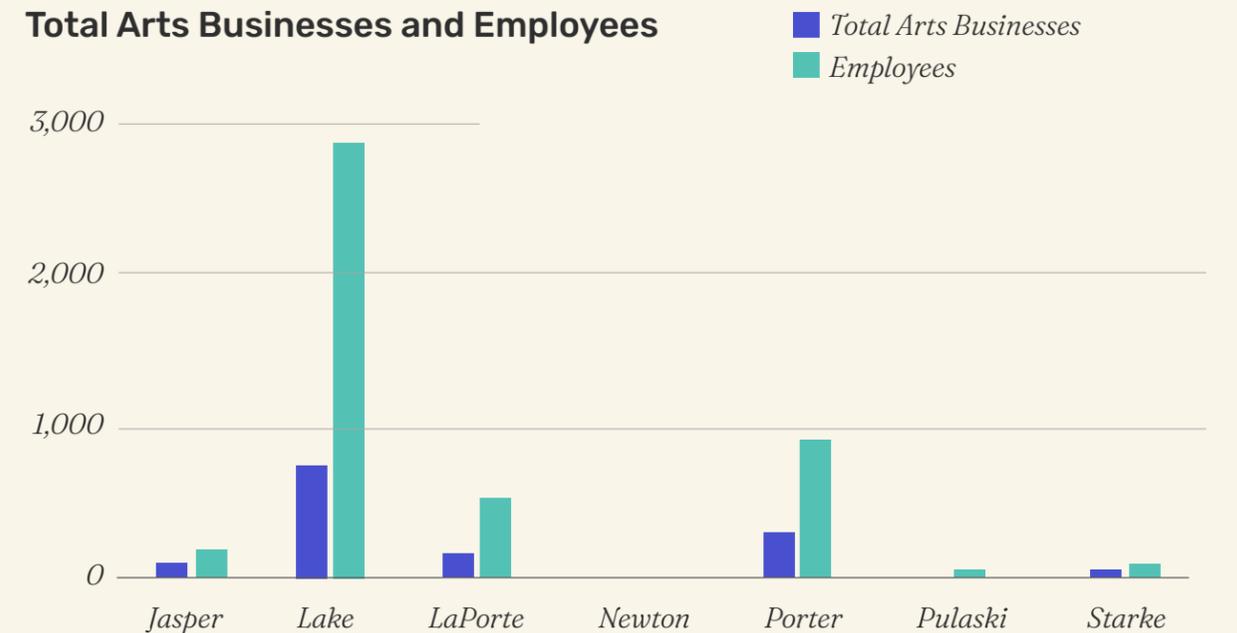
Source: National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, 2024.

#### Creative jobs over time



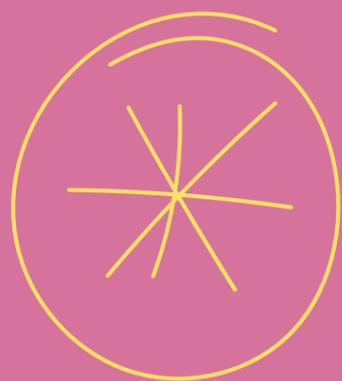
Source: Indiana Department of Workforce Development, 2 Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages EGR 1, 2018-2024

#### Total Arts Businesses and Employees



Source: Creative Industries, Americans for the Arts 2017. Does not include non-profits or individual artists.

# The arts are a vehicle for human services



## SPOTLIGHT

Between 2022 and 2024, the Indiana Arts Commission's Lifelong Arts Indiana initiative set out to weave creativity into the lives of older adults across the state. Partnering with the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration, the program trained artists and service providers in a participatory arts model designed to build participant skills over time, encourage self-direction, and make art personally meaningful. Then, with more than \$500,000 in funding, those trained facilitators brought their projects to life in 44 counties, many in Northwest Indiana, and reached more than 2,000 older adults through workshops in libraries, community centers, and care facilities.

The results tell a story of community connection and personal growth. Both facilitators and older adult participants reported improved mental health and well-being. More than 90% said they would return for future workshops, and many shared how the experience had improved their physical symptoms of aging, such as those associated with arthritis and balance issues.

While there are limitations in the program's evaluation, it clearly offered meaningful engagement and demonstrated the utility of art in advancing outcomes related to health and community engagement. And, it underscores the kind of investment needed for the arts to demonstrate impact at scale.

# Survey

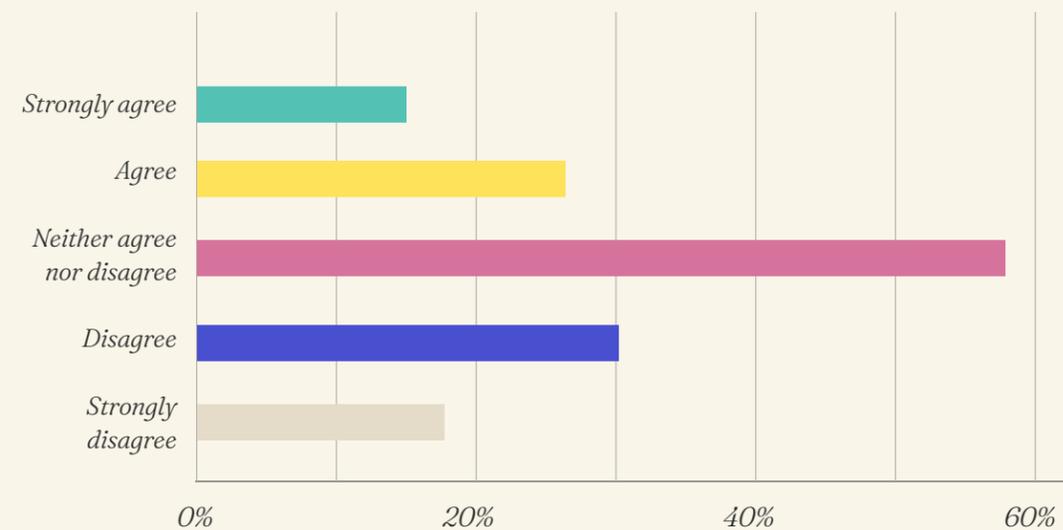
To better understand how residents view arts and culture in Northwest Indiana, the Forum launched an online survey in mid-January 2025. Over the following two months, the survey circulated widely—shared through member networks, steering committee contacts, and partner organizations, and promoted across social media, local newspapers, radio, and the Forum’s website. The twelve questions focused on big-picture perceptions of the region’s creative landscape.

By the time the survey closed at the end of March, 528 people had responded. Overall, the respondent pool reflected the region’s demographic makeup, offering a representative snapshot of public sentiment. One exception stood out: Pulaski County, though the least populated county in the region, contributed a disproportionately high number of responses.



COUNTY	PERCENT
Lake	44.3%
Porter	28.5%
LaPorte	13.6%
Pulaski	3.9%
Jasper	3.4%
Unknown	2%
Cook (IL)	1.8%
Starke	1.2%
Newton	0.2%
Other	1.2%

Share of respondents who said arts and culture influenced their decisions to live in Northwest Indiana.



Survey results reveal a complex picture of how residents across the region perceive and participate in arts and culture. While most respondents were neutral about arts and culture influencing their decision to live in Indiana, their behaviors tell a different story: more than 80% reported engaging with arts-based programs, patronizing creative businesses, or supporting local artists on a weekly or monthly basis. Public-facing amenities like music (66%), performing arts (54%), theater (50%), and visual arts (50%) were among the most commonly accessed cultural resources, with community and cultural centers (48%) also playing a significant role.

*Although many respondents were ambivalent about arts and culture influencing their decision to live in Indiana, **over 80%** reported regularly engaging with arts programs, creative businesses, or individual artists on a weekly or monthly basis.*

The survey also highlighted Indiana's relationship with broader cultural ecosystems. 91% of respondents said they travel to Chicago for arts and culture, with other frequent destinations including Milwaukee, Nashville, New York, Los Angeles, and even international cities. However, the data is not without limitations. Responses skewed older (34% were 64 and up), more female (67%), and underrepresented Black and Latino communities, who make up a combined 34% of the regional population but only 11% of respondents. These gaps suggest a need for continued outreach as part of future engagement efforts.



## People frequently engage with arts and culture.

Leading arts and culture amenities, according to the share of respondents who participate in them. *(select all that apply)*

- Music: **66%**
- Performing Arts: **54%**
- Theater: **50%**
- Visual Arts: **50%**
- Community and Cultural Centers: **48%**
- Cultural Heritage: **37%**
- Zoo/Botanical Gardens: **36%**



reFLEXion artist, Felix Maldonado, in conversation with student artists at the Gardner Center for the Arts through Miller Beach Arts & Creative District. Photo Credit: Cameraslinger

# Participatory mapping

Cultural mapping is the process of collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing information to describe the cultural resources, networks, relationships, and patterns of use within a community. To create the asset map for arts and culture in Northwest Indiana, we drew from in-person meetings, landscape assessment research, and cultural assets identified by survey respondents. This ground-up process is known as *participatory mapping*<sup>3</sup>—defined as “the process of creating a tangible display of the people, places, and experiences that make up a community, through community members themselves identifying them on a map.”

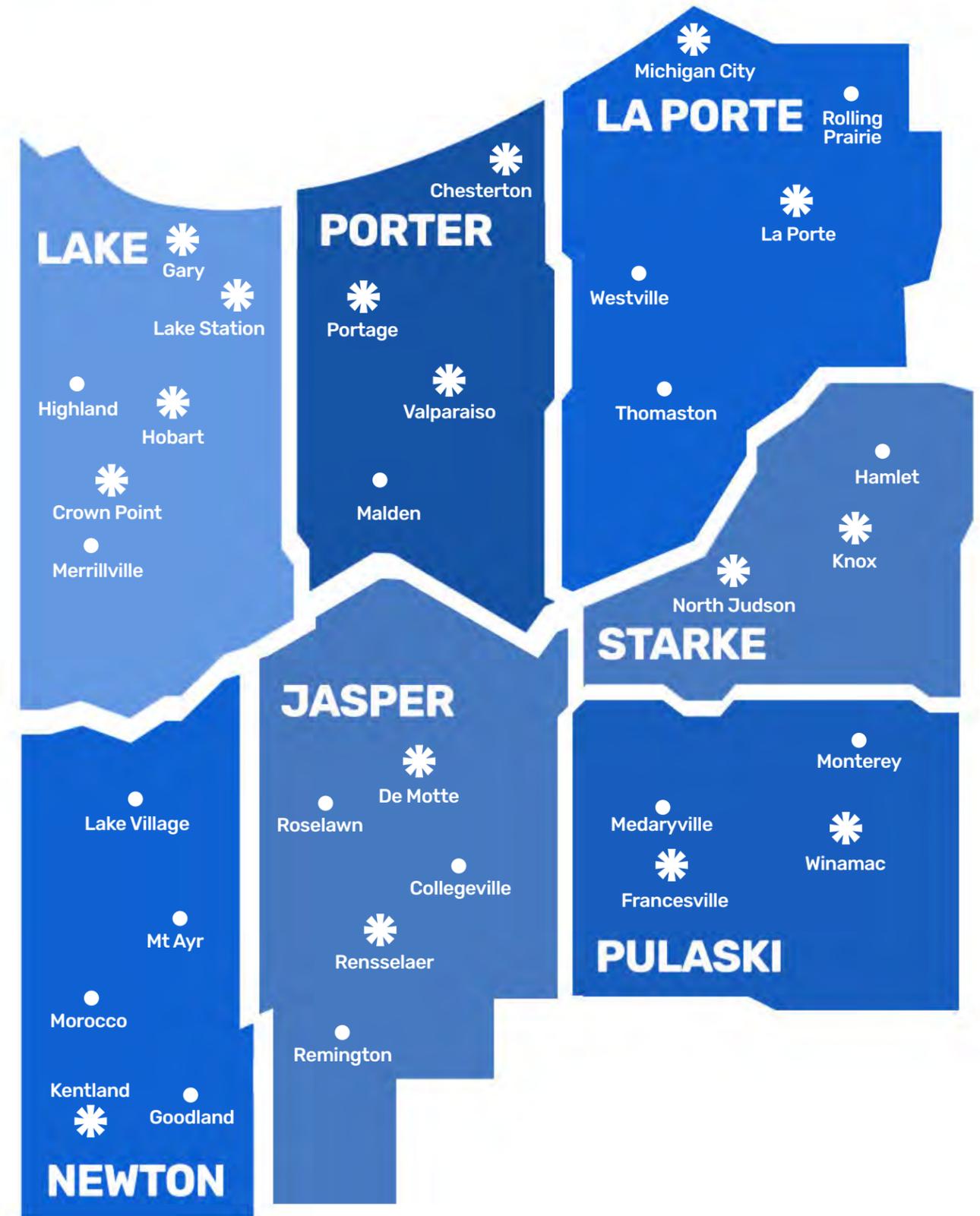
The resulting map offers a preliminary view of the region’s cultural assets. While not comprehensive, it is layered and adaptable, designed to evolve alongside its users and reflect a broad, flexible definition of arts and culture.

## Participatory map of cultural assets in Northwest Indiana

Access the participatory map online at [www.nwforum.org/economic-initiative](http://www.nwforum.org/economic-initiative) →

<sup>3</sup> Source: Advancement Project, *Participatory Asset Mapping Toolkit* <https://communityscience.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/AssetMappingToolkit.pdf>

# CHICAGO



## Use cases

The following use cases illustrate how a participatory cultural map might be applied in Northwest Indiana. By showing where and how cultural assets exist across the region, the map supports more informed planning, investment, and advocacy.

1. To understand **geographical disparity**: [This map tool](#) can answer questions such as, “Where are there vacuums of resources? Where can resources/technical assistance/creative labor support one geography from another?”

Bottom line: Use this tool to compare counties within the region and Northwest Indiana to other regions in the state.

**Users:** Community foundations, artist coalitions, municipalities

2. To understand **asset type**: This tool can answer questions such as, “What kinds of cultural assets exist within each county? Does one county have a variety of a particular kind of asset?”

Bottom line: Use this tool to plan cultural programming, public space activations, and community events.

**Users:** Cultural programmers and planners, artists, community organizations

3. To understand **organization size and capacity**: This tool can answer questions such as, “Which cultural organizations are lacking in funds/staff/technical capacity? Where can philanthropy have maximal impact for sector-wide sustainability?”

Bottom line: Use this tool to identify impact areas, allocate funds, and develop programs to provide technical assistance and professional development.

**Users:** Philanthropy, corporate partners, higher education

4. To understand **policy implications or needs**: How has state funding for arts and culture organizations changed over the past 2-3 years? What demographics of people are served by community arts organizations? With which pillars of IGNITE have funded projects aligned?

Bottom line: Use this tool to do research on the region, case-make for policy changes and funding, and evaluate the impact of economic development initiatives.

**Users:** Lawmakers, grantseekers, arts advocates, researchers, funders

## Managing the cultural asset inventory

The cultural asset inventory is powered by live data housed in Airtable, allowing it to be continuously updated and expanded as new cultural assets are identified. This flexible platform supports real-time edits and additions, making the map a living tool that can evolve with ongoing community engagement and future research.

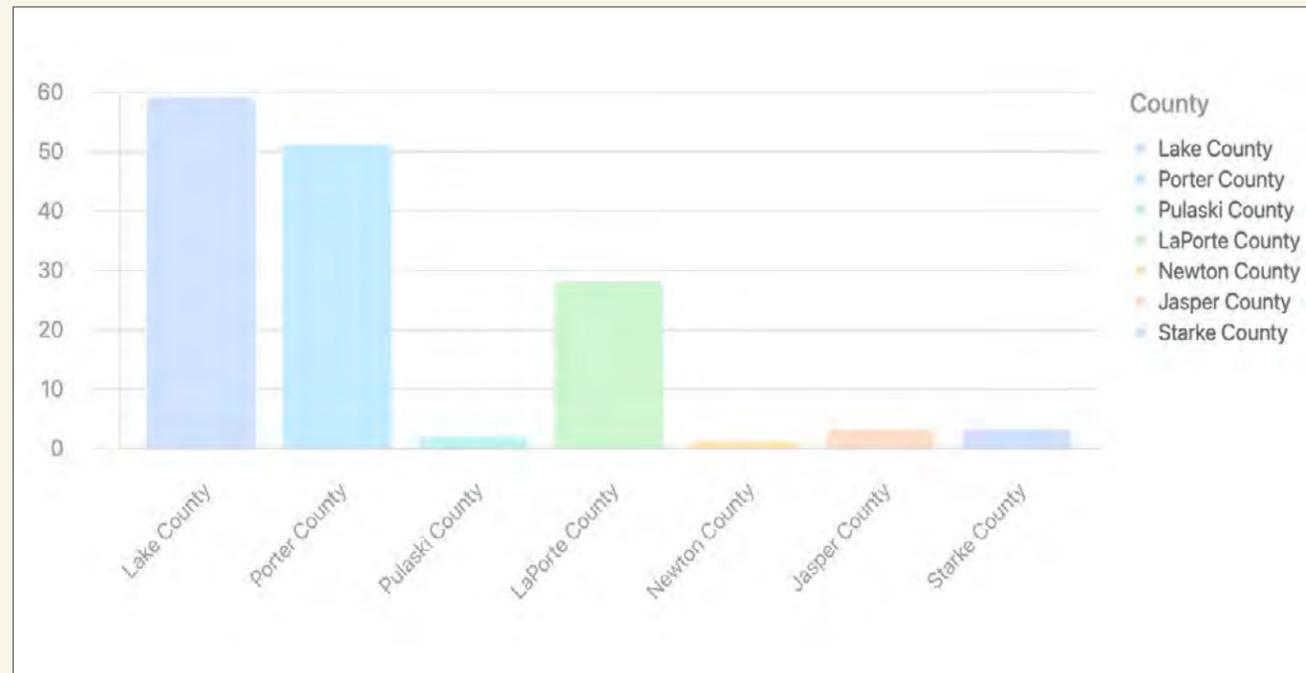
**We want to hear from you. Identify your communities assets by emailing [info@nwiforum.org](mailto:info@nwiforum.org).**

See **Appendix A** for detailed instructions on how to manage the cultural asset inventory.

## Managing the Cultural Asset Inventory

Cultural Asset	Address	County	Where	Category	Tags
O'Gara & Wilson Ltd.	233 Calumet Rd, Chestert...	Porter County	Retail		
Market on Main Artisan Fair	Main St, Westville, IN 46...	LaPorte County	Retail	Regional Festival	
Miller Community Theater	4030 W 5th Ave, Gary, I...	Lake County	Venue		
Beale Pottery	520 E 8th St, Michigan C...	LaPorte County	Retail		
South Bend Museum of Art	120 S Dr. Martin Luther K...	St. Joseph County	Venue	Education	
Indiana Ballet Theatre	8888 Louisiana St, Merri...	Lake County	Venue	Education	
Arts in the Park in LaPorte	250 Pine Lake Ave, LaPo...	LaPorte County	Venue	Parks and Recreation	Arts Practitioner
South Shore Orchestra	Valparaiso, IN 46383	Porter County	Arts Practitioner		
Indiana Dunes National Park	1215 N State Rd 49, Port...	Porter County	Public Space	Parks and Recreation	
PEP House Walk at Christmas in La P...	La Porte, IN 46350	LaPorte County	Regional Heritage (steel mill, farms, history museum)	Regional Festival	
Shrine of Christ's Passion	10630 Wicker Ave, St Jo...	Lake County	Venue (museum, gallery, performance space)	Public Space	
European Market	220 Broadway, Chestert...	Porter County	Retail	Parks and Recreation	Regional Heritage (steel mill, farms, history museum)
Memorial Opera House	104 Indiana Ave, Valparai...	Porter County	Venue (museum, gallery, performance space)		
LaPorte County Historical Museum	2405 Indiana Ave, La Por...	LaPorte County	Regional Heritage (steel mill, farms, history museum)		

### Total Asset Spread by Northwest Indiana County



### 2024 APS Support by Asset Type



# Funding landscape

Between 2019 and 2025, arts and culture funding in Northwest Indiana revealed striking contrasts across counties. In total, grantmakers in Jasper, Lake, LaPorte, Newton, Porter, and Starke Counties awarded just over \$11 million—an amount representing only about 0.3% of their combined philanthropic assets.<sup>4</sup> LaPorte County stood out dramatically, with nearly 39% of its total philanthropic giving directed to arts and culture. This

outsized commitment may be attributed to the presence of prominent institutions such as the Lubeznik Center for the Arts, Friendship Botanic Gardens, the La Porte County Historical Society, and the Barker Civic Center.

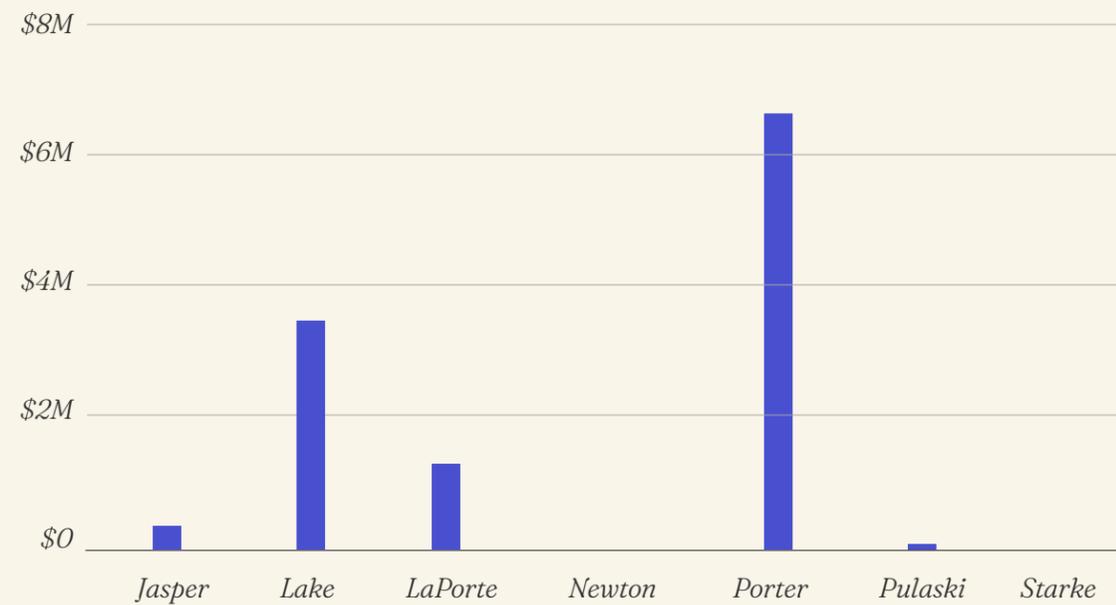
While Lake County’s funders held the greatest total assets, it was Porter County that led in actual dollars distributed, receiving over \$6.5 million for arts and culture initiatives.

Notably, Newton and Starke Counties showed no recorded philanthropic giving in this category during the period. Yet even in Starke County, six recipients managed to secure a total of \$125,462—likely thanks to support from grantmakers based outside the county.

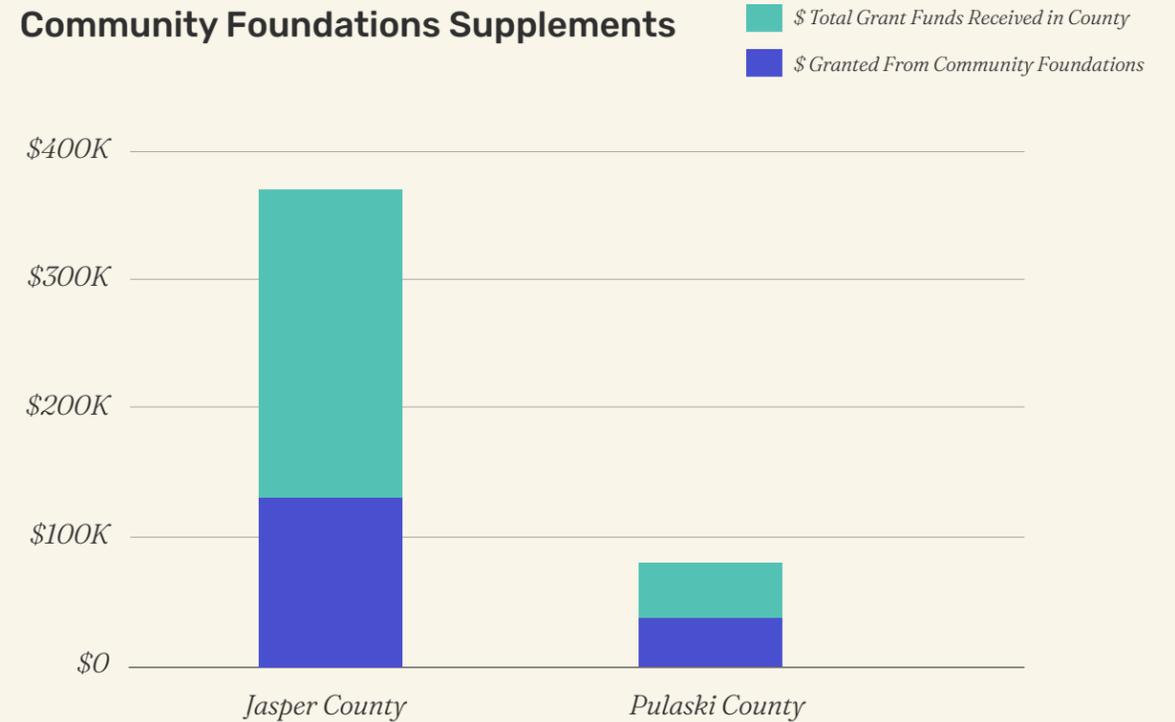
Likewise, In Jasper and Newton single community foundations were key drivers in supplementing the grant funds received county-wide.

On the receiving end, 161 grantees across the region were awarded grants, totaling \$22.7 million. This broader number suggests that while local giving varied dramatically, regional networks and external funders played an essential role in sustaining arts and culture across Northwest Indiana.

**Total Arts and Culture Funding by County, 2019-2025**



**Community Foundations Supplements**

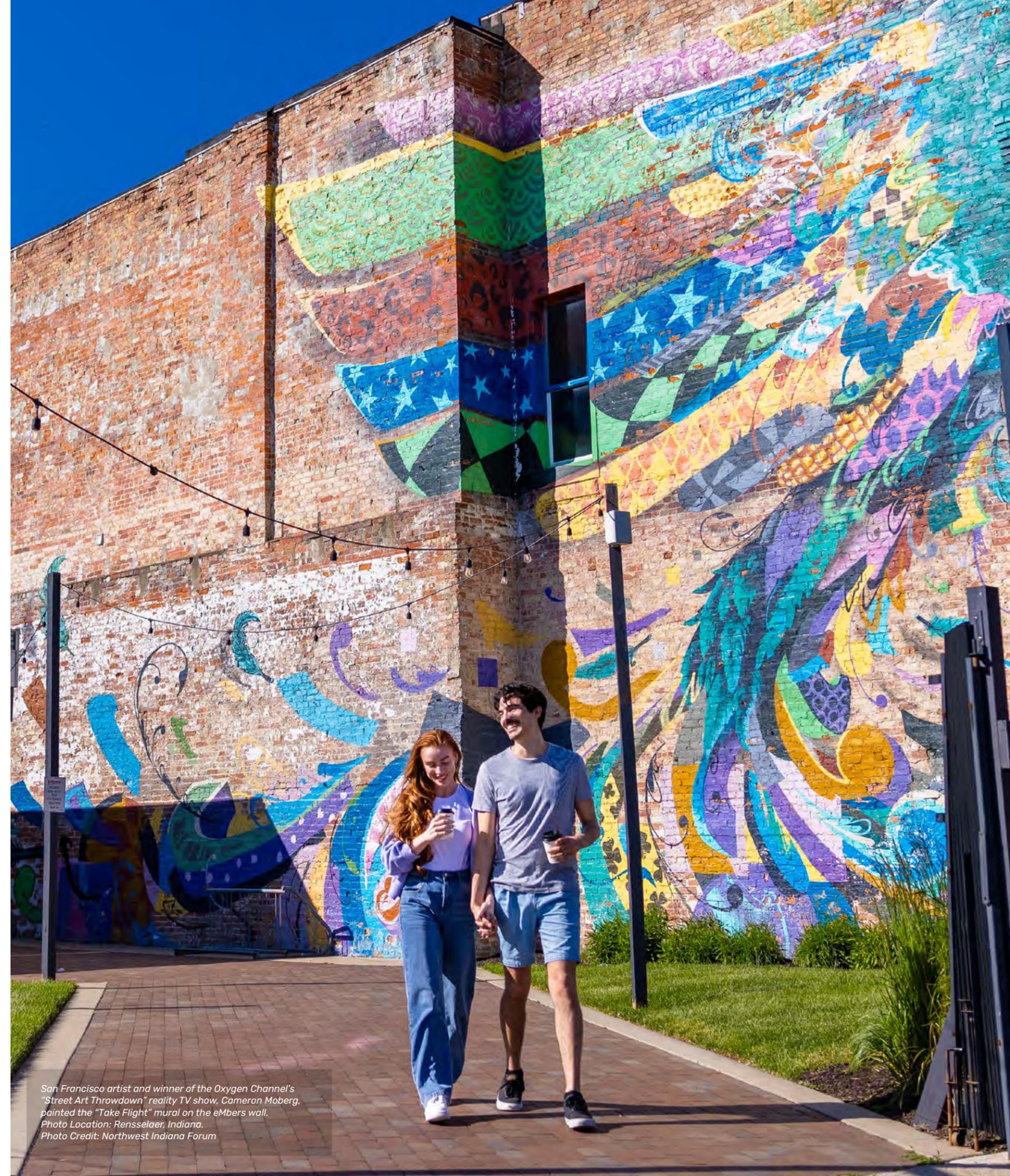


<sup>4</sup> All data is copyright of Candid.org and Foundation Center Online. Refinements: arts & culture funding, 2019 - 2025. Local Grantmaker Count = Number of grantmaking entities operating within the county, Local Grantmaker Assets = Total assets of ALL local grantmakers in the county, Local Grantmaker Amt. Funded = Total amount of funding for “arts & culture” classified projects, Local Grant Recipient # = Number of recipients of arts & culture grants in the county, Local Grant # Grants = Number of arts & culture grants received across the county, Local Grants \$ Total Grants = Total known arts & culture grant dollars received in the county (can be from funders outside of subject county).

# Background and benchmarking

## S.W.O.T. analysis

Building on insights from initial community engagement, preliminary research, and the consulting team's expertise, we developed a S.W.O.T. analysis to assess the region's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to the READI 2.0 focus on arts and culture. This analysis served as a foundational tool, guiding the formulation of strategic recommendations. It reflected the evolving nature of the project, with additional refinements made during Phases 2 and 3 as more feedback and data were collected.



*San Francisco artist and winner of the Oxygen Channel's "Street Art Throwdown" reality TV show, Cameron Moberg, painted the "Take Flight" mural on the eMbers wall. Photo Location: Rensselaer, Indiana. Photo Credit: Northwest Indiana Forum*

## Strengths

- Sustained presence of industrial manufacturing, a trade loosely affiliated with the arts and culture sector, but which provides rich regional cultural heritage.
- Lush natural landscape, including the Indiana Dunes, Lake Michigan, and agricultural land, which drives tourism and commerce while creating untapped potential for arts and culture.
- Strong college and university presence, including several degree programs that graduate artists and makers.
- A number of beloved anchor institutions, including but not limited to South Shore Arts, Lubeznik Center for the Arts, the Chesterton Art Center, Indiana Ballet Theater, Northwest Indiana Symphony, Brauer Museum of Art, located on the campus of Valparaiso University, and others.
- A strong willingness among arts practitioners, cultural service organizations, and economic development agencies to weave arts and culture into the region's strategies to promote placemaking, workforce development, infrastructure investment, entrepreneurship, and business development.
- Proximity to Chicago, which contributes to the region's cultural workforce and entrepreneurial spirit. (See weaknesses)

## Weaknesses

- Lack of a large, centralized city to concentrate the region's arts and culture assets and activities.
- Absence of arts and culture in the original *IGNITE* strategy, contributing to an overall sense that the region has missed an opportunity to advance shared priorities.
- Underrepresentation of the arts ecosystem in regional marketing efforts and in quality-of-place investments.
- Lack of connectivity between regional assets, including natural, cultural, and commercial/industrial amenities.
- Absence of a large venue (10,000+ seats) anywhere in the region to host concerts and other cultural events.
- Absence of any space to host community events and festivals in rural areas.
- Unclear sense of the cultural assets that already exist within the region.
- Misconceptions about the region, shaped by a variety of factors, such as the dominant presence of heavy industry along Interstate 90/94.
- Inability to attract a community of local artists and cultural talent as residents, with many choosing to commute from Chicago.
- Lack of an MFA program at area colleges and universities.
- Lack of networking opportunities and coordination between working artists and creatives in the region.
- Ineffective marketing, which limits the visibility of the arts in the region, struggling to gain national or even regional recognition due to the proximity of Chicago. (See strengths)

## Opportunities

- Dedicated statewide funding for arts and culture via READI 2.0, with support from Lilly Endowment Inc.
- A \$20 million NWI Thrive Grant, funded by Lilly Endowment Inc., which will focus on fostering interest and understanding of the Region's wildlife and habitats through education and placemaking initiatives.
- Large supply of vacant or underutilized industrial building stock that is ripe for reimagining (e.g. Substation No. 9 in downtown Hammond)
- Potential redevelopment of the soon-to-be-shuttered Indiana State Prison facility in Michigan City, presenting an opportunity to serve artists and creatives.
- Legacy of other creative industries such as industrial arts, furniture making, or boatbuilding, which extend beyond the self-identified arts and culture sector.
- Affordability of the region, relative to Chicago, Indianapolis, and other proximate cities.
- Scenic U.S. Route 12, which stitches together existing cultural and industrial assets parallel to the Lake Michigan shoreline.
- Deep legacy and history of artists and makers who hail from the region, from Jackson 5 to Freddie Gibbs.
- Expanded grantmaking opportunities and parameters are already taking place and can be strengthened.
- Overlapping initiatives to expand the physical footprint of arts districts, reposition legacy sites to welcome creative industries, provide operating support and technical assistance, foster corporate philanthropy, and amplify the sector as an ally in economic development.

- Improvements to regional transit, significantly cutting down travel times to and from Chicago, among other destinations, with the potential to grow the region's cultural workforce.
- The establishment of the Indiana Dunes Indigenous Cultural Trail, honoring the ancestral homeland of the Miami, Potawatomi, and other Indigenous peoples.
- Eagerness and capacity of the arts and culture sector to be engaged as an ally in regional economic development.
- A number of strong corporate philanthropies including the Lilly Endowment, White Family Foundation, Cleveland Cliffs, Mammoth North Solar, and NIPSCO, with the potential for more funding as U.S. manufacturing expands.

## Threats

- Resource supply and demand imbalance, with demand for financial support by arts organizations far outpacing readily available funding.
- Recent pivot away from arts and culture investment by corporate philanthropy, creating the need to widen the definition of arts and culture to include creative economy/STEM.
- Government funding for arts and culture or service organizations that tangentially support the arts (e.g., after-school programs, VA, etc.) may be shifting, leaving a vacuum for other sources of funding to fill.
- Arts and culture is perceived as a secondary priority to more pressing social issues, such as addressing substance abuse and housing insecurity.
- Absentee ownership in larger corporations and vacationers who might not be as vested in the region's cultural scene.
- Shifting demographics and misalignment with regional arts and culture trends.

# Emerging insights

In the process of identifying the region’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats within the project’s scope, Public Sphere Projects uncovered a series of emerging insights. These served as preliminary hypotheses that offered an early framework for understanding the region’s dynamics. Alongside the S.W.O.T. analysis, these insights played a critical role in shaping the recommendations we developed in later stages, ensuring they were grounded in both research and stakeholder input.

## **Insight #1: Arts, culture, and creativity are already abundant.**

Northwest Indiana boasts a hard-working, wide-spread, and diverse creative ecosystem. It includes traditional cultural institutions, arts education, philanthropy, service organizations, and media. Yet this ecosystem is under-recognized in regional marketing efforts and in quality-of-place investments.

## **Insight #2: Nodes and networks are emerging.**

Like the region itself, the arts and culture sector is diffuse and decentralized. However, the region’s arts and culture sector is beginning to coalesce into specific, constrained districts: such as Chesterton or Michigan City downtowns. At the same time, regional networks of mutual assistance and affinity are likewise beginning to form. This infrastructure—both geographical and affinity-based—can continue to be incentivized.

## **Insight #3: The definition of arts, culture, and creativity can be expanded.**

Beyond the self-identified arts and culture sector, there is a clear opportunity in Northwest Indiana to embrace other creative industries such as industrial arts, furniture making, or boatbuilding. It will require a paradigm shift to recognize and nurture a broader field of creative practitioners. Early efforts—including expanding grant-making parameters—are already taking place and can be strengthened.

## **Insight #4: The sector is a willing partner in economic development.**

The region’s arts and culture leaders expressed an appetite and readiness for participation in promoting and advocating for Northwest Indiana. Potential financial motives notwithstanding, arts and culture is demonstrating its capacity to be a partner. Established and emerging leaders should be regularly convened and engaged.

## **Insight #5: The arts, culture, and creativity sector is undernourished.**

While the arts and culture sector in Northwest Indiana lends the region much of its character and attractiveness, it lacks recognition and capacity. There are overlapping opportunities to expand the physical footprint of arts districts, reposition legacy sites to welcome creative industries, provide operating support and technical assistance, foster corporate philanthropy, and amplify the sector as an ally in economic development.



## Benchmarking regions

While every region has its own unique characteristics, Northwest Indiana shares similarities with several national peers in areas such as population size, economic and social priorities, geographic proximity, and overall regional identity. These peer regions serve as valuable points of reference, offering examples and precedents that can inform Northwest Indiana's strategic planning.

This list is not exhaustive but provides a starting point for broader comparisons and deeper analysis in the later phases of our work. By studying these peers, we can draw insights that are relevant while tailoring strategies to fit the region's distinct needs and opportunities.



*Participants at a Michigan City community open house were invited to imagine how arts and culture show up in everyday life through an interactive activity hosted at the Lubeznik Center for the Arts.*

## Northwest Indiana



### Economic Impact

Indiana’s creative economy contributes approximately \$7.6 billion annually to the state’s overall economy.

### Cultural Participation

Undefined

### Funding and Investments

- **State Arts Agency Total Legislative Appropriations for Indiana 2023:** \$3,632,417
- **Per Capita Spending on State Arts Agencies:** \$0.71 (Total State Funds (Appropriation and Other State Funds))

Indiana received a state appropriation of \$3,632,417, \$1,205,000 in other State Funds and a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant of \$912,000 (2023)

## Northwest Arkansas



### Economic Impact

In the Northwest Arkansas Region, the sector generated \$232.7 million in economic activity during 2022—\$157.4 million in spending by arts and culture organizations and an additional \$75.2 million in event-related expenditures by their audiences. That economic activity supported 3,434 jobs, provided \$136.6 million in personal income to residents, and generated \$35.2 million in tax revenue to local, state, and federal governments.

### Cultural Participation

The region hosted over 3 million attendees at arts and cultural events in 2022.

### Funding and Investments

- **State Arts Agency Total Legislative Appropriations for Arkansas 2023:** \$1,372,507
- **Per Capita Spending on State Arts Agencies:** \$0.45 (Total State Funds (Appropriation and Other State Funds))

Arkansas received a state appropriation of \$1,372,507 and a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant of \$721,670 (2023).

## Northwest Ohio



### Economic Impact

Arts-related, creative and cultural businesses currently produce an economic impact of \$3.84 billion annually in Northwest Ohio, up from \$2.4 Billion in 2007.

Rural counties make up nearly thirty percent of the creative economy with more than \$12 billion in annual economic activity.

The Ohio Arts Council reports that creative industries contribute more than \$41.4 billion to Ohio’s economy annually.

### Cultural Participation

Undefined

### Funding and Investments

- **State Arts Agency Total Legislative Appropriations for Ohio 2023:** \$20,085,698
- **Per Capita Spending on State Arts Agencies:** \$1.74 (Total State Funds (Appropriation and Other State Funds))

Ohio received a state appropriation of \$20,085,698, \$320,000 other State Funds and a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant of \$1,174,300 (2023).

## Lehigh Valley, Pennsylvania



### Economic Impact

In 2022, the nonprofit arts and culture sector in the Lehigh Valley generated \$171.4 million in economic activity.

\$80.6 million spent directly by organizations and \$90.8 million in event-related spending by attendees.

Lehigh Valley’s arts and culture sector supported 2,590 local jobs, contributed \$104.0 million in personal income, and generated \$32.1 million in tax revenue across local, state, and federal governments.

### Cultural Participation

Over 27% of attendees came from outside Carbon, Lehigh, and Northampton Counties, spending an average of \$48.94 per person. 82.9% of nonlocal visitors reported that their primary reason for visiting the Lehigh Valley was to attend an arts or cultural event.

On average, Lehigh Valley event-goers spend \$31.75 per person beyond admission on things like dining, parking, transportation, and childcare, providing vital income for local businesses.

### Funding and Investments

- **State Arts Agency Total Legislative Appropriations for Pennsylvania 2023:** \$10,569,000
- **Per Capita Spending on State Arts Agencies:** \$0.81 (Total State Funds (Appropriation and Other State Funds))

### State Arts Agency Revenues

Pennsylvania received a state appropriation of \$10,569,000 and a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant of \$1,094,800 (2023).

# Relevant case studies

Incorporating case studies is a key element of designing effective solutions. By examining how organizations across the country integrate economic development with arts and culture, we can uncover valuable lessons and strategies. These examples also provide insight into how others have addressed challenges similar to those faced by Northwest Indiana.



Photo Credit: MetroABQ Newsletter

## Arts & Culture as Economic Drivers



Photo Credit: ArtsQuest Center at SteelStacks

### Transforming Industrial Heritage

**ArtsQuest Center at Steelstacks (Bethlehem, PA):** Repurposing former industrial spaces into arts and cultural hubs, attracting 1.9 million visitors annually, and generating \$136 million for the regional economy.

**Applications for Northwest Indiana:** Consider converting former or underutilized steel mills or refineries into vibrant art centers to boost tourism, property values, and entrepreneurship.

### Regional Arts Trails

**Inspired by the Kentucky Artisan Center at Berea:** Combining retail, exhibitions, and dining to support artisans and drive economic activity.

**Applications for Northwest Indiana:** Consider establishing artisan hubs connected through a regional trail network, promoting tourism and community pride.

## Arts & Culture as Community Anchors



Photo Credit: Anne Rippey/Alamy, Traveler

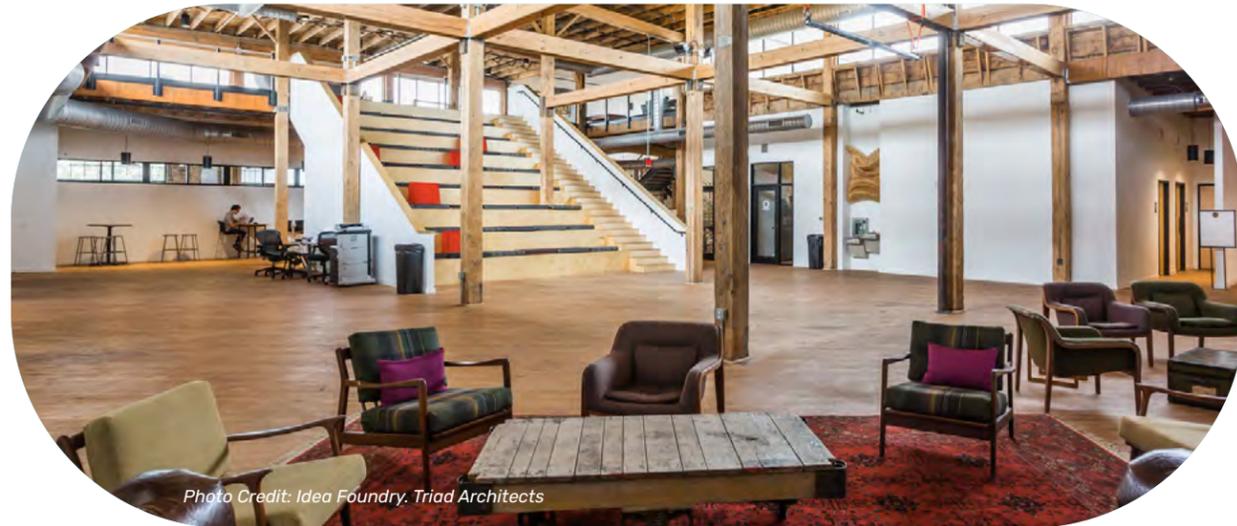
### Arts Institutions Driving Revitalization

**Adrienne Arsht Center (Miami, FL):** A master plan revitalized surrounding neighborhoods, creating jobs and enhancing community engagement.

**Children's Museum of Indianapolis (Indianapolis, IN):** Affordable housing projects and family education programs build stronger communities.

**Cleveland Museum of Art + The Cleveland Foundation (OH):** Anchoring economic development through collaboration and inclusive initiatives.

## Cross-Sector Partnerships for Arts, Education & Innovation



### Arts and High-Tech Integration

**Idea Foundry (Columbus, OH):** Collaborative maker-spaces that connect the digital and physical realms.

**Applications for Northwest Indiana:** Consider establishing regional hubs linking manufacturing heritage with modern design and technology.

### Arts in Education

**Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) (Baltimore, MD):** Fostering creative entrepreneurship and innovation through arts-based partnerships.

**Baltimore Creatives Acceleration Network (B/CAN):** A citywide initiative offering strategic support for creative entrepreneurs across disciplines.

**Applications for Northwest Indiana:** Consider developing a regional Creative Entrepreneurship Network to support local artists, designers, and technologists. This could include mentorship programs, funding opportunities, and collaborative maker spaces where individuals can prototype and design innovative products. Host community problem-solving events to address local challenges through creative solutions.

### VR/AR in Cultural Tourism

**LACMA & Snapchat Collaboration:** Using AR to enhance storytelling and engagement.

**Applications for Northwest Indiana:** Consider creating VR/AR-enhanced tours showcasing industrial and historical landmarks.

## Celebrating Cultural Identity in Small and Rural Communities



### Local Festivals and Celebrations

**Tobacco Heritage Days (Edgerton, WI):** Preserving local heritage through community events.

**Applications for Northwest Indiana:** Consider developing festivals highlighting regional cultural or industrial history.

### Sculpture Celebrations

**Lenoir, NC Annual Sculpture Celebration:** Providing artists with exposure and community engagement opportunities.

**Applications for Northwest Indiana:** Consider hosting similar events showcasing local talent and fostering pride.

## Cultural Tourism and Transportation



### Heritage Trails

**Blue Ridge Parkway (VA/NC):** Historical markers celebrate regional culture.

**Applications for Northwest Indiana:** Consider developing cultural heritage trails integrating historical sites with local artisan hubs.

### Public Art Along Transit Routes

**Camino de Sueños (NM):** Public art installations enhancing cultural identity.

**Applications for Northwest Indiana:** Consider installing public art & murals along scenic routes to draw attention to cultural heritage.

# Community engagement approach

## Overview

The *IGNITE the Region Arts and Culture Strategy* moved quickly—faster than most planning efforts of its kind. From the start, Public Sphere Projects and the Northwest Indiana Forum made a deliberate choice: don't wait to bring people in. Instead of holding off on engagement until a draft was in hand, we began by listening. That early round of conversations yielded meaningful insights and helped shape the direction of the work from the outset.

The engagement framework that emerged laid the groundwork for deeper outreach in later phases. It served as a commitment to staying flexible, responsive, and community-driven as the initiative moved forward. By keeping stakeholders at the center, the process gained both clarity and momentum, ensuring that the vision for Northwest Indiana's cultural and economic future would reflect the voices of the people building it.



A participant offers input on the future of arts and culture in the region during a community open house at Indiana University Northwest's Arts Building in Gary.

# Initial community engagement activities

The project launched with a three-day kickoff event held from November 17-19, 2024, spanning the northern half of the region. This event laid the initial groundwork for the planning initiative, serving as a foundational step in the broader *IGNITE the Region* update. As the first in a series of planned community engagement activities, it set the tone for collaboration and dialogue, providing the consulting team an opportunity to connect with local stakeholders, gather initial insights, and build momentum for the work ahead.

## Following is a summary of initial community engagement activities completed as part of Phase 1:

- Advisory Group Kickoff Meeting:** The project began with a focused Leadership Team Kickoff Meeting, bringing together influential community leaders from diverse sectors such as arts and culture, heavy industry, government, and tourism. This three-hour session was designed to establish key goals for the *IGNITE the Region Arts and Culture Strategy* and elevate initial observations about the role of arts and culture in the region's development. This meeting underscored the interconnectedness of cultural initiatives and economic growth, setting a collaborative tone for the work ahead.
- Arts & Culture Convening:** A casual gathering of artists and representatives from regional arts and culture organizations served as a crucial early engagement event. This convening was an opportunity to rally support from the arts community, a sector with a clear vested interest in the project's success. The relaxed atmosphere encouraged open dialogue, fostering a sense of shared purpose and laying the groundwork for deeper collaboration with this key stakeholder group.

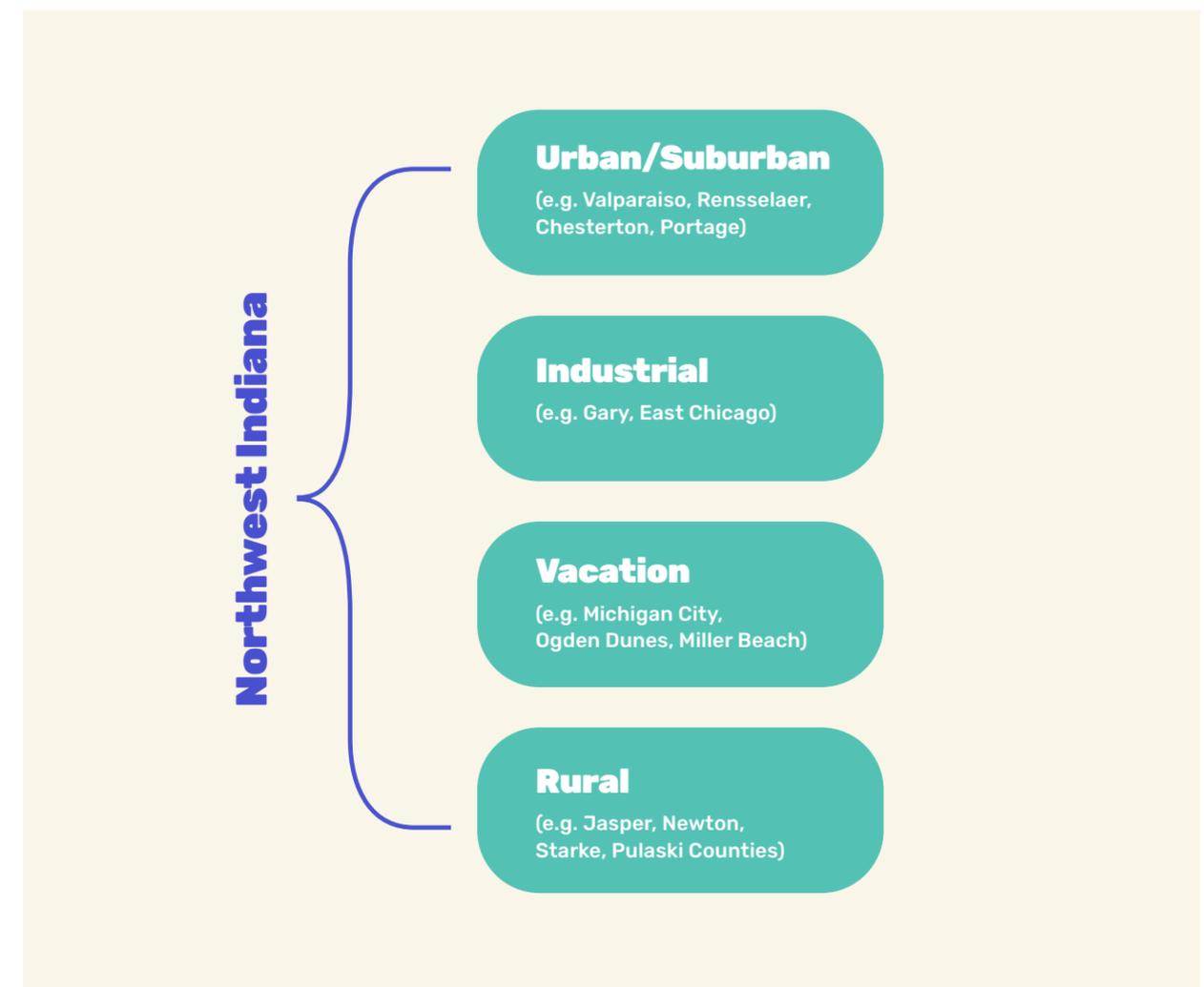
- University Roundtable:** A roundtable discussion brought together academic leaders from institutions such as Indiana University Northwest and Purdue University Northwest. This conversation explored the dynamic intersection of academics and arts and culture, highlighting opportunities for collaboration in education, research, and creative endeavors. It emphasized the pivotal role universities play in shaping cultural strategies and fostering innovation in the region.
- Rural Communities Roundtable:** To ensure inclusivity, we held a virtual Rural Communities Roundtable in December, recognizing the unique contributions of rural areas to the region's cultural landscape. This session provided a platform for voices from more remote locations to share how arts and culture manifest in their communities. The conversation addressed barriers to participation and reinforced the importance of integrating rural perspectives into the broader strategy.
- Board Meeting:** Engaging with the Northwest Indiana Forum's board of directors offered an opportunity to align the project's objectives with the broader vision for the region. During this meeting, board members shared their insights on what a successful strategy should look like, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive approach that drives both cultural vitality and economic progress.
- Site Visits:** Site visits to key locations across the northern half of the region brought the project to life, offering a firsthand view of cultural and economic assets. Stops included the Ports of Indiana, Journeyman Distillery campus in Valparaiso, the Lubeznik Center for the Arts, and the Center for Visual and Performing Arts. These visits deepened the consulting team's understanding of the region's potential and highlighted opportunities to connect cultural initiatives with local industries and tourism.

# Regional typologies

Northwest Indiana's seven-county region is defined by a variety of uses and identities that shape how people experience it, both as a whole and within its distinct areas. These "regional typologies" highlight the interplay between residential life, work, recreation, and tourism. They are geographically focused; for example, the northernmost areas are characterized by a mix of industrial activity and vacation destinations, while the southern parts transition into suburban neighborhoods and rural landscapes.

Understanding these typologies was essential for developing a community engagement strategy that connected with the key aspects of each area. This approach also allowed for tailored recommendations that address the unique needs and opportunities of the region's diverse communities.

*Below are the typologies identified through this process:*



## Key stakeholder groups

Key stakeholder groups in Northwest Indiana are defined by common demographics, ideologies, missions, or similar alignments, rather than by geographic boundaries. For instance, arts organizations or faith-based communities can be found across the region, transcending specific locations.

Identifying these groups early in the process proved crucial for fostering inclusive engagement and ensuring that diverse perspectives were considered. This approach allowed Public Sphere Projects and the Northwest Indiana Forum to connect with a wide range of people who contribute to the region's character while shaping strategic recommendations that are meaningful and relevant to their interests and needs.

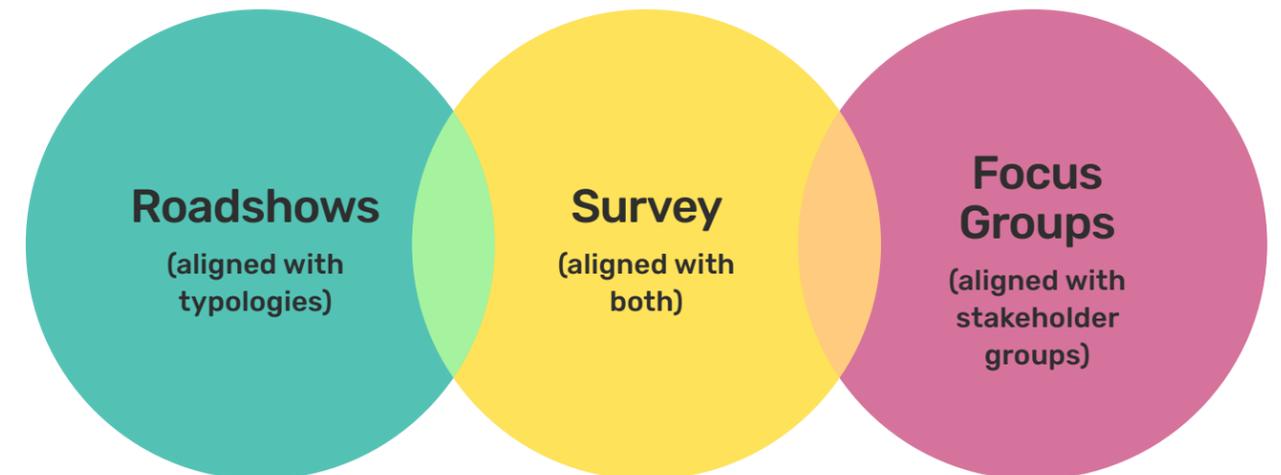
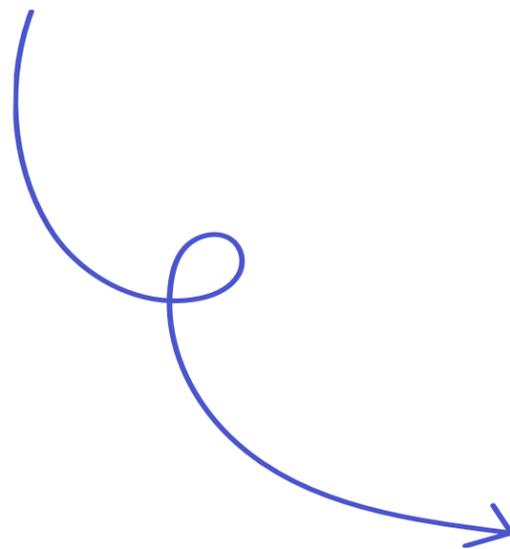
*Below are the key stakeholder groups we identified:*

- Artists and arts organizations
- Black and Hispanic residents
- Business leaders and industrial workers
- College and university students and administrators
- Faith-based organizations
- Farmers and agricultural workers
- Government agencies
- Native American residents
- Older adults
- Philanthropists
- Vacationers
- Youth

## Engagement methodologies

To ensure broad and efficient community engagement, we proposed three interconnected and overlapping modalities. First, in-person roadshows or community workshops were tailored to the regional typologies, offering opportunities to engage with communities directly in their unique contexts. Second, a combination of in-person and virtual focus groups targeted key stakeholder groups, creating spaces for dialogue that accommodated diverse schedules and locations. Finally, an online survey bridged both regional typologies and stakeholder groups, providing a flexible platform for widespread participation.

Together, the following engagement modalities maximized reach and ensured meaningful input from a wide cross-section of the region:



### Roadshows

Casual open house events held across distinct regional contexts included 90-minute community conversations with gamified Q&As. These sessions provided direct, localized engagement opportunities.

**Dates: January 15-18**

**Locations:**

- Industrial (Indiana University Northwest Arts Building, Gary)
- Vacation (Lubeznik Center for the Arts, Michigan City)
- Rural (The Highland Barn, Rensselaer)

### Survey

A short online survey, with a target response rate of 1,000+, gathered broad input from Northwest Indiana residents, workers, and visitors, providing an accessible platform for participation.

**Dates: January – April**

### Focus Groups

A mix of in-person and virtual focus groups targeted key stakeholder groups, such as corporate leaders, nonprofit administrators, and working artists, to facilitate flexible, focused dialogues on various themes.

**Dates: January and February**

**In-person focus groups:**

- Corporate philanthropy
- Infrastructure/industry
- Recreation/trails/cultural heritage

**Virtual focus groups:**

- Nonprofit arts administrators
- Placemaking/open space/cultural heritage
- Working artists/creative entrepreneurs

# Part 2: Impact Assessment



Arts and culture are not standalone activities. They are a powerful tool that supports and strengthens every other pillar of community and economic development.

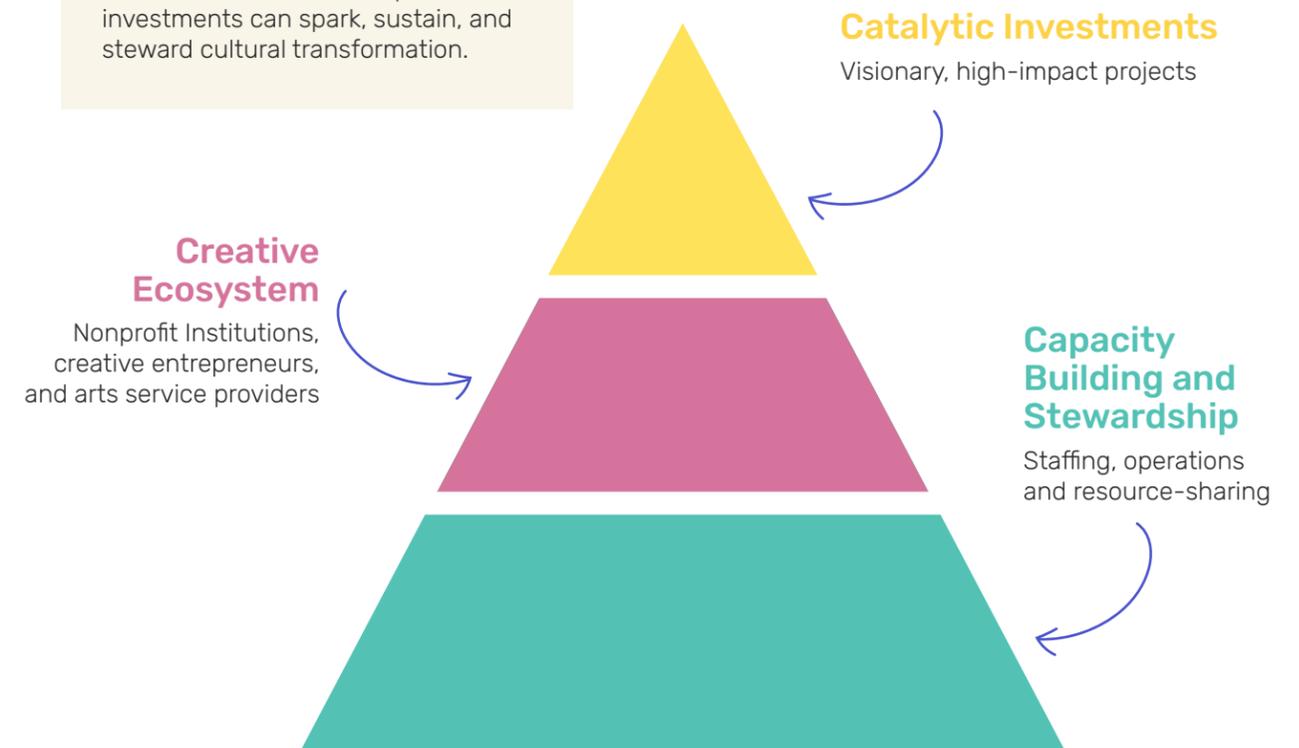
Grantmaking is a deliberate process, shaped by the need to identify projects that will have a meaningful impact on their communities. At its core, an impact assessment involves understanding how an investment in arts and culture will affect a region, both in the immediate term and in the years to come. It's not simply about funding projects—it's about determining which projects will create the most value, spark long-term engagement, and sustain cultural growth.

To guide the Northwest Indiana Forum and its partners in future arts and culture grantmaking efforts, we defined five specific areas of potential impact: *heritage*, *districts*, *storytelling*, *marquee venues*, and *industry*. These areas provided a framework for categorizing the kinds of projects that have the greatest potential to contribute to the region's cultural landscape. Then, we documented a list of projects that emerged through our research, discussions, surveys, and other community outreach efforts, which are captured in their entirety in the cultural asset map referenced in Part 1 of this report.

READI 2.0 is designed to support large-scale, high-profile projects—those that could drive significant visibility and momentum. While these catalytic investments are essential, they are not sufficient on their own. A successful cultural strategy goes beyond major projects and acknowledges that arts and culture thrive in an ecosystem of ongoing support. While big investments are often the most visible, their success depends on a healthy infrastructure of institutions, creatives, and service providers—those who build the foundation for sustained impact.

### 3 Tiers of Cultural Investment

A three-tier framework captures how investments can spark, sustain, and steward cultural transformation.



That is why we approached our assessment with a broader perspective. Rather than focusing solely on surfacing landmark projects, we considered the full range of activities that support and sustain cultural initiatives. After all, a well-rounded approach to arts and culture planning requires not just singular investments but also systems-level work that nurtures creativity and ensures its long-term vitality.

Therefore, to gauge **impact**, we proposed considering projects within three distinct tiers. The first, *catalytic investments*, encompasses ambitious, high-impact initiatives capable of shifting public perception and laying the groundwork for broader transformation. The second tier, the *creative ecosystem*, includes projects that focus on the essential structures—such as nonprofits, artists, and entrepreneurs—that sustain and propel the cultural sector. Finally, the *capacity building and stewardship* tier emphasizes investments in the operational side of arts and culture, such as staffing, resources, and infrastructure, which are crucial for managing and sustaining these initiatives over time.

To evaluate **feasibility**, an additional layer of understanding involves assigning each project an estimated cost value, providing a sense of its financial scope. For this, we recommend utilizing the following scale:

- **\$ (Tens of thousands of dollars):** Could be implemented with the support of a single funder. This level typically supports smaller projects or initiatives, where one key funder provides the necessary financial resources. Examples may include local events, pilot programs, or small-scale community initiatives.

- **\$\$ (Hundreds of thousands of dollars):** Could be implemented with the support of a few funders. This funding level allows for larger, more complex projects or regional programs that require multiple contributors. It may support programs that involve partnerships, such as multi-city events, community outreach efforts, or larger public-facing initiatives with a broader scope.
- **\$\$\$ (Millions of dollars):** Could be implemented with the support of many funders. At this scale, projects can cover wide-ranging initiatives or infrastructure projects that require substantial financial backing from multiple funders. These could include region-wide programs, city-wide cultural initiatives, or major public works projects that require collaborative, multi-funder support to achieve large-scale impact.

This section highlights a selection of representative regional arts and culture concepts, organized by their impact area. Each concept is further categorized by its tier and estimated cost. *It is important to note that this list is neither exhaustive nor prescriptive. It does not capture the full breadth of potential arts and culture concepts in the region, nor does it attempt to recommend concepts that should be funded.* Rather, it provides a snapshot of current initiatives that illustrate how various types of projects might shape the broader cultural landscape.

For a more comprehensive and up-to-date overview, the cultural asset map described in Part 1 will continue to be updated regularly, capturing new projects and ideas as they emerge.

See **Appendix B** for examples of comparable projects and programs from other cities, aligned with each of the five impact areas outlined in this section.



Photo Location: Downtown Crown Point, IN.  
Photo Credit: South Shore Convention and Visitors Authority

# Heritage

*From pierogi to popcorn, steel to sand, birding to biking, immigrant communities to Indigenous tribes, Northwest Indiana is a uniquely varied region.*

**Investment opportunity:** These cultural practices can be elevated and celebrated through aligned investments from the private and public sectors.

See **Appendix B** for examples of Heritage projects from elsewhere in the U.S.



East Chicago's Festival de la Monarca, organized by The Nature Conservancy, is a free, noncommercial celebration that honors the monarch butterfly as it migrates through East Chicago, Indiana. The festival highlights the butterfly's life cycle and its remarkable 2,000-mile journey to Mexico, while also celebrating its deep cultural significance through music, food, and dance. Festival de la Monarca is a vibrant celebration of conservation, culture, and community, showcasing the enduring bond between people and nature. Photo Credit: South Shore Convention and Visitors Authority

# Representative regional concepts

## Expand microgrants for community events and block parties



**Location:** Region-wide  
**Tier:** Capacity building and stewardship  
**Cost:** \$

Microgrants for community events and block parties are designed to support neighborhood gatherings that promote community engagement. These grants aim to foster connections among residents by funding activities like food trucks, live entertainment, and educational sessions with guest speakers. As one example, through the City of Valparaiso’s “Know Your Neighbor” grant program, neighborhood groups can apply for a \$250 grant annually, or up to \$500 if they are newly forming or lack an active association. Eligible expenses include rentals for food trucks or ice cream trucks, entertainment such as live music or bounce houses, and costs associated with hosting specific training sessions or qualified guest speakers. Additional grant funding could be used to expand this program regionally, enabling other cities and municipalities to replicate the “Know Your Neighbor” initiative. By increasing the program’s reach, funding could help enhance community engagement, strengthen local economies, and provide more neighborhoods with the tools they need to foster lasting connections and improve quality of life.

*Read more about the City of Valparaiso’s “Know Your Neighbor” grant program →*

## Enhance the Indiana Dunes Indigenous Cultural Trail



**Location:** Porter  
**Tier:** Creative ecosystem  
**Cost:** \$\$

The Indiana Dunes Indigenous Cultural Trail offers an immersive experience that blends the rich cultural heritage of the Miami and Potawatomi tribes with the diverse ecology of the region. Located at the Indiana Dunes Visitor Center, the trail features interactive elements such as low-impact boardwalks, trilingual signage in English, Potawatomi, and Miami, and a tree trail highlighting the cultural significance of native species. Designed in collaboration with tribal representatives, the trail offers visitors a deeper understanding of Indigenous perspectives on water, sustainability, seasons, and the interconnectedness of all living things. Additional grant funding could be used to further activate the trail by expanding interpretive programs, enhancing signage, and supporting community-led cultural events and educational activities, fostering an even stronger connection between the public and Indigenous traditions.

*Read more about the Indiana Dunes Indigenous Cultural Trail →*

## Expand the reach of Memories Alive at Weston Cemetery



**Location:** Rensselaer  
**Tier:** Creative ecosystem  
**Cost:** \$

Launched in 2018 by the Jasper County Historical Society, Memories Alive at Weston Cemetery transforms Rensselaer’s 1842 Weston Cemetery—home to over 7,500 graves—into a living history stage each fall. Costumed interpreters portray notable residents at their gravesites, offering an engaging “cemetery-theatre” experience modeled on similar tours in Elgin and Bloomington, Illinois. The event draws hundreds of visitors annually, boosting heritage tourism and local business foot traffic while raising funds for cemetery preservation and Historical Society programs. Additional grant funding could further activate the program by expanding its reach, enhancing interpretive materials, and supporting the development of educational initiatives that deepen community engagement with local history.

## Develop a “sand and steel” trail system



**Location:** Porter County  
**Tier:** Catalytic investment  
**Cost:** \$\$\$

Burns Harbor Trail celebrates the legacy of “sand and steel” by connecting the rich history of American steel manufacturing with the natural beauty of the region. A multi-use trail, being developed by town planners and the Ports of Indiana, will wind from the Indiana Dunes National Park through the working steel port, giving visitors a rare, firsthand view of one of America’s last fully integrated mills. The project will create opportunities to host historic walking tours, plein-air painting classes, and port “open house” events that introduce the public to the industrial processes behind the steel legacy. Additional funding could support the development of interpretive materials, signage, and educational programs, ensuring that the history and significance of the region’s industrial heritage are effectively communicated to visitors. Through this collaboration between public agencies, port operators, and industry leaders, the trail has the potential to become both an activated outdoor laboratory for skills training and a key tourism destination.

## Leverage Lake Michigan for heritage and arts tours



**Location:** Lake, Porter, and LaPorte counties  
**Tier:** Creative ecosystem  
**Cost:** \$

Harbor Country Adventures, in partnership with U.S. Steel, NIPSCO, and Cleveland Cliffs, has already tapped into Northwest Indiana's appeal as a recreational destination by offering sunset cruises on Lake Michigan. These 90-minute tours, blending nature and industry, guide passengers past the iconic dunes, power plants, and steel mills, providing a unique narrative that celebrates both the region's natural beauty and its industrial heritage. There is an opportunity to expand on this model by collaborating with arts, history, or heritage organizations to offer specialized offshore tours that delve deeper into the manufacturing infrastructure that defines the state's northwestern shoreline. Additional funding could support the development of new educational materials, enhance the on-board experience with expert guides or multimedia content, and improve access to these tours for a wider audience.

*Read more about Harbor Country Adventures →*

## Transform an industrial symbol with light



**Location:** Michigan City  
**Tier:** Creative ecosystem  
**Cost:** \$\$

The NIPSCO Power Plant Cooling Tower has become an iconic symbol in the region, recognized for its towering presence and association with the area's industrial legacy. Commissioning nighttime light projections on the tower would transform it into a dynamic visual landmark, adding a creative and cultural dimension to its industrial silhouette. Light projections could be used to highlight regional history, celebrate local events, or showcase art, turning the cooling tower into a public art installation that engages both residents and visitors. Funding for this project could go toward the development of the projection system, including the technology and equipment needed for high-quality visuals, as well as the costs of content creation and installation. This initiative would not only beautify the area but also position the cooling tower as a centerpiece for artistic expression, further cementing its significance as a symbol of the region's past and future.



*Family view bison grazing the Efrogmson Prairie at Kankakee Sands Preserve in Newton County, Indiana—part of a 10,000+ acre landscape of restored prairie, savanna, and wetlands.  
Photo Location: Newton County, Indiana  
Photo Credit: Northwest Indiana Forum*

# Districts

*In the central district of Michigan City, galleries, furniture shops, and studios are forming a walkable urban cluster. In downtown Chesterton, an art museum, public pavilion, and railway heritage site lie around the corner from a historic downtown. On Gary's Broadway St, the City is planning to tenant storefronts with creative entrepreneurs.*

**Investment opportunity:** These emerging cultural clusters can be further incentivized with public subsidy and targeted philanthropic investments.

See **Appendix B** for examples of District projects from elsewhere in the U.S.



# Representative regional concepts

## Strengthen downtown Chesterton's arts district



**Location:** Chesterton  
**Tier:** Catalytic investment  
**Cost:** \$\$\$

As the City of Chesterton seeks partners in revitalizing its downtown and considers the strategic use of TIF funds, public events that drive foot traffic and support local businesses could center around arts programming. With existing cultural assets such as Riley's Rail Museum, the Chesterton Art Center, and a variety of creative retailers and galleries, an arts district has already begun to emerge as a key asset in the community. By leveraging additional funding, the city could further expand this arts-focused initiative, using it as a catalyst for further investment in the downtown area. Increased funding could support the development of new public art installations, cultural festivals, and artist residencies that not only attract visitors but also create opportunities for local businesses to thrive. By focusing on arts programming, Chesterton could enhance its identity, stimulate economic growth, and ensure that the arts district becomes a central component of the broader downtown revitalization effort.

## Advance the Michigan City Arts Corridor



**Location:** Michigan City  
**Tier:** Catalytic investment  
**Cost:** \$\$

From the Lubeznik Center for the Arts to the Uptown Arts District, the Michigan City Arts Corridor presents a unique opportunity to deepen the city's cultural offerings. In 2025, the Lubeznik introduced its first artist-in-residency program in a storefront, further integrating art into the fabric of the community. Additional grant funding could support efforts to activate public spaces in meaningful ways, such as through temporary art installations or site-specific projects that respond to the local environment. It could also help build the capacity of cultural organizations to sustain ongoing initiatives and foster collaborations that involve both artists and residents. With further investment, the Arts Corridor could become a more robust platform for creative expression and a catalyst for broader community engagement.

*Read more about the Lubeznik Center for the Arts →*  
*Read more about the Uptown Arts District →*

## Support the growth of the Miller Beach Arts and Creative District



**Location:** Gary  
**Tier:** Catalytic investment  
**Cost:** \$\$

The Miller Beach Arts and Creative District is an emerging cultural hub, centered around Gary's Marshall J. Gardner Center for the Arts. The district's management organization curates a range of events, including exhibits, live music, and artisan showcases every weekend, along with seasonal markets and a biennial public arts festival. Its proximity to the Indiana Dunes adds a unique dimension to its urban setting. Additional funding could help expand the district's offerings, enabling more diverse programming, such as artist residencies, public art installations, and collaborative community projects. With more resources, the district could strengthen its year-round presence, attract larger audiences, and further integrate the arts into the fabric of the local community, positioning it as a more prominent cultural asset.

*Read more about the Miller Beach Arts and Creative District →*

## Expand the Valparaiso Creative District



**Location:** Valparaiso  
**Tier:** Catalytic investment  
**Cost:** \$\$\$

Launched in 2015, the Valparaiso Creative District Plan envisions transforming the downtown area into a regional destination for arts, culture, and innovation, with a focus on supporting local artists, fostering diverse programming, and celebrating the community's creative identity. Spearheaded by the Valparaiso Creative Council, the plan includes initiatives such as the development of the Valpo Creates Center, which will serve as a collaborative space for artists, offer workshops, and house the Council's operations. Additional funding could play a crucial role in advancing this plan by enabling the creation of public art installations, expanding educational and outreach programs, and enhancing marketing efforts to attract both locals and visitors. With more resources, the Creative Council could strengthen its capacity to implement these initiatives, ensuring the long-term success of the district and fostering a sustainable cultural ecosystem in the heart of Valparaiso.

*Read more about the Valparaiso Creative District Plan →*

# Storytelling

*Northwest Indiana sometimes gets a bad rep: it's a place with crime, dereliction, strip-club billboards, and towns to drive through, not to. This narrative overlooks the region's extraordinary assets, including world-class recreation, historic architecture, and industrial innovation.*

**Investment opportunity:** Supporting creative communications—such as murals, wayfinding, podcasts, and festivals – can change the way regional audiences and international visitors perceive the region.

See **Appendix B** for examples of Storytelling projects from elsewhere in the U.S.



"Faces of the World" by Artiste Rast. This mural, part of the Rensselaer Art Walk, combines visual art with movement—many of the roses spin on a timer, creating a whimsical, interactive experience.  
Photo Location: Rensselaer, Indiana  
Photo credit: Northwest Indiana Forum

# Representative regional concepts

## Shift the narrative in Gary



**Location:** Gary  
**Tier:** Catalytic investment  
**Cost:** \$\$\$

Abandoned buildings in Gary hold untold stories that reflect the city’s evolving history, and Decay Devils is working to uncover and celebrate these narratives. The organization focuses on rehabilitating neglected structures, emphasizing that even the most deteriorated spaces have value and can contribute to the community’s identity. By repurposing these buildings, Decay Devils seeks to transform them into places of engagement and reflection, where local history is preserved and shared. Additional funding could help expand these efforts, supporting restoration projects, public art installations, and educational programs that connect residents to the city’s history, turning forgotten spaces into cultural landmarks that foster pride and a deeper understanding of Gary’s past.

*Read more about Decay Devils →*

## Grow the Rensselaer Mural Walk



**Location:** Rensselaer  
**Tier:** Creative ecosystem  
**Cost:** \$

Downtown Rensselaer’s Mural Walk offers a striking contrast to the surrounding agricultural landscape, with over three dozen murals that explore themes ranging from local wildlife to the town’s cultural heritage. These murals are not just decorative; they reflect the identity of a community where art and farming coexist. The murals provide a public canvas that captures the area’s values and history. Additional funding could help expand the Mural Walk by supporting the creation of new artworks, offering opportunities for local artists, and funding community programs that further integrate the art into the fabric of daily life, strengthening the connection between residents and their town’s evolving story.

## Expand regional arts coverage



**Location:** Region-wide  
**Tier:** Creative ecosystem  
**Cost:** \$\$

Local radio and TV programming, such as Indiana’s Art on the Air and Eye on the Arts, have proven successful in highlighting a wide range of local artists, artistic organizations, and community events. These programs provide valuable platforms for celebrating the creative vibrancy of the region. However, the area lacks a centralized resource—like a newspaper or comprehensive listing—that could effectively track and promote art events happening across the region. Additional funding could help establish such a resource, supporting the development of an online platform or mobile app that consolidates event listings, as well as expanding local radio and TV programming to feature more diverse arts coverage and reach broader audiences. This investment could provide a more unified voice for the arts community, raising visibility and fostering greater community engagement.

*Read more about Art on the Air → / Read more about Eye on the Arts →*

## Reimagine I-90/94 billboards for regional storytelling



**Location:** Lake, Porter, and LaPorte counties  
**Tier:** Creative ecosystem  
**Cost:** \$\$

Locals and passers-through alike know them well—the billboards for injury attorney and strip clubs dot the thoroughfares of the region, depicting a specific identity of the place commuters call home. But, these advertising spaces present opportunities to tell a different story of the region’s history and current offerings. From vintage tourism posters to newly commissioned works that celebrate the regions unsung assets is a creative way to challenge visitors assumptions and champion the places locals love. Additional funding could be used to commission artwork, facilitate partnerships with local artists, and manage the logistics of billboard placements, ensuring that these spaces become a platform for celebrating the region’s hidden gems and fostering a stronger sense of pride among residents and visitors alike.

## Elevate Northwest Indiana through public relations campaigns



**Location:** Region-wide  
**Tier:** Creative ecosystem  
**Cost:** \$\$

Public relations and visual storytelling can play a critical role in elevating Northwest Indiana's arts and culture scene by capturing and sharing its unique narrative with broader audiences. By pooling together funding to hire a publicist, photographer, and videographer, arts and culture institutions can craft compelling stories that highlight local talent, events, and cultural assets. A skilled publicist can create strategic outreach campaigns to engage media and build relationships with journalists, while photographers and videographers can produce high-quality visual content that showcases the region's vibrant artistic landscape. Additional funding could support these efforts by covering the costs of hiring professionals, producing high-quality content, and implementing targeted marketing campaigns to reach new audiences. This investment would pair well with the existing "This Is Northwest Indiana" campaign by telling a compelling story of Northwest Indiana's arts and culture scene and positioning the region as a sought-after cultural destination.

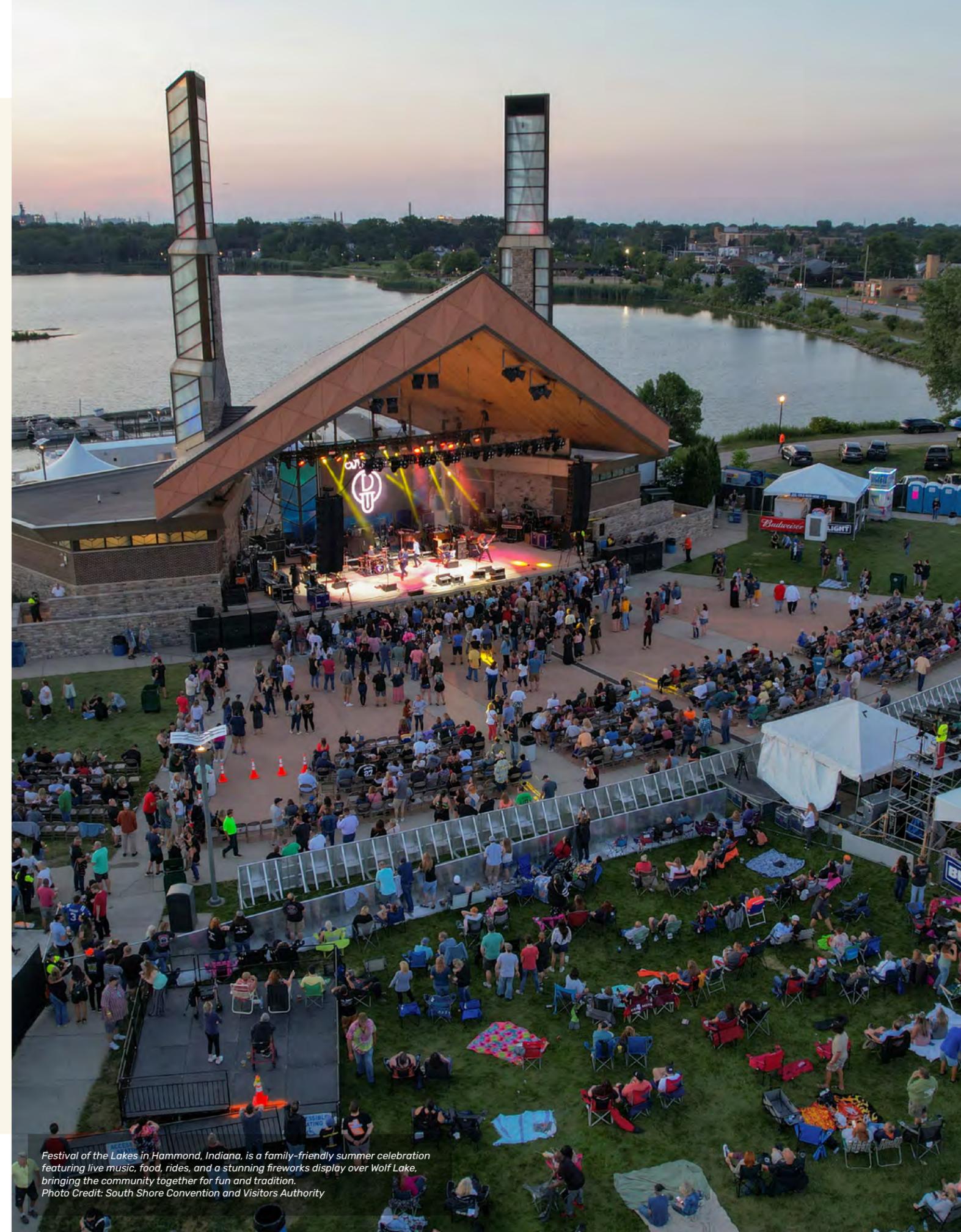


# Marquee venues

*Signature attractions such as sports venues, national parks, and casinos bring energy and funding to the region. This cohort can continue to grow, with large-scale strategic investments into venue that drive both local participation and tourism.*

**Investment opportunity:** By leveraging public finance and philanthropy for programming and infrastructure improvements, significant redevelopment and activation of legacy venues, as well as the addition of new cultural spaces, can be accomplished.

See **Appendix B** for examples of Marquee Venue projects from elsewhere in the U.S.



Festival of the Lakes in Hammond, Indiana, is a family-friendly summer celebration featuring live music, food, rides, and a stunning fireworks display over Wolf Lake, bringing the community together for fun and tradition. Photo Credit: South Shore Convention and Visitors Authority

# Representative regional concepts

## Support the Gabis Arboretum as a cultural destination



**Location:** Valparaiso  
**Tier:** Capacity building and stewardship  
**Cost:** \$\$\$

Purdue University Northwest's Gabis Arboretum is a remarkable outdoor asset that has already hosted events like the Acorn Concert Series, drawing visitors to enjoy its natural beauty. As the university explores the best uses for the land, there is significant potential to develop infrastructure that would support year-round events and enhance the visitor experience. Additional funding could be used to support both programmatic and capital planning, helping to expand event offerings, build necessary facilities, and improve accessibility for all seasons. With strategic investment, the arboretum could become a key cultural and community destination, offering a diverse range of educational, recreational, and artistic programs throughout the year.

*Read more about Gabis Arboretum →*

## Enhance downtown Valparaiso's vibrancy through arts programming



**Location:** Valparaiso  
**Tier:** Creative ecosystem  
**Cost:** \$\$

Downtown Valparaiso has made significant strides in activating its downtown corridor through community festivals, markets, and events, particularly at Central Park Plaza, home to the William E. Urschel Pavilion and Northwest Health Amphitheater. These venues host a variety of activities, including the Summer Concert Series, which runs Thursday nights and features local and regional bands. To sustain and enhance the vibrancy of the district, additional funding could be utilized to expand arts-specific programming, such as live music performances, theater productions, and other forms of public performance. Investing in small-scale infrastructure improvements and programmatic development would not only enrich the cultural offerings but also attract a wider audience, fostering a thriving arts scene that benefits both residents and visitors.

*Read more about Central Park Plaza →*

## Bring year-round programming to Wolf Lake Pavilion



**Location:** Hammond  
**Tier:** Capacity building and stewardship  
**Cost:** \$\$

Home to the popular Festival of the Lakes, the Pavilion at Wolf Lake Memorial Park has become a beloved venue for locals and a key draw for visitors. While the annual festival already attracts large crowds, there is significant potential to expand programming throughout the warmer months. Hosting theater, dance, and music performances from touring groups, as well as smaller events to showcase local talent, could further activate the space and bring more people to the area year-round. Additional funding could support these efforts by covering the costs of booking performers and marketing events to ensure a wider audience. With increased financial support, the Pavilion could become a year-round cultural destination, offering a variety of events that cater to different tastes and bring new vibrancy to the park.

*Read more about the Pavilion at Wolf Lake Memorial Park →*

## Adapt the Dunes Pavilion into a flexible events center



**Location:** Chesterton  
**Tier:** Capacity building and stewardship  
**Cost:** \$\$\$

The Dunes Pavilion, currently catering to visitors with dining and concessions typical of national park settings, holds untapped potential as a venue for a wide range of cultural events. Its indoor-outdoor design, situated next to the Indiana Dunes National Park, makes it an ideal location for live performances, art galleries showcasing local visual artists, and larger-scale activations such as modern dance on the beach or a parking lot festival. Additional funding could be used to enhance the pavilion's infrastructure, making it more adaptable for various events and improving accessibility. With these upgrades, the space could host year-round activities that attract both local residents and tourists, further establishing the pavilion as a node of activity within the park and a key asset within the community.

*Read more about the Dunes Pavilion →*

## Conduct a feasibility study for a new large-scale venue



**Location:** Region-wide  
**Tier:** Capacity building and stewardship  
**Cost:** \$\$

As the region looks to meet the growing demand for large-scale entertainment venues, commissioning a feasibility study to explore the potential for building a new venue is a key step forward. With the Lake County Convention Center on the horizon as a flexible new space centrally located within the region, the study would assess the viability of a similar venue designed specifically for large touring bands and other major events. Funding for the study could cover market research, audience demand analysis, infrastructure needs, and economic impact projections, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the region's needs. The findings would guide decisions on facility design, location, and programming, ultimately helping to create a venue that complements or enhances existing spaces like the Lake County Convention Center and further strengthens the area's appeal to major entertainment acts.

*Read more about the Lake County Convention Center project →*

## Expand cultural programming at Lake County Fairgrounds



**Location:** Lake County  
**Tier:** Creative ecosystem  
**Cost:** \$\$

The Lake County Fairgrounds in Crown Point, Indiana, is already home to one of the state's largest county fairs, attracting approximately 200,000 visitors annually. Beyond its signature summer fair, the venue hosts a variety of events such as trade shows, concerts, and community festivals throughout the year. To further enhance its role as a regional cultural hub, exploring opportunities to expand programming could be beneficial. Additional funding could support the development of new event spaces, such as an outdoor amphitheater or indoor performance hall, to accommodate a wider range of activities, including concerts, theater productions, and community gatherings. Investing in infrastructure improvements, such as upgraded lighting, sound systems, and seating, would also enhance the quality of events and attract larger audiences. By leveraging its existing popularity and expanding its offerings, the Lake County Fairgrounds could become a year-round destination for arts, culture, and entertainment in Northwest Indiana.



# Industry

*Northwest Indiana is defined by its muscular industry, in sectors such as construction, logistics, and manufacturing. These industries are also platforms for creatives looking to build fabrication skills or to innovate materials and techniques. They can be used as backdrops for performances, subjects for photographic documentation, or sites for sculptural experimentation.*

**Investment opportunity:** Such creative projects can be seeded through grants, and conducted in collaboration with industry leaders.

See **Appendix B** for examples of Industry projects from elsewhere in the U.S.



Region Roots, a mission-driven non-profit operated by the NWI Food Council since 2021, connects small-scale and underserved farmers with wholesale market opportunities. Buyers place online orders from local farms, producers harvest the food, and Region Roots delivers fresh, locally grown food directly to businesses, schools, and institutions—making fresh, local food easy and accessible every week.

# Representative regional concepts

## Support steel artists through artist-in-residency programs



**Location:** Gary and Portage  
**Tier:** Creative ecosystem  
**Cost:** \$

Northwest Indiana is home to a number of artists who use steel as a primary medium, drawing directly from the region's industrial history. Creating artist-in-residency programs for metal sculptors and other artists working with steel, in partnership with companies like U.S. Steel and Cleveland Cliffs, would offer a unique opportunity to connect art with the region's industrial roots. By providing artists with direct access to steel and the working environment of a steel mill, these residencies could result in compelling, site-specific works that reflect the intersection of manufacturing and creativity. The program could include collaborative workshops, production opportunities, and public exhibitions, giving artists the chance to engage with the local community. Additional funding would help establish dedicated studio spaces, provide stipends for artists, and acquire necessary equipment and materials. This initiative could redefine the relationship between industry and art, contributing to both the region's cultural landscape and its ongoing industrial evolution.

## Cultivate creative entrepreneurship in Gary



**Location:** Gary  
**Tier:** Catalytic investment  
**Cost:** \$\$\$

The 10,000-square-foot Fiber Smart House in Gary is set to transform the historic Union Station into a dynamic workforce and educational training hub, offering coding classes, business incubation, and a network operations center. This \$8 million project aims to position Gary as a tech hub in Northwest Indiana, revitalizing the area and driving digital equity. Additional funding could help expand the project's impact by supporting creative spaces for artists and entrepreneurs in nearby vacant buildings, fostering innovation and providing collaborative work environments. Investments in infrastructure, such as high-speed internet and educational partnerships, would strengthen the tech workforce pipeline and attract startups. This initiative would not only activate underused spaces but also position Gary as a thriving center for technology, art, and entrepreneurship.

## Support local farms through equipment and information sharing



**Location:** Newton, Jasper, Pulaski, and Starke counties  
**Tier:** Capacity building and stewardship  
**Cost:** \$

The NWI Food Council's Farm Tool Library and Region Roots's Farm Tours and Festivals play a crucial role in supporting the region's small farms by providing affordable access to tools, equipment, and peer support. The Farm Tool Library helps reduce barriers to farming by giving local farmers access to the resources they need to grow and succeed. Similarly, the Region Roots Local Farm and Food Hub connects farmers with partners and funders, promoting local agriculture and strengthening the community's food systems. Additional funding could be used to expand programming and events such as farm tours and festivals, which give the public greater exposure to the region's agricultural heritage and foster pride in local food production. Funds could also support the creation of a sponsored and branded regional tool library, where industry partners contribute to the sustainability of local farming efforts. Investments in these initiatives would further empower farmers, enhance community engagement, and solidify the region's agricultural identity.

# Part 3: Implementation



*The Bailly Homestead, a National Historic Landmark in Porter, Indiana, was home to Joseph Bailly de Messein and Marie La Fevre de la Vigne Bailly. Established around 1824 along the Little Calumet River, the site served as a trading post, inn, and hub of commerce at the crossroads of Indigenous trails. A key stop between Detroit and Fort Dearborn, the homestead facilitated trade, cultural exchange, and settlement in the Calumet Region, reflecting the early European-American and Indigenous connections that shaped the area's history.*  
Photo Credit: Indiana Dunes Tourism

# Overview

As part of the process of developing the *IGNITE the Region Arts and Culture Strategy*, Public Sphere Projects uncovered a set of cultural assets, sector needs, and community desires. Just as importantly, the process led to a set of recommendations for strengthening the creative ecosystem. These focused on three interconnected approaches: directing funding to arts and culture projects, sustaining a vibrant cultural sector, and building long-term capacity—whether through increased philanthropic support or expanded technical assistance and training.

Each of these mechanisms for developing a self-sustaining ecosystem is elaborated elsewhere in this document. Grantmaking—with an emphasis on investing in impact areas—is central to the cultural plan. As important is the notion of sector vibrancy, which considers how cultural nonprofits, creative entrepreneurs, community arts providers, institutions of power, and other key agents in the ecosystem are networked and aligned. Finally, in order to ensure that the sector is formally supported with administrative resources, evaluation tools, and technical assistance, this document also addresses internal capacity building.

Northwest Indiana is home to a wealth of cultural assets and opportunities, yet it lacks the coordinated management and stewardship needed to support and sustain its arts and culture sector. Unlike other regional priorities—such as food insecurity, housing, or addiction services—there is no established infrastructure or leadership guiding arts and culture efforts across the region. As a result, local philanthropy has no clear mandate or framework for funding cultural initiatives. This strategy is designed to address that gap by proposing a cohesive, regional approach to cultural planning—one that strengthens coordination, clarifies funding priorities, and positions arts and culture as a shared responsibility across sectors.



*"Jasper County Wildlife" by Sean Bullen. Part of the Rensselaer Art Walk and Jasper County Mural Tour, this piece highlights local wildlife and celebrates the natural beauty of the region. Photo Location: Rensselaer, Indiana. Photo Credit: Northwest Indiana Forum*

# Implementation framework

This section focuses on three intersecting mechanisms—how, by effectively leveraging grant funds, sectorwide services, and capacity building, the ambitions of the cultural plan can be fully realized. This section, therefore, both illuminates how the recommendations detailed throughout this document form a cohesive framework and outlines specific implementation steps, such as structuring roles, responsibilities, and instruments.

## Impact funding

The recommended approach to grantmaking is to focus investments into five key impact areas: *heritage*, *districts*, *storytelling*, *marquee venues*, and *industry*. Each of these impact areas is defined loosely enough to accommodate a variety of projects at all scales—from tactical placemaking interventions to catalytic cultural infrastructures, and from rural communities to urban centers.

Effective grantmaking, however, also requires that regulatory requirements are strictly met. Financial compliance, payment issuance, and legal review are also part of the grant funding cycle. Likewise, grantmakers are responsible for ongoing reporting and stewardship of funded projects.

## Sector vibrancy

A diverse arts and culture sector is already hard at work in Northwest Indiana. But like any sector, its sustainability relies on ongoing support services. Chief among such services is advocacy: outreach to philanthropic institutions, elected officials, industry leaders, and other decision influencers. This level of advocacy is beyond any individual arts and culture entity—to be effective and lasting, advocacy must happen at the sector-wide scale.

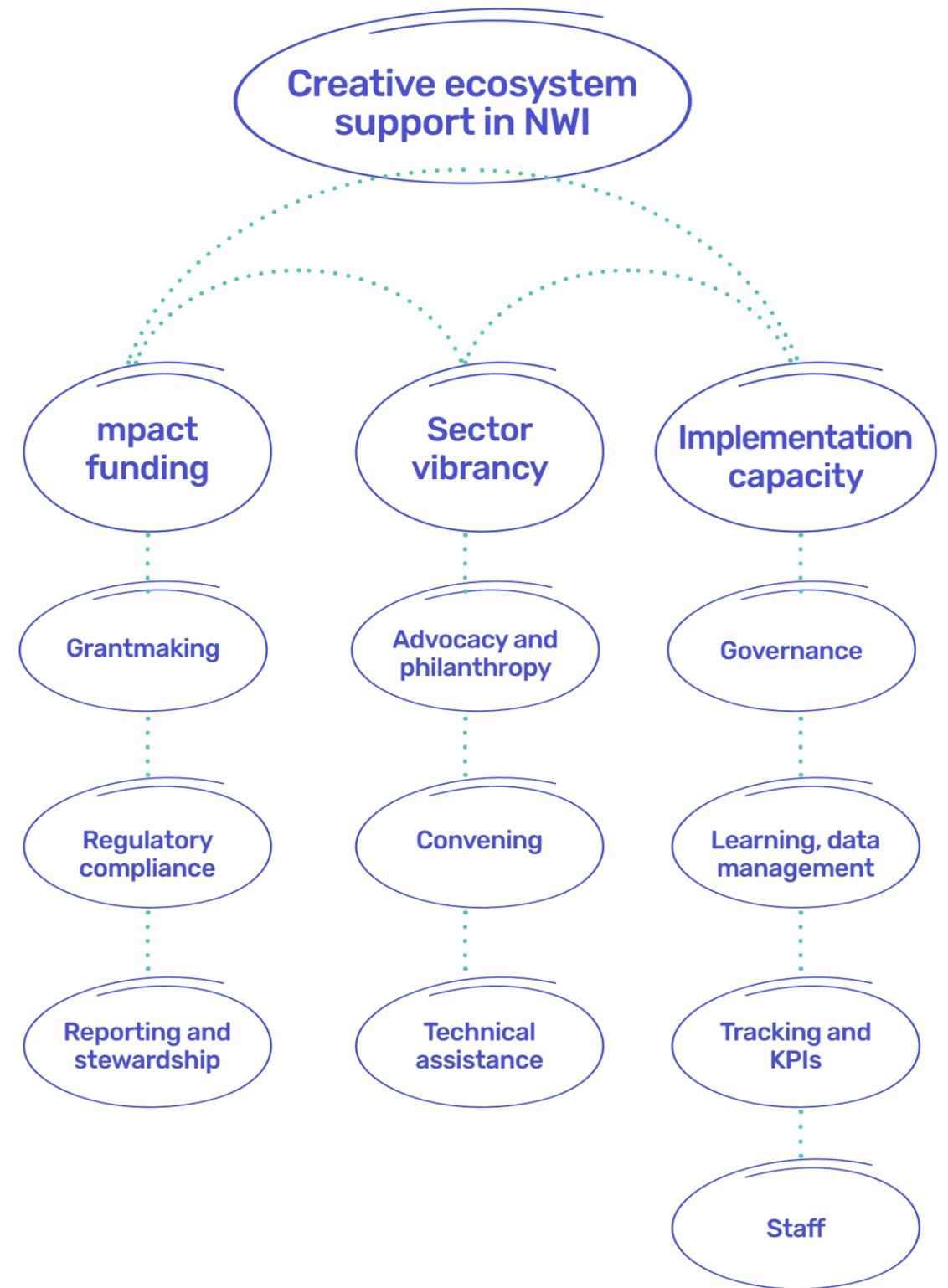
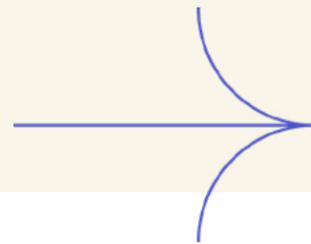
The identity of a sector as a sector also requires regular convenings. These might take the form of conferences, social events, or digital communications. Whatever shape it takes, regular convening enables the creative sector to share ideas, learn from one another, and seek opportunities to collaborate. Finally, as the sector continuously evolves, it needs to be served with professional development, training, and other forms of technical assistance.

## Implementation capacity

Implied in all of the above is the need for additional administrative capacity. Capacity is used to mean a system of inclusive governance, ongoing information management and learning, evaluation against KPIs, and backbone staff expertise.

As suggested in this report, this capacity can be housed within the Northwest Indiana Forum. While there is a cohort of other organizations (e.g., universities, South Shore Arts, and others) that serve some of these roles, the Forum is seen as the most well-equipped, trusted, and influential agent to take on this body of work. Its regional reach, established relationships across public and private sectors, and experience managing complex initiatives make it uniquely positioned to provide the leadership and infrastructure required to move this strategy forward.

*The chart to the right illustrates how the three mechanisms listed above each contribute to the ultimate goal of a thriving, self-sustaining creative ecosystem that is the purpose of this cultural plan.*



## Impact funding

As noted throughout this report, the framework for grantmaking is structured around five interrelated “impact areas” (heritage, districts, storytelling, marquee venues, and industry) that reflect the strengths, community desires, and stated priorities of the creative sector.

Regardless of the eventual source of funding (Lilly Endowment Inc., local philanthropic community, corporate investments, etc.), effective grantmaking in the sector will require a transparent, well-managed process that includes application intake, evaluation, and stewardship. The oversight necessary for this process, including committee and staff roles, is detailed below.

Following are specific suggestions for structuring such an effective process. These suggestions are rooted in national best practices as well as a series of discovery conversations with leadership of IEDC, IAC, South Shore Arts, and the Northwest Indiana Forum. These procedural changes are pending IEDC approval.

The Northwest Indiana Forum acts as a crucial conduit linking regional partners to state-level funding opportunities, stewarding a diverse portfolio of grant proposals. To elevate the quality of these proposals—and to maximize their long-term impact, whether they receive funding or not—the Forum can weave learning and capacity-building into every stage of the grant cycle.

The framework outlined here tracks each project’s alignment with the Forum’s five regional impact areas (heritage, districts, storytelling, marquee venues, and industry) and its broader *IGNITE the Region* strategic pillars, ensuring that decisions remain data-driven, resources flow where they matter most, and actionable insights are extracted from every application.

### 1. Setting strategic guidance for applicants

**Recommendation:** Before project ideas are formally drafted, the Forum should circulate a concise guidance sheet that (a) clarifies which of the five impact areas each project must address; (b) links those impacts to the Forum’s strategic pillars, and highlights the measurable outcomes most grantmakers seek (jobs created, talent attraction, equitable access, and long-term place-making value); and (c) presents the rubric reviewers will use to score applications. Putting the criteria in plain view boosts transparency, steers applicants toward mission-aligned ideas, and elevates proposal quality before they ever reach the review stage.

### 2. Issuing the call for proposals

**Recommendation:** Adopt a two-tier timeline and data-driven outreach to ensure every county and institution in the cultural asset map—especially first-time or small applicants—receives the call. Require a brief concept note 4–6 weeks before the full application, allowing staff to flag misalignment early, suggest partners, and route applicants to technical assistance before the final deadline.

#### Key Deliverables

1. Two-Tier Timeline
  - Announce concept note and full proposal deadlines together.
  - Provide a one-page concept note template with links to technical assistance resources.
2. Database-Driven Outreach
  - Export the regional asset map to build a county-by-county contact list.
  - Spot communities or sectors with no prior submissions and conduct personal follow-ups (email, phone, or site visits).

### 3. Mass & Targeted Engagement

- Issue dedicated email blasts and press releases to all contacts in the database.

### 4. Partner Amplification

- Supply slide decks and talking points to county economic development offices, tourism bureaus, and anchor institutions so they can rebroadcast the call locally.

### 3. Information sessions and outreach

**Recommendation:** Host both virtual and in-person sessions, segmented by applicant type (municipalities, nonprofits, private developers, and grassroots groups). Pair each session with a simple infographic explaining impact area and strategic pillar alignment, and citing examples of what a successful project could look like. Outreach should prioritize historically underrepresented communities and first-time applicants, ensuring the pipeline reflects regional diversity.

By tailoring content to specific applicant types, spotlighting the exact scoring rubric, and proactively engaging communities that rarely apply, the Forum has the potential to build a more diverse, mission-aligned pipeline, ultimately producing stronger proposals and a grant slate that reflects the full geographic and cultural breadth of Northwest Indiana.

### 4. Encouraging cross-sector and multi-partner proposals

**Recommendation:** Ask applicants to build teams that span sectors (arts, tourism, industry, education, philanthropy). During the concept note review, Forum staff should flag proposals that would be strengthened by additional collaborators and provide targeted suggestions, drawn from the Regional Asset Database, to help applicants refine their partnerships before submitting full proposals.

#### Key Deliverables

1. Call Language
  - Require a short partnership chart outlining the roles, budgets, and decision-making structure.
2. Scoring Incentive
  - Allocate bonus points in the evaluation rubric for well-defined, cross-sector collaborations demonstrating shared risk, shared resources, and collective impact.

### Scoring Rubric Example

CATEGORY	WEIGHT	WHAT TO SCORE	HOW TO SCORE
<b>A. Mission &amp; Strategy Alignment</b>	<b>45pts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Alignment with at least one IGNITE pillar.</li> <li>- Contribution to one or more Impact Areas.</li> <li>- Clarity of objectives and metrics.</li> </ul>	Apply the 4-point readiness scale for each sub-element (“Absent” = 0, “Emergent” = 1, “Developing” = 2, “Strong” = 3). Multiply the sum by 5 to convert to <b>45 point maximum</b> .
<b>B. Community &amp; Equity Impact</b>	<b>20pts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Depth of engagement with prioritized or underserved communities.</li> <li>- Evidence of community-centered planning and implementation.</li> </ul>	Use the readiness scale; emphasize equity, mirroring William Penn’s equity-driven criterion.
<b>C. Economic &amp; Place Activation</b>	<b>20pts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Job creation, attendance, neighborhood activation</li> <li>- Leverage of partner resources</li> </ul>	Score each factor (0–5) and sum to 20.
<b>D. Operational &amp; Fiscal Capacity</b>	<b>15pts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Governance, staffing &amp; fiduciary oversight</li> <li>- Diversified revenue, and realistic budget</li> </ul>	Use the readiness scale

### 5. Evaluating proposals by impact area and strategic pillar alignment

**Recommendation:** Adopt a 100-point rubric that blends the five impact areas with the Forum’s strategic pillars, while borrowing proven decision-making elements from the William Penn Foundation’s “Tiers of Readiness”<sup>5</sup> framework and San Francisco’s Grant Review<sup>6</sup> rubric. The structure below assigns clear weights, uses a four-level readiness scale (absent, emergent, developing, and strong), and mirrors public-sector best practices for transparency and equity.

#### Bonus for cross-sector collaboration

Add up to **+5 points** for proposals that document:

1. Shared risk – co-owned budget, milestones, and accountability;
2. Shared resources – tangible in-kind or cash contributions from each partner;
3. Collective impact – joint metrics exceeding what any single partner could achieve.

This blended, equity-minded framework anchors evaluation to the Forum’s strategic goals, rewards meaningful collaboration, and meets funder expectations for rigor and clarity.

### 6. Updating and maintaining the regional asset database

**Recommendation:** Require applicants to geo-tag project sites and identify partner assets so every submission—funded or not—updates a GIS-based map of cultural clusters, service gaps, and collaboration patterns. Each quarter, staff should validate new entries, retire outdated ones, and circulate brief analytic snapshots to regional partners.

### 7. Post-award learning cohort and story-driven reporting

**Recommendation:** Once grants are awarded, convene recipients into an annual Forum Grant Cohort to foster peer learning, streamline data collection, and amplify narrative storytelling. By coordinating post-award support, the Forum can transform one-off grants into a continuous cycle of shared knowledge and region-wide impact.

### Sector vibrancy

A growing and vibrant creative sector is the result of an intentional, mutually-supportive system of advocacy, donor engagement, convening, networking, and access to technical resources. Among these, advocacy is perhaps the most urgently needed.

#### Advocacy and philanthropy

While this body of recommendations was initially tied to pledged grant funding from Lilly Endowment Inc., it should be noted that they are independent of the source of funding. Put another way, the impact areas can and should be supported through philanthropic funds (and other mechanisms, as addressed below) beyond the Lilly Endowment pledge.

Northwest Indiana boasts a strong philanthropic sector that includes numerous community foundations across its counties, well-resourced private funders such as the Dean and Barbara White Family Foundation, and a cohort of corporate giving programs. These generate substantial philanthropic investments in the region; however, arts, culture, and creativity have not been historically among the top priorities.

Among the funders who expressed initial interest in this body of cultural planning work—and, by extension, subsequent support—were the following:

- Anderson Foundation
- Community Foundation of Pulaski County
- Crown Point Community Foundation
- Dean and Barbara White Family Foundation
- Jasper Newton Foundation
- Legacy Foundation
- NIPSCO
- Porter County Community Foundation
- Unity Foundation of La Porte County
- Urschel Development Corporation

Consistent advocacy efforts—such as the case presented in this report—are required to engage these funders as long-term partners in enhancing the creative sector and stimulating the regional creative economy. The capacity required for such an advocacy campaign is addressed later in this section.

It is also notable that preliminary conversations with philanthropic leaders, conducted as part of the engagement effort summarized in Section 1, showed that these leaders were willing (and in some cases eager) to be engaged. Therefore, the Lilly Endowment funding ought to be seen not as the only, primary, or final investment in the creative sector but, rather, as seed funding that can stimulate further co-investment from regional philanthropy.

<sup>5</sup> William Penn Foundation, *Environmental & Public Spaces Grantmaking Framework (updated June 2024)*, [https://williampennfoundation.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/WPF\\_Framework\\_EPS.pdf](https://williampennfoundation.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/WPF_Framework_EPS.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> San Francisco Grants for the Arts, *FY25 & FY26 Parades and Festivals Grant Overview—Addendum (7 June 2024)*, pp. 11–14, [https://www.sf.gov/sites/default/files/2024-06/GFTA%20FY25%20%26%20FY26%20Parades%20and%20Festivals%20Grant%20Overview\\_addendum%20%28PDF%29%20%231\\_06-07-24.pdf](https://www.sf.gov/sites/default/files/2024-06/GFTA%20FY25%20%26%20FY26%20Parades%20and%20Festivals%20Grant%20Overview_addendum%20%28PDF%29%20%231_06-07-24.pdf)

## Convening and technical assistance

The Northwest Indiana Forum has already demonstrated its convening ability throughout the cultural planning process. A byproduct of these gatherings was not only direct input into the plan, but an *emerging community* of practice that shared programmatic updates with one another, weighed in on common challenges, and identified overlaps and opportunities for collaboration across the sector. Stakeholders repeatedly called for more such convenings—formal and informal occasions to gather, learn, and share.

A vibrant sector thrives through convenings. They are particularly important in a geographically large and dispersed region, where such opportunities may be few. It is the recommendation of this report that a regular series of convenings—both for the sector overall and segmented by typology and geography—be hosted by the Northwest Indiana Forum. The staff and governance capacity needed in order to coordinate these is discussed below in Implementation Capacity.

Likewise, the Northwest Indiana Forum may leverage its network of consultants to provide technical assistance to arts and culture organizations. Assistance may include legal help required to set up small creative enterprises, connections to expertise in construction and real estate development, and relevant services. Other means of sector-wide technical assistance are discussed in more detail below, under the heading of “Learning and data management.”

## Implementation capacity

### Staffing and governance

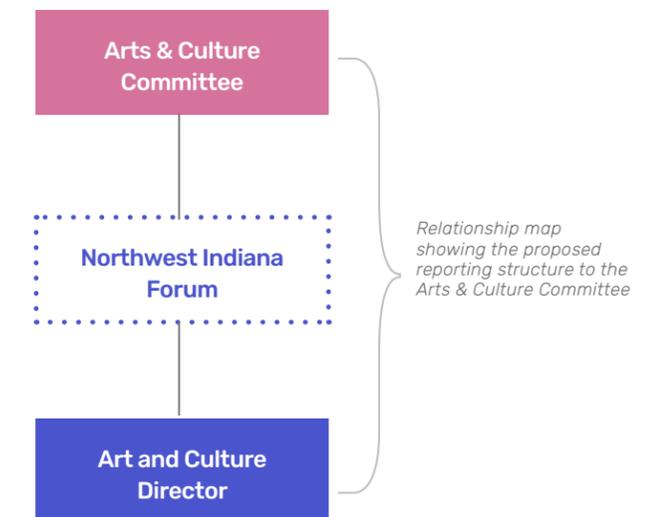
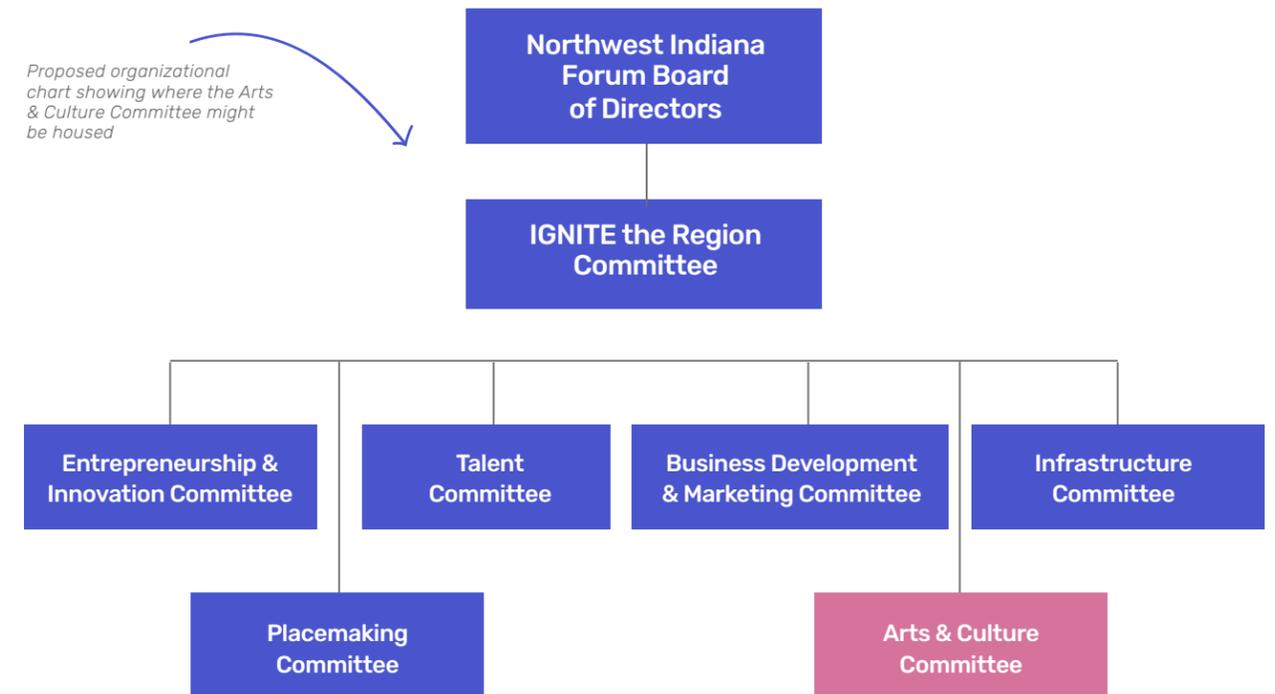
To support a rich ecosystem of assets and opportunities in the region and to leverage READI 2.0 funds, Northwest Indiana requires dedicated management and oversight capacity.

While numerous nonprofit organizations hold a stake in the creative sector, there is currently no single, region-wide coordination, resource, or backbone support for arts and culture. Consequently, there is a lack of engagement of regional philanthropy, as noted in the Sector Vibrancy section.

It is, therefore, the recommendation of this report to incubate an arts and culture support function, with the capacity—and mandate—to serve the region’s creative sector. Based on the findings of this report, this role is best suited to be performed by, and housed within, the Northwest Indiana Forum.

This role will undertake administrative responsibilities related to structuring application intake and review, regulatory compliance and reporting, and connecting grantees to technical assistance. In addition, this role will also provide ongoing ecosystem-wide services, such as regular convening of the arts sector, advocacy to elected officials, government affairs, and regular maintenance and analysis of the cultural sector inventory. (More on these functions in Sector Vibrancy above.)

As with other Northwest Indiana Forum programs, efforts to build implementation capacity in the creative sector will be overseen by a board committee made up of regional arts leaders. The Arts & Culture Committee will serve as content experts, recommending grant decisions and advising on the needs and opportunities in the



sector. Similarly to the advisory group that participated in the drafting of this plan, future committee members might include non-profit leaders representing prominent arts and culture organizations, working artists, creative entrepreneurs, arts funders, and others.

See **Appendix C** for national examples of how to structure regional arts and culture capacity.

### Learning and data measurement

Grant applications represent an important tool for learning about the sector and recognizing needs before they are articulated. Unaddressed obstacles in applications—missing fiscal sponsors, weak project management, and unclear ownership—spotlight areas where the Northwest Indiana Forum can offer non-monetary support.

- **Fiscal sponsorship pool:** Pair unincorporated groups with nonprofits that can act as fiscal agents.
- **Legal and compliance clinics:** Partner with law schools or pro-bono networks to offer contract reviews and guidance.
- **Project management bootcamps:** Provide short training on scheduling, budgeting, and KPI tracking.

By converting grant intake into a feedback loop—and publicizing how lessons learned translate into new services—the Forum can demonstrate that regional progress depends on nurturing the entire ecosystem, not merely writing checks to isolated projects. This holistic approach will amplify long-term cultural dividends and position the Forum as both the funder and field-builder for region.

## Key performance indicators

In order to track progress on the milestone goals for the region, several key performance indicators (KPIs) have been identified below. These are specific, measurable tasks that reflect the success of achieving the goals and milestones outlined in this report. The KPIs below are intended to provide a benchmark for evaluating progress of the Northwest Indiana Forum initiatives to promote arts and culture in the region.

See **Appendix D** for the implementation matrix for the Arts and Culture pillar, which outlines specific tasks and responsibilities for each impact area and enables the Northwest Indiana Forum to track progress toward its goals.

### Business growth and attraction

- **New creative or cultural businesses established:** Tracks the number of new businesses that have launched within the region due to economic development activities.
- **Business expansions:** Number of existing businesses that have expanded operations specifically to promote more arts and culture activities for the region (new facilities, increased hiring, etc.).
- **Businesses attracted to the region:** Tracks the number of companies or industries that relocate or set up in the area. Also tracks new start-ups in the region who are encouraged and supported by the program.
- **Private investment:** Total amount of private investment attracted to the region to support arts and culture initiatives and 501(c)(3)s.

### Public-private partnerships (PPP) Impact areas

- **Number of PPPs established:** Measures the number of successful partnerships formed between the private companies, industry, philanthropic organizations, educational organizations, community-based organizations, chambers of commerce and local governments.
- **Amount of leveraged funds through PPP:** Measures the total dollar value of additional funding or investments secured through these partnerships.

- **Heritage:** Track the number of public and privately funded arts, culture and recreational events in the region (also listed above in PPP).
- **Districts:** Track the public and philanthropic investments in arts and culture districts throughout the region.
- **Storytelling:** Measure the number of murals, way-finding, podcasts, festivals, events with a focus on changing the perception of the region.

### Grant program-specific success

- **Search new funding sources:** Finding federal, state, local and philanthropic programs available to fund arts and culture programs and projects.
- **Application intake and efficiency:** Tracks the number of applications received and the timeframe for processing them.
- **Stakeholder engagement:** Tracks the community outreach efforts in program awareness, opportunities for participation, opportunities for partnership, and general support for arts and culture organizations or projects.
- **Arts and Culture stakeholder satisfaction:** Measures how satisfied local businesses, investors, and other stakeholders are with the program. This is done through regular feedback from the business community regarding the effectiveness of programs, policies, and services through surveys and questionnaires.
- **Economic impact:** Measure general economic impact (for example, regional tax revenues) resulting from program initiatives.

- **Marquee venues:** Track public and philanthropic financing of redevelopment projects of legacy venues, as well as addition of new cultural infrastructure
- **Industry:** Monitor private sectors and encourage platforms for creative workforce training and skill-building for artists, in collaboration with industry leaders.

# Acknowledgements



*A family enjoying outdoor recreation at Potawatomi Park, Rensselaer, Indiana.  
Photo Credit: Northwest Indiana Forum*

# Acknowledgements

The Northwest Indiana Forum gratefully acknowledges the individuals and organizations whose leadership, insight, and collaboration made the development of this Arts and Culture Strategy possible.

## Northwest Indiana Forum

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- Jennifer Gadzala, Grants Director
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- Alisha Berglund, Berglund Construction
- Jennifer Brooks, Urschel Development Corp.
- Edwin Buswell, Kankakee-Iroquois Regional Planning Commission

- Rick Calinski, NIPSCO
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- Lori Tubbs, Lori Tubbs Development Consulting
- Matt Vessely, 1st Source Bank
- Ty Warner, NIRPC
- Sherri Ziller, Regional Development Authority

## Arts & Culture Steering Committee

The Arts & Culture Steering Committee played a central role in guiding the development of this plan, providing strategic oversight, local insight, and thoughtful direction at every stage of the process. Through their leadership and commitment to the region's creative future, the Committee helped shape a shared vision that reflects both the needs and the aspirations of Northwest Indiana's arts and culture ecosystem.

- Vanessa Allen, Urban League of Northwest Indiana
- Kelly Anoe, Legacy Foundation
- Don Babcock, Purdue Northwest
- Nicole Barker, Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District
- Janet Bloch, Lubeznik Center for the Arts
- Wade Breitzke, WeCreate Media
- Marie Foster-Bruns, Valparaiso University
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- Jonathan Canning, South Shore Arts
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- Tom Dakich, Transform Indiana
- Lisa Daugherty, Center for Workforce Innovations
- Angie Nelson Deutch, City of Michigan City

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- Dean Mazzoni, Franciscan Health
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- Jill Ritchie, bp
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- Philip Taillon, South Shore Convention and Visitors Authority
- Raeann Trakas, Cleveland Cliffs
- Dan Vicari, Gary/Chicago International Airport
- Ty Warner, NIRPC
- Bill Welter, Journeyman Distillery

- Matt Wells, One Region
- Rafi Wilkinson, Indiana Dunes National Park
- Sherri Ziller, Northwest Indiana Regional Development Authority

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- Dillon Goodson, Principal & Co-founder
- Lucas Cowan, Advisor, Cultural Planning and Public Art
- Sonya Hedges, Graphic Designer
- Kate Reese, Associate, Research and Public Policy
- Michelle Woods, Advisor, Infrastructure and Public Space Operations

## Community Open House Hosts

- Highland Barn, Rensselaer, IN
- Indiana University Northwest, Gary, IN
- Lubeznik Center for the Arts, Michigan City, IN



Photo Credit: Northwest Indiana Forum

# Appendix



*"Man with a Watering Can" by artist Mister Toledo from California.  
Photo Location: Rensselaer, Indiana.  
Photo credit: Northwest Indiana Forum*

# Appendix A:

## Cultural asset inventory methodology

The purpose of this [Airtable](#) is to inventory the cultural assets that exist in Northwest Indiana. The geographic scope includes Lake, Porter, Pulaski, Laporte, Newton, Jasper, and Starkey counties. The kinds of assets contained in this inventory fall under an intentionally broad category; these may be venues, programs, reoccurring events, nonprofits, or potential projects. This broadness is intended, so that users can only understand the geographical scope of the cultural assets in the region and find answers to questions such as those outlined on page 13 and 14 of this report.

The field hierarchy is as follows

- 1. Asset name**
- 2. Address:** the street address, municipality, state and ZIP Code of the asset.
- 3. County:** the county of the asset.
- 4. Asset type:** this is a multi select field, currently, including the categories of: venue, retail, parks and recreation, regional heritage, cultural heritage, public space, education, cultural event, cultural planner, arts practitioner, musical event, regional festival.

- 5. Budget size:** these fields are currently blank, but can be populated through more thorough review of 990s, direct outreach, and annual reports.
- 6. Sector type:** these fields are currently empty, but should be populated by forum staff. This is a single select field containing the options nonprofit for profit government multi sector.
- 7. IGNITE pillar:** this is a multi-select field reflecting the IGNITE pillars; talent, marketing, infrastructure, place, entrepreneurship.
- 8. Strategic goal:** these fields are currently empty, but could be used to advance strategic initiatives based on this process's recommendations. This is a single select field currently containing the following: arts and districts, arts and industry arts in heritage arts and storytelling and arts and venues.
- 9. Notes:** this is an open text notes field.
- 10. Web address:** this field should include a URL of the asset's web address when possible.
- 11. Status:** these fields are currently empty but could be used to evaluate ongoing projects completeness. This is a single select field containing to-do, in progress and done.
- 12. 2024 funding from IAC:** this is a field containing historical grant funding stewarded towards various assets from IAC. This should be updated annually based on communications with the Indiana Arts Council.

- 13. Priority:** this is a field that is largely empty, but it is a single select field containing the options READI 1.0 and READI 2.0.
- 14. Investment type:** these fields are currently empty, but could be populated to measure magnitude of impact. This is a single select field containing catalytic invest investment ecosystem invest investment and capacity invest investment.
- 15. MAP cache:** this field will be auto generated based on the address field. Importantly, both the address and map cache fields are those that populate the Google map of the cultural assets. This field should not be edited directly or removed.

To add an asset, scroll to the bottom of the inventory in the airtable click the "+" in the leftmost column and populate fields as needed. Users will also find that there are various views on the left of the airtable. This is meant to help different users, sort, and filter the cultural assets in the entire inventory based on strategic priorities and/or localities. Additional views can be made with certain set filters. No record should be entered without a Name, Address, County, and Type—these are the most important functions of this inventory.

## Map

To populate the map:

- 1.** Go to the [Airtable](#)
- 2.** Click the down facing arrow next to "Full View."
- 3.** Click "download .csv."
- 4.** Save the .csv with the title, "Northwest Indiana cultural assets..."; and then the numbers corresponding to the date (e.g. Northwest Indiana cultural asses 3.12.25)
- 5.** In the google map click the three dots next to the current .csv
- 6.** Click "Reimport and Merge"
- 7.** Click "Update matching items;" then import the .csv file that has been downloaded from Airtable.

Refreshed geographic points should appear on the map

# Appendix B:

## Impact area precedents

### Heritage

#### Detroit, MI – African World Festival

- Established in 1983 and now staged each July on downtown Detroit’s Hart Plaza, the three-day celebration is produced by the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History as the Midwest’s largest showcase of the African Diaspora.
- Features four performance stages, 125 + market-place vendors, food courts, live art demos, wellness clinics, and family dance workshops—turning the riverfront plaza into an immersive, all-ages heritage experience.
- Attracts ~ 20,000 visitors, driving summertime foot traffic to nearby hotels, restaurants, and Detroit Riverwalk attractions and reinforcing the city’s global cultural brand.
- Financed through a public-private mix—City of Detroit services, lead support from the Ford Foundation, and dozens of corporate sponsors—illustrating how aligned investments can sustain a signature heritage event.

#### Hilo, HI – Merrie Monarch Festival

- Founded in 1964 to honor King Kalākaua, the week-long festival features an international hula competition, parade, artisan market, and cultural workshops that preserve and broadcast Native Hawaiian traditions worldwide.
- merriemonarch.com
- Operated by a 501(c)(3) that pairs County of Hawai‘i and State cultural-arts grants with major corporate sponsors, keeping tickets free while sustaining top-tier production.
- In 2025 the festival’s craft-market vendors received Community-Based Economic Development (CBED) grants from the Hawai‘i Department of Business, Economic Development & Tourism, illustrating how public funds can bolster heritage micro-enterprises.<sup>7</sup>
- Shows how layered public investment, corporate philanthropy, and nonprofit stewardship can elevate living cultural practices—hula, chant, traditional crafts—into an internationally celebrated heritage brand that drives both economic impact and community pride.

<sup>7</sup> Office of the Governor, State of Hawai‘i, “NEWS RELEASE: CBED Program Awards Grant to INPEACE to Support Native Hawaiian Businesses at 2025 Merrie Monarch Festival,” March 24 2025. <https://governor.hawaii.gov/newsroom/news-release-cbed-program-awards-grant-to-inpeace-to-support-native-hawaiian-businesses-at-2025-merrie-monarch-festival/>

### Districts

#### Baltimore, MD – Station North Arts & Entertainment District

- First area in Baltimore to gain Maryland’s Arts & Entertainment District designation (2002); the 104-acre zone spans the Charles North, Greenmount West, and Barclay neighborhoods steps from Penn Station, MICA, UBalt, and Johns Hopkins.
- State-enabled incentive bundle fuels reinvestment: a 10-year declining property-tax credit on qualifying renovations, plus artist income-tax subtractions and an admissions-&-amusement-tax waiver—lowering costs for studios, galleries, and creative developers.
- Folded into the Central Baltimore Partnership in 2020, which now curates Second-Friday Art Walks, the Asia North festival, Maryland Film Festival venues, and other year-round programming that keeps foot traffic—and spending—in the district.
- Rated one of USA Today’s “Top 5 Art Districts in the U.S.” (2021), underscoring the tourism draw and branding power of concentrated cultural activity supported by public subsidy and targeted philanthropy.
- Demonstrates how layered tax incentives, nonprofit stewardship, and strategic events can convert under-used industrial and residential blocks into a nationally recognized creative cluster, catalyzing private investment and talent attraction around a transit hub.

### Storytelling

#### Philadelphia, PA – Mural Arts Philadelphia

- Began in 1984 as the Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network; now the nation’s largest public-art program and a global model for place-based storytelling.
- Produces 50–100 new projects each year—murals, mosaics, and transit-wayfinding graphics—that weave neighborhood histories and contemporary voices into the city’s visual fabric.
- Maintains and restores a 4,000-plus-piece collection, ensuring past narratives stay legible while new stories emerge.
- Runs the “Mural Arts Podcast,” guided walking tours, and digital map tools that help local and international visitors decode the artwork and re-imagine Philadelphia’s identity.
- Core program tracks—Art Education, Community Murals, Porch Light, and Restorative Justice—provide project-based learning for thousands of youth and adults, strengthening civic pride through shared storytelling.
- Leverages a broad funding mix (city contracts, philanthropy, corporate sponsorships, earned tour revenue) to keep communications, interpretation, and maintenance sustainable and highly visible.

## Scotland, UK – “Scotland Is Now” Global Campaign

- Launched April 2018 by Brand Scotland partners—VisitScotland, Scottish Government, Scottish Enterprise & Universities Scotland—to unify tourism, trade-promotion and talent-attraction messaging under one narrative.
- Deployed 15 short documentaries, a Google-partnered AR app, social-video series and podcast minis, distributed across travel, FDI and diaspora channels to recast Scotland as bold, innovative and inclusive.
- Between launch and December 2019 the content logged 181 million video views, reached 221 million people, and generated 1.5 million #ScotlandIsNow tags—lifting Scotland into the global top-five on the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index by 2020.
- Shows how integrated creative communications—story-driven video, immersive tech and digital way-finding—can measurably raise a region’s place-brand equity, boosting tourism, exports and skilled-talent interest.

## Marquee venues

### Bethlehem, PA – ArtsQuest Center at SteelStacks

- A defunct Bethlehem Steel mill was adaptively re-used as a multi-venue cultural campus, preserving industrial heritage while creating new spaces for art, music, and community events.
- The nonprofit ArtsQuest leads a public-private partnership that aligns city, corporate, and philanthropic investment to spotlight local cultural traditions—most visibly through the folk-oriented Musikfest and other year-round festivals.
- Programming now draws more than 1.9 million visitors each year and delivers \$150 million in annual regional economic impact, alongside an estimated \$100 million in social capital benefits.<sup>8</sup>
- The model boosts tourism, sparks creative entrepreneurship, and has catalyzed adjacent redevelopment—demonstrating how aligned public- and private-sector investment in heritage assets can drive inclusive economic growth.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> ProSocial Valuation Service, *ArtsQuest ProSocial Valuation Statement (Bethlehem, PA: ArtsQuest, issued 23 January 2020)*, 4–6. <https://www.artsquest.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2020/01/ARTSQEST-PS-VS-NEW-012320.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Paul Muschick, “How a Free Music Festival Is Sparking Economic Development in the Lehigh Valley,” *Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corporation News*, 21 August 2023. <https://www.lehighvalley.org/news/quality-of-life/how-a-free-music-festival-is-sparking-economic-development-in-the-lehigh-valley/>

## Industry

### Sheboygan, WI – John Michael Kohler Arts/Industry Residency (JMKAC x Kohler Co.)

- Public-private partnership launched in 1974 between the John Michael Kohler Arts Center (non-profit) and Kohler Co. (global manufacturer)
- Embeds artists inside the active Pottery and Foundry facilities, pairing them with master craftspeople and industrial equipment
- Provides three-month residencies with 24/7 studio access, housing, materials, technical assistance, and a stipend
- 500+ artists from 26 countries have completed the program, producing large-scale ceramic and cast-metal works exhibited worldwide
- Collaboration often sparks product innovations for Kohler Co. while giving artists unique workforce training in industrial processes
- Demonstrates how existing manufacturing infrastructure can double as a creative skills lab, aligning corporate philanthropy with cultural workforce development.

## Gary, IN – Fiber Smart House – Union Station Tech Hub

- Adaptive-reuse of Gary’s 1910 Union Station into a 10,000-sq-ft, \$8 million fiber-optic network operations center and workforce-training hub led by Digital Equity LLC and preservation nonprofit Decay Devils.
- Financed with \$5 million in City of Gary ARPA funds and \$3 million in private/state capital, the project couples broadband infrastructure upgrades with downtown revitalization goals.<sup>10</sup>
- The Valparaiso-based Center of Workforce Innovations will run onsite training labs, offering certifications in fiber installation, coding, and emerging tech—building a talent pipeline for regional industry.
- Sits on the 157-mile Quantum Corridor fiber route, positioning the facility as a regional access point for high-capacity networks and future quantum-computing research.<sup>11</sup>
- Shows how a disused industrial landmark can be transformed into a creative and digital-skills campus through coordinated public funds, industry investment, and heritage-preservation leadership—blending economic development with cultural identity.

<sup>10</sup> Alex Dalton, “Gary, Ind., Breaks Ground on \$8 Million Fiber, Workforce Hub,” *Government Technology*, August 25, 2023. <https://www.govtech.com/network/gary-ind-breaks-ground-on-8m-fiber-workforce-hub>

<sup>11</sup> *Inside INdiana Business Staff*, “Fiber Smart House’ to Revitalize Historic Gary Building,” *Inside INdiana Business*, August 23 2023. <https://www.insideindianabusiness.com/articles/fiber-smart-house-to-revitalize-historic-gary-building>

## Burns Harbor, IN – Port of Indiana – Burns Harbor Heritage Trail

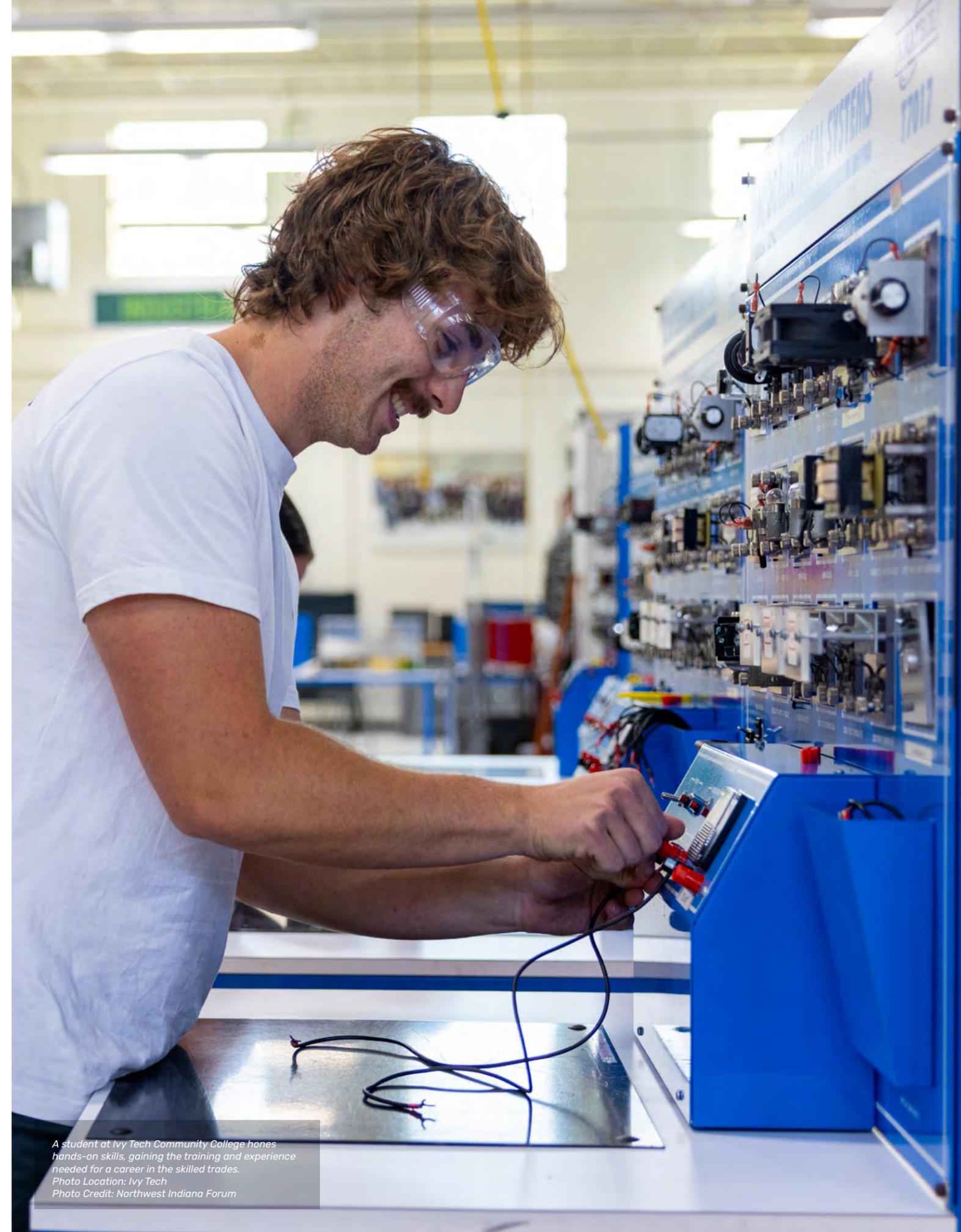
- Town planners and the Ports of Indiana are building a multi-use trail that threads from Indiana Dunes National Park through the working steel port, giving walkers and cyclists first-hand views of one of America’s last fully integrated mills.
- The concept grew out from the Northwest Indiana Regional Development Authority’s shoreline program, positioning the project for RDA capital and matching industry gifts.<sup>12</sup>
- Interpretation is co-designed with local historians, retired millworkers, and art teachers—pairing steel-heritage walking tours, plein-air painting classes, and “Port Open House” days that acquaint creatives with industrial processes.
- Demonstrates how an active manufacturing corridor can double as an outdoor skills lab and heritage-tourism draw when public agencies, port operators, and industry leaders collaborate.

## Michigan City, IN – Industrial Shoreline Cruises

- Private operator Harbor Country Adventures runs 90-minute Lake Michigan cruises in partnership with Indiana Dunes National Park, guiding passengers past dunes, power plants, and steel mills for a blended nature-and-industry narrative.
- Regional officials cite the cruises as a model for tours that reveal “a mix of industrial and natural landscapes,” underscoring public appetite for behind-the-scenes looks at Northwest Indiana’s manufacturing infrastructure.<sup>13</sup>
- Programs employ park rangers, artists, and local historians as on-board interpreters—offering seasonal contract work and skills development in storytelling, heritage interpretation, and creative placemaking.
- Shows how waterways adjacent to heavy industry can be leveraged—through public-private coordination—for creative workforce training, visitor engagement, and positive visibility for port-sector employers.

<sup>12</sup> Northwest Indiana Regional Development Authority, Fiscal Year 2011 Annual Report (Crown Point, IN: RDA, 2012). [https://www.in.gov/rda/files/RDA\\_FY2011\\_Annual\\_Report.pdf](https://www.in.gov/rda/files/RDA_FY2011_Annual_Report.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Joseph S. Pete, “Portage Looking to Secure Passenger Boats for Lake Michigan Tours, Potentially Lure Midwestern Cruise Ships,” *Times of Northwest Indiana*, September 9 2024 (reprinted in *Indiana Economic Digest*)



A student at Ivy Tech Community College hones hands-on skills, gaining the training and experience needed for a career in the skilled trades. Photo Location: Ivy Tech Photo Credit: Northwest Indiana Forum

# Appendix C:

## Precedents for regional arts and culture capacity building

### Ann Arbor, MI – Creative Washtenaw

- Began as a cultural-economy initiative inside a regional planning body; spun off as an independent nonprofit now recognized as the county's creative-sector backbone.
- Coordinates advocacy, public funding, data, marketing, and capacity-building across arts, sciences, history, and humanities.
- Keeps county-wide strategy aligned through formal pacts with economic-development, tourism, government, and philanthropic partners.
- Channeled ARPA and county dollars to local arts groups, led county cultural planning, and expanded civic & philanthropic support for creatives.
- Shows how a regional intermediary can knit the sector together, distribute resources more equitably, and attract sustained public-private investment.

### Northwest, AR – Creative Arkansas Community Hub & Exchange (CACHE)

- Launched in 2019 inside the Northwest Arkansas Council; now an independent nonprofit stewarding the region's creative economy.
- Serves as an arts ecosystem convener—connecting artists, municipalities, businesses, and cultural nonprofits while coordinating advocacy, data, funding, and capacity-building.
- Operates through cross-sector compacts with local governments, major foundations, and community stakeholders, delivering programs like the Municipal Arts Alliance.
- Has unified multiple cities around cultural priorities, channeling new public and philanthropic dollars (e.g., READI-style funds) toward arts initiatives and creative-sector growth.



*The Exchange Makerspace at the La Porte County Public Library is where ideas come to life. With free access to tools, technology, and collaborative space, visitors can learn new skills, explore hobbies, plan businesses, and create in a welcoming, hands-on environment—without the cost of owning equipment.  
Photo Credit: Northwest Indiana Forum*

# Appendix D:

## Updated *IGNITE the Region* Implementation Matrix

The IGNITE Implementation Matrix serves as a practical roadmap for advancing the priorities outlined in the *IGNITE the Region* strategy. Originally developed as part of the 2017 planning process, the matrix has been updated to reflect the addition of a sixth pillar focused on arts and culture, ensuring that creative economy initiatives are fully integrated into the region's broader economic development framework.

The matrix outlines specific actions, timelines, and responsible parties for each impact area, providing a clear structure for implementation and accountability. By translating strategy into trackable tasks, it enables the Northwest Indiana Forum to monitor progress, align partners, and adjust course as needed.

The matrix will be updated periodically to reflect progress and evolving priorities. Access the latest IGNITE Implementation Matrix at [nwiforum.org/IGNITE](http://nwiforum.org/IGNITE).



*Cowles Bog meets industry in Northwest Indiana. This protected wetland, part of the Indiana Dunes National Park, exists alongside the region's industrial landscape, highlighting the balance between conservation and economic development in Northwest Indiana. Photo Credit: Indiana Dunes Tourism*

