# LESSONS FROM THE CULTURE AND COMMUNITY NETWORK

Smart Growth AMERICA

SSTI State Smart Transportation Initiative

# Table of Contents

## Note from the National Association of Regional Councils

The National Association of Regional Councils (NARC) is proud to support Smart Growth America's Culture and Community Network and its vision for helping regions strengthen communities through arts and cultural strategies. Regional councils are uniquely positioned to bring citizens, community leaders, and elected officials together. By incorporating staff creativity, local artists, and community organizations, the Culture and Community Network gives regional councils new tools to better facilitate public input on infrastructure planning and projects. We encourage regional councils across the country to take advantage of this opportunity to advance community-driven planning in their regions.

## Acknowledgements

We envision a country where transportation, housing, and development choices create communities that are healthy, prosperous, and resilient—no matter where you live or who you are. Learn more at: **www.smartgrowthamerica.org**

SGA's Arts and Culture program advances racial equity and climate justice within smart growth through creative, cultural organizing and community power-building. Artists and cultural workers are essential co-leaders, partners, and instigators in this work.

The **State Smart Transportation Initiative** is a project of Smart Growth America and the High Road Strategy Center, based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. SSTI convenes top officials from state transportation agencies across the U.S., builds capacity among agency staff through applied research and technical assistance, and shares knowledge and best practices with the larger transportation community.

This program was made possible by the generous support of **The Kresge Foundation**.

SGA also thanks the **National Association of Regional Councils** for its partnership and support of the Culture and Community Network.

*This report was written by Eric Murphy and Marian Liou based on the experiences of Smart Growth America's Arts & Culture team, the Atlanta Regional Commission, and participants in the inaugural cohort of the Culture and Community Network (April-October 2025). Additional support was provided by Jaibin Mathew and Allentza Michel of Powerful Pathways, with editing from Eric Cova. This report was released in January 2026.*

# INTRODUCTION

Metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) and regional planning agencies play a pivotal but often unseen role in shaping how communities grow. They coordinate transportation and land use planning across multiple jurisdictions, allocate federal funding, and set priorities that determine which projects move forward. Their decisions influence everything from commutes to climate resilience, making them critical points of leverage for promoting community-centered planning planning that delivers benefits across all of the communities they serve. Because of this unique and extensive role, MPOs are well-positioned to integrate arts and culture strategies into their work—not as an afterthought, but to fundamentally reimagine how planning is conceived and executed at a regional scale.

Transportation planning agencies must involve the public as they make their plans, both as a matter of federal requirements and good public practice. Traditional approaches to public involvement, like in-person evening meetings or surveys, often fail to engage the full breadth of community needs, experiences, and aspirations. They typically favor wealthier property owners while excluding others, resulting in limited participation. This negatively impacts those excluded communities, the agency's planning process, and outcomes for everyone.

*Street photowalk led by the Boyle Heights Arts Conservatory for Smart Growth America's Healing Our Highways program, 2024.*

To ensure that the whole public is involved, we need new approaches beyond the status quo. Some agencies have begun using arts and culture strategies to reach a broader audience and encourage more meaningful public involvement, focusing on historically excluded and harmed groups. Incorporating arts and culture into public participation is a broad approach rather than a particular set of techniques and can be adapted to meet a local context. Engaging with communities through the arts diverse creative and cultural expression encourages meaningful involvement because people can communicate on their own terms rather than navigating opaque, unfamiliar, or exclusionary government processes.

Arts and culture strategies can bring additional benefits to planning. Everyone *can* be creative, but planners don't always have their creative side cultivated or learn to bring their lived experiences to the table as part of professional training. A more creative and open mindset among agency staff can lead to more imaginative planning.

This report highlights innovative arts and culture strategies in community engagement within regional planning contexts, drawing from the experiences of MPOs and planning agencies across a broad spectrum of geography, experience, and institutional culture that have come together through Smart Growth America's Culture and Community Network to learn, experiment, and refine their approaches to integrating arts and culture into regional planning. It provides guidance for MPO and other planning agency staff, those working in arts and culture, equity, and community engagement, and others who support them, to fundamentally reimagine how planning is conceived and executed at a regional scale in ways that more effectively reflects communities' realities and needs.

## About Smart Growth America's Culture and Community Network

From April through October 2025, Smart Growth America convened the Culture and Community Network (CCN), bringing together staff from nine metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) across the country to integrate arts, culture, and creativity into transportation and regional planning. Through peer learning, experimentation, and structured reflection, participating agencies explored how cultural and creative strategies can make planning more accessible, equitable, and community-driven.

**Participating agencies included (and regions represented):**

- Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (Chicago, IL)
- Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (Greater Philadelphia/ Southern New Jersey)
- Flint Hills Regional Council and Flint Hills Metropolitan Planning Organization (Manhattan, KS)
- Grand Valley Metropolitan Council (Grand Rapids, MI)
- Metropolitan Transportation Commission-Association of Bay Area Governments (San Francisco Bay Area, CA)
- Metro (Portland, OR)
- PlanRVA (Richmond, VA)
- R1 Planning Council (Rockford, IL)
- Southern California Association of Governments (Los Angeles, CA)

The Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), the MPO and regional planning agency for metropolitan Atlanta, and the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, the regional planning agency for the Boston region, each with about a decade of arts and culture experience, also participated as guest experts and speakers. The ARC's journey from early experiments to a mature, institutionalized program without significant external funding support offers valuable lessons about what's possible when organizations commit to fundamentally reimagining community engagement. The following investigation of ARC's experience illuminates both the challenges and breakthroughs that can emerge when planning agencies center artists and cultural workers as essential partners in the planning process.

# CASE STUDY:

## THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND CULTURE PROGRAM AT THE ATLANTA REGIONAL COMMISSION

**Background**

The Atlanta Regional Commission is the metropolitan planning organization for the 11 counties that make up the Atlanta metro area. With a broader mandate than a standalone MPO, ARC has cross-sector planning responsibilities that include community development, land use, aging, and natural resources, among others. Its greater resources, connections, and internal support across a variety of areas made it easier for the agency to add arts and culture to its portfolio more than a decade ago.

ARC's engagement with arts and culture has evolved over years and through several iterations. Perhaps most significantly, ARC has invested in this work primarily through its own internal resources—dedicated staff time, program support, and funding for artists and community-based organizations (or CBOs, local organizations led by and serving residents that focus on specific needs such as health, education, or well-being)—rather than relying on philanthropic or other external grants. In 2012, ARC absorbed the Metro Atlanta Arts and Culture Coalition and was one of the first MPOs to incorporate arts and culture into its operations under former executive director Doug Hooker. The organization's embrace of arts and culture began as an effort to promote the local arts community and was met with enthusiasm from staff.

These efforts opened doors for ARC to connect with arts leaders in its role as a regional convener, promote local artists, and encourage a collaborative ecosystem of arts and civic organizations in the area. One mural project, funded through an external fundraising campaign, helped establish a working relationship with the public art program at MARTA, Atlanta's transit agency, and introduced ARC to local artists.

*Work day with Village Skatepark ATL for ARC's Culture and Community Design program, 2024. Photos courtesy of ARC.*

ARC's involvement in arts and culture would evolve over the years from this early stage. While some artists saw the efforts as an opportunity to lift up their work, others challenged that approach and identified a disconnect from community benefit. This group saw the traditional approach to arts and culture as too superficial, potentially focused on beautification that could lead to displacement. The efforts were also not yet well integrated throughout the rest of the agency's work.also not yet well integrated throughout the rest of the agency's work.

Meanwhile, traditional community engagement efforts were falling short at ARC. An informal internal analysis found that the overwhelming majority of agency departments used a traditional "inform" or "consult" approach to community engagement. Staff reported a lack of a unified community engagement strategy across the organization, feeling that "minimum requirements" drove engagement practices that were not part of a larger strategic vision.

"We weren't planning the way we should," said community development manager Samyukth Shenbaga. "There's enough that I have listened to and read and heard, talking with fellow planning professionals, that traditional processes aren't successful."

The organization pivoted in its approach to arts and culture after 2020 through a variety of changes. A change in board membership, staff personnel, and the national zeitgeist after the death of George Floyd and subsequent protests allowed ARC to develop a new focus for its arts and culture efforts.


*Site visit to Ballethnic Dance Company for Atlanta Regional Commission's Arts Leaders of Metro Atlanta program, 2022.*

Arts and culture efforts were moved into the Community Development department, allowing for better integration into planning efforts and the use of federal funds to support the work. Community Engagement and Arts Program Director Marian Liou (now the Director of Arts & Culture Director at Smart Growth America) was hired with a background in community advocacy work that allowed a change in focus. She sought to use arts and culture to engage more substantively with a broader range of community members and develop community engagement skills among the local arts community.

> "The pivot was to say artists were core to us understanding communities. They were translators of community issues."
>
> - SAMYUKTH SHENBAGA
> COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT MANAGER, ARC

*Photos courtesy of ARC.*

Realizing ARC needed to forge new connections with communities that had been excluded from and harmed by traditional planning practices and infrastructure, the organization started to explore how art could build community power and address neighborhood and community concerns.

Investing resources to expand participation and build relationships with community groups and residents could ensure their needs, values, and perspectives were reflected in development plans, while rebuilding trust, increasing transparency, and creating more sustainable outcomes. The organization saw arts and culture strategies as an innovative way to expand that involvement and make it more meaningful.

"The pivot was to say artists were core to us understanding communities. They were translators of community issues," said Shenbaga.


*Site visit led by We Love Buford Highway for ARC's ALMA program, 2022.*

## Design and implementation

At first, ARC's program lacked examples and knowledge of the work they were setting out to do. Early efforts were funded through MPO membership dues or those funds were used as matches to land state and federal grants. Without flexible arts and culture funding, the organization was entering somewhat uncharted territory.

Staff like Liou worked to connect ARC's existing arts and culture efforts—which included the Arts Leaders of Metro Atlanta (ALMA) program—with the organization's responsibilities as a regional planning organization. Using arts and culture strategies to improve community engagement would allow ARC to fund those efforts with federal transportation dollars. ARC's new approach shifted the status quo while still falling squarely within federal guidance and requirements.

Things started small, with a $15,000 budget to pay artists, culture bearers, and community-based organizations (CBOs) participating in the organization's public involvement work. While previous organization policy was to not pay these organizations for their contributions, that changed through a significant and persistent casemaking effort. Not everyone was convinced of the connection between arts and culture strategies and planning efforts at first, including compliance staff and some external partners, but that changed as internal changemakers spent significant effort making the case for the strategy.

It took internal memos, research, and conversations by changemakers among staff and supportive leadership that emphasized the importance of paying CBOs and cultural workers for their unique expertise, which was not available in-house or through typical planning, engineering, and design consultants. As skeptics saw the undeniable results of arts and culture strategies improving the quality of public involvement, that made the case easier. Finally, an update of FHWA rules clearly allowing CBOs to be reimbursed for contributing their time and expertise cemented the change.

ALMA was an existing arts leadership program that was retooled and rebranded as

the Culture and Community Design program (and has since been rebranded again as Community-Centered Design), and brought artists and community groups together to co-design community infrastructure projects. For example, the Alif Institute created a schematic for a connection from their property to the planned Peachtree Creek Greenway that would allow them to share Arab culture and increase their presence among passersby. Needing to engage with the Georgia Department of Transportation on the project, the group reported feeling more confident in their ability to influence the Greenway's outcomes after working with the ARC and learning more about being involved in the planning process. Through the program, the Ballethnic Dance Company was able to formalize an artistic idea for wayfinding and connection to a nearby transit stop and learn to "speak in the language necessary about issues that are important to us."

Through this program, ARC developed a directory of local artists who were interested in civic work. They also created a handbook for incorporating the arts into planning efforts.

In 2023, the program continued its innovative shift toward developing community engagement skills among local artists under the organization's Director of Community Engagement and Culture, Roshani Thakore. Thakore's hire was a strategic advancement of the program because she brought her background as a social practice artist to the table. Like with Liou, community experience and connections were critical and allowed further institutional change and the ability to start planning efforts from a different place.

Recently, the program's senior planner has been hired from a CBO and draws perspective from their experiences skateboarding around and through the built environment. The rebranded program now describes itself as a place where "community organizations serving underrepresented populations collaborate with artists, local officials, and planners to design community engagement projects using arts and culture."

In one example of the CCD program's work, the African Diaspora Art Museum of Atlanta created a "One Clarkston" art activation to cultivate belonging and togetherness between American-born and foreign-born Black residents in Clarkston, Georgia, focusing on the community's youth.

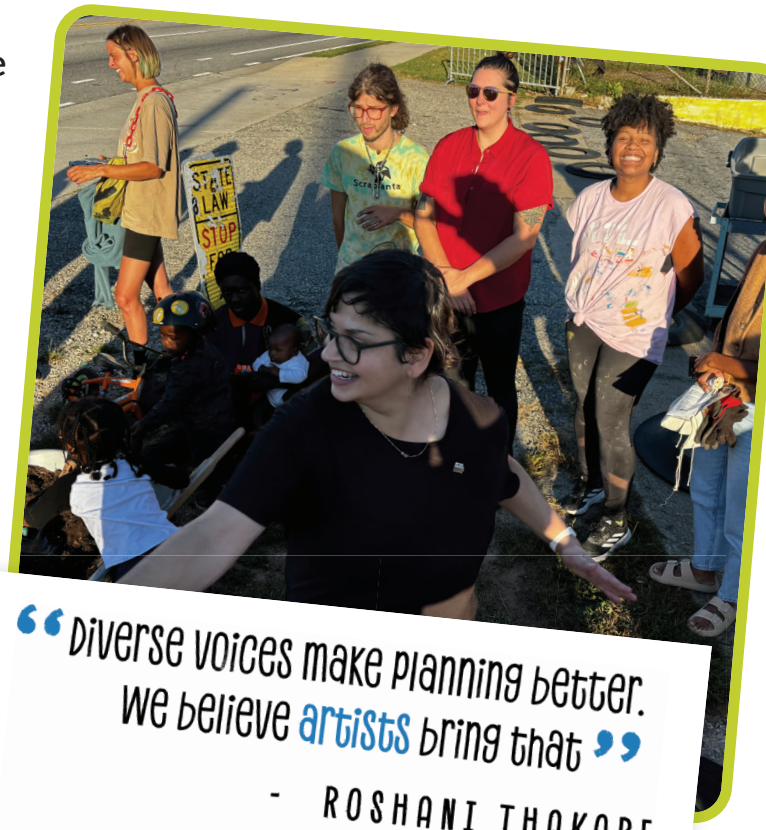
ARC COO Mike Alexander highlighted the difference in approach of the program compared to traditional community engagement efforts. Rather than an evening meeting with a staff member "standing with a board saying 'here's a transportation project that's going to happen to your community,'" the program created a day-long art-focused event with the community's young people. These strategies still face challenges, but Alexander hoped that those who participated would take away that there are people who care about their community; that these innovative efforts would pay off in meaningful public involvement even years down the road; and that other organizations would start their own similar engagement efforts.

## Learning, unlearning, reflecting, and evolving

ARC established connections with groups historically harmed by traditional planning processes and learned that "coalition building between marginalized communities is an opportunity" for the organization. By working with ARC, potential future partners gained the skills to engage their communities and built trust in the organization.

"Diverse voices make planning better. We believe artists bring that," said Thakore.

Through the evolution of these programs, the organization learned important lessons. First, arts and culture efforts needed support and buy-in from across the organization, often requiring groundwork to be laid first, before programs could move forward. Internal champions of the work were the engine that moved those efforts. Leadership that understood the potential of the work had to give those changemakers space to develop and test different approaches and strategies. New board members had to join, changing the composition of the board, to make the efforts possible.



> "Diverse voices make planning better. We believe artists bring that"
>
> - ROSHANI THAKORE
> DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND CULTURE, ARC

*Photos courtesy of ARC.*

And throughout, many involved in the program needed to spend significant time making the case for these efforts to external and internal skeptics, including in formally researched memos and reports, given that the work at times had few precedents and examples to point to.

Using arts and culture strategies in community engagement work required a conscious shift to a different way of operating. That meant for the work to be successful, the organization needed

a commitment to and tolerance of change. Shenbaga said that ARC had to "get comfortable being uncomfortable" and understand that the progress of these strategies might be non-linear or "messy" — and that was okay, and to be expected.

Alexander said very wide guardrails and support for innovation were needed. "That takes patience," he said, "and that in itself is a form of innovation."

Staff found that lived experience and a community-centric, artistic mindset were crucial for the program's success. These were necessary to define and measure success differently, focusing on community outcomes. Initial success metrics included the amount of money paid to artists, the number of CBOs engaged, and increased interaction with historically marginalized and excluded groups.

Community outcomes that were less easily measured were empowerment and the ability and willingness of community groups to speak up in an informed way. Organizational indicators of success included whether agency practices were changed, whether the agency valued other ways of communication and knowledge, and openness and creativity across the agency's operations.

The ultimate indicator of success, according to Liou, is whether the community's needs are being met and community outcomes are improving.

"patience in itself is a form of innovation"

- Mike Alexander
CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, ARC

*ARC COO Michael Alexander (far right) at Healing, Bridging, Thriving: A Summit on Arts and Culture in our Communities, hosted by the National Endowment for the Arts and the White House Domestic Policy Council, 2024.*

## Looking ahead

An evaluation process and constant feedback loop have been created to ensure arts and culture strategies continue to grow and iterate. Quantitative measurements, like the number of new members of the public involved, keep efforts accountable. Equally important is checking in with participants about how they feel subjectively, and whether each part of the program is accomplishing the goals established at the outset. Thakore uses an internal toolkit, in part adapted from the Center for Artistic Activism, to establish and formalize this feedback and evaluation process and to train colleagues on creative community engagement.

*Photos courtesy of ARC.*

Several staff noted that **educational work and building support are ongoing processes involving many stakeholders**, including the local community, elected leaders, consultants, the agency's board, and others. Internal policy changes and training are cementing arts and cultural approaches throughout the organization, but the changing people in a variety of roles over time will mean that some work will likely always be involved in teaching newcomers to begin from a different place with a new mindset.

Alexander notes that engagement efforts across ARC must be coordinated with the department that houses the organization's arts and culture work. This is one way to institutionalize the changes that arts and culture strategies have brought to the organization, but more ways to formalize and institutionalize that change in culture should be explored.

While ARC's experience demonstrates what's possible with sustained commitment over more than a decade, MPOs don't need to wait years to get started. The path forward depends on where your organization is today. The following section explores three distinct entry points into this work, showing how agencies at different stages — from those with no formal program to those looking to expand existing efforts — can take meaningful next steps.

# THREE PATHWAYS TO GETTING STARTED

Metropolitan Planning Organizations enter arts and culture work from different starting points. Understanding these pathways can help identify where your agency fits and what next steps make sense.

The experiences of Culture and Community Network participants reveal that there is no single formula for success. An MPO in the Richmond, Virginia, region found ways to experiment with creative engagement that didn't require large budgets or extensive staff capacity. A large MPO serving 5.5 million people discovered how to build on a decade of sporadic initiatives to create sustained integration. And an established program in Portland learned how to move from a single grant program to agency-wide cultural transformation.

What these diverse experiences share is a willingness to start somewhere—and a recognition that the starting point matters less than the commitment to authentic engagement and continuous learning. Whether you're starting from scratch, building on past experiments, or scaling up existing programs, these pathways offer concrete examples of how to move forward.

## Pathway 1: Starting from scratch (PlanRVA, Richmond, VA)

**Context:** A regional planning organization serving nine localities and over a million residents with no formal arts and culture program.

**How it began:** Staff with non-traditional backgrounds (grassroots organizing, higher education, union organizing) and personal creative practices (quilting, arts) brought their whole selves to work. Leadership supported this authenticity and created space for experimentation.

**Early steps:**

- Internal survey using video (not a conventional questionnaire) to gauge staff comfort with arts and culture.
- "People's Budget" forum theatre exercise in partnership with local government.
- PlanRVA Day with maps and sticker-based activities to demystify planning.

- Zero Fare Transit campaign using storytelling as data.

**Key enabler:** Executive director Martha Shickle experienced how other organizations used art to spark conversations about difficult topics like redlining. "A visual display of information hits people differently than a dryly written report. It shows up differently in people's hearts."

**Critical lesson:** Staff emphasized that "everyone is an artist in some way" and creative engagement doesn't require professional artists—it requires openness, experimentation, and respect for community voice.


## Pathway 2: Building on periodic efforts (DVRPC, Greater Philadelphia/Southern New Jersey)

**Context:** An MPO serving 5.5 million people with over a decade of one-off arts initiatives but no sustained integration.

**Evolution:**

- **2008 and 2023:** Foundational reports examining demographics, culture, and creativity.
- **2012:** Regional forums showcasing Mural Arts Philadelphia and arts-based economic development.
- **2018-2024:** Creative demonstrations like experimental pop-ups and station art.
- **2025:** Intentional shift toward sustained integration through CCN participation.

**Current experiments:**

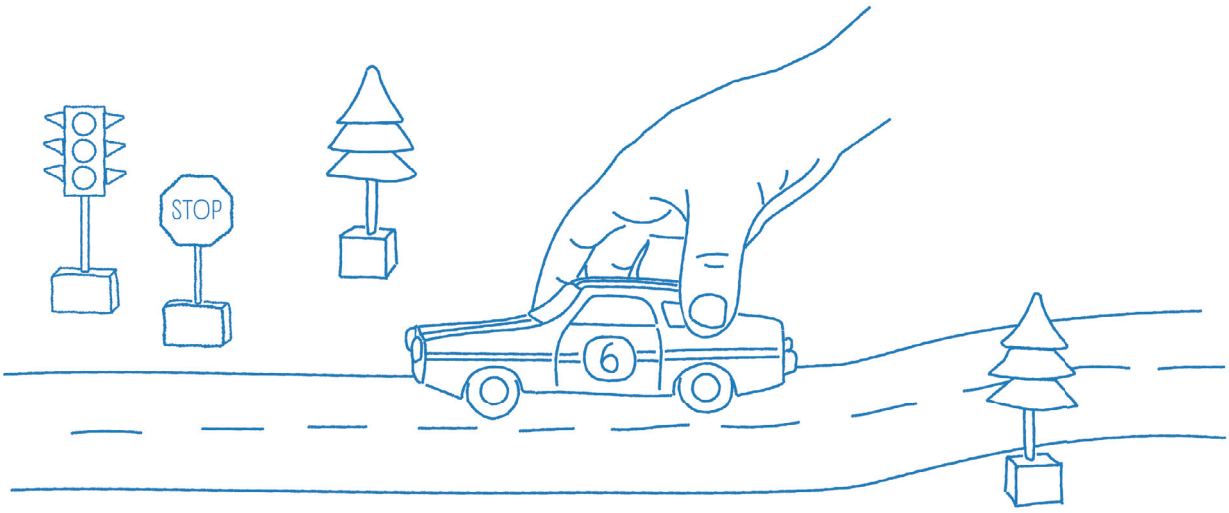
- Scale models and Matchbox cars to explain street design (described as "joyful, silly, and effective").
- Partnerships with Artworks Trenton and local cycling groups.
- "Art in Planning Workshop" showcasing staff creativity while connecting with outside artists.
- Embedding creative methods in Safe Streets for All committee.

**Challenge faced:** Even when past arts initiatives were successful, they often lacked the structures to sustain lessons learned and build momentum over time.

**Critical lesson:** Transportation Planner Jen Farris noted, "If we keep doing the same thing, we'll get the same outcome." An internal survey revealed strong staff interest in risk-taking, creating momentum for change.

**Next step:** Preparing specific, fundable arts and culture projects for inclusion in the FY2027 work program to move from side projects to core activities.

While agencies like PlanRVA and DVRPC demonstrate how to launch or revitalize arts and culture efforts, other MPOs face a different challenge: how to take an established program and deepen its integration across the entire organization. This requires moving beyond a single successful initiative to fundamentally shift how the agency approaches all of its community engagement work.



## Pathway 3: Expanding an existing program (Metro, Portland, OR)

**Context:** An MPO with an established Community Placemaking grant program seeking agency-wide integration.

**Foundation:** Metro started with a good foundation, managing five performance arts venues in the Portland area as part of its portfolio, with staff focused on delivering arts and culture for the region. Principal planner Dana Lucero transitioned from transit work in 2017 and identified an opportunity to repurpose a dormant funding pool. The initial placemaking program launched with $100,000 distributed across six organizations, and has grown steadily supported by the agency's equity strategy.

Since 2017, grants of $5,000 to $25,000 have blended community with arts and culture strategies as the program has doubled in size and still has many more applicants than it can fund.

"It came out of a desire to engage communities differently," said Deputy Director of Planning, Development and Research Malu Wilkinson. "This was a way to get community voices telling us what they wanted to invest in and giving them money to follow through."

**Key shift:** Moving from treating artists as vendors to engaging them as collaborators in storytelling projects, community gatherings, and creative processes. The community placemaking program has pushed the boundaries of what is possible in connecting art with local communities, supporting projects that include storytelling, community gardens, markets, history, and other elements of culture that extend beyond physical art.

"There's a whole ecosystem of people and networks you're missing if you're not tapping into arts and culture," said Metro Councilor Christine Lewis. She said the placemaking program had helped the agency connect with leaders of community organizations that can help involve the public in projects or larger processes like Oregon Metro's 50-year Future Vision process.

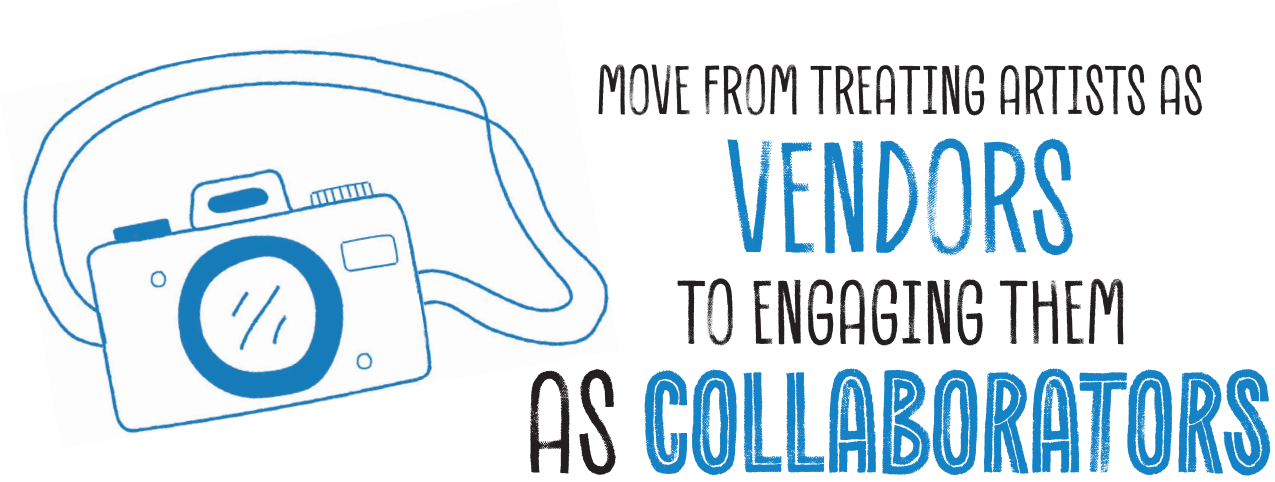
**Expansion underway:**

- **Future Vision process:** 18-month, 50-year regional visioning effort intentionally centering artists and culture-bearers, working with the former Creative Laureate of Portland as a consultant.
- **Safe Streets for All:** Exploring "data justice" by elevating qualitative stories and lived experiences alongside technical datasets.

- **Internal cohort:** Creating an arts and culture group of staff with creative practices to meet regularly, hear from artists, and pilot experiments.

- **Broader integration:** The program has impacted how the agency approaches engagement, incorporating arts and culture more strongly into public involvement processes. Lewis noted a parks engagement session that let participants build parks with Play-Doh allowed her five-year-old to contribute. "That's how you're going to get a lot of people who aren't going to fill out a survey."

**Program design lessons:** Wilkinson said the organization has learned to simplify grant requirements and work closely with procurement and legal staff to make the grants easy for community organizations to apply for and manage. Many are new to the grant process and require more time and engagement for the project to run smoothly. Using funds from a construction excise tax rather than federal funds has made it easier to cut some of the strings that would normally come with similar grants. Being willing to experiment, allow some freedom, and spend the time required for success has shifted the perception of what government can do in some communities.




**Challenges and evolution:** There have been obstacles, including limited staff and time. For most of its history, the community grantmaking program has been managed by a single staffer, Dana Lucero. That is now changing, with new staff coming on. "We can't have a sustainable program where all the knowledge lies in one person," said Wilkinson.

**Pivotal moment:** During a virtual meeting, a Community Placemaking grantee told communications manager Molly Cooney-Mesker directly: "This [process of supporting community-based organizations to implement their own ideas and projects] is what real community engagement is." That moment crystallized the need to embed creative practices throughout the agency's engagement work.

**Critical lesson:** Senior public affairs specialist Lakeeyscia Griffin, who brings a multidisciplinary artistic practice of photography, music, and videography to her work, explains: "These structures [of institutional processes such as grantmaking and contracting] may feel diametrically opposed to the cultivation of arts, but they're necessary so that when artists come in, they can do what they're here to do."

**Takeaway:** You can start from anywhere. The key is matching your approach to your agency's readiness, resources, and relationships. Small MPOs can be nimble; larger MPOs can leverage scale and resources.

These pathways illustrate that successful integration of arts and culture isn't about having the perfect conditions—it's about recognizing opportunities, supporting champions, and being willing to experiment and learn. But knowing where to start is only the beginning. The following recommendations distill lessons from across all CCN agencies to provide practical guidance for implementing arts and culture strategies, regardless of which pathway your organization takes.


*Above: The interactive bicycle sculpture being drawn or written on by two event participants adding their own creative designs or suggested improvements about biking in East Trenton. Photo credit: Cassidy Boulan*

*Below: An interactive bicycle sculpture created by artist Wills Kinsley commissioned by DVRPC for a public engagement event focused on road safety and proposed traffic calming improvement in East Trenton, New Jersey. Photo credit: Jen Farris*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## FOR IMPLEMENTING ARTS AND CULTURE STRATEGIES

Integrating arts and culture into regional planning requires more than enthusiasm. It demands strategic thinking about organizational readiness, internal champions, funding sources, and measures of success. The recommendations that follow are drawn from the collective experience of CCN participants who navigated these challenges across diverse contexts and organizational cultures.

These recommendations are not meant to be followed in strict sequence. Instead, think of them as interconnected considerations that will need attention at different stages of your work. You may find yourself returning to questions of internal readiness even as you're implementing programs, or discovering new funding sources as you deepen relationships with external partners.


*Marc Weinblatt, Founder and Co-Director, Mandala Center for Change, leads an applied theater workshop during the Culture and Community Network Seattle convening, June 2025.*

### Assessing internal readiness

The first critical step is honest assessment: understanding where your organization is today and what conditions need to be cultivated for this work to take root and flourish. Here are important indicators to reflect on in assessing how prepared your agency is.

**Authenticity, trust, and commitment** are necessary for these strategies to be effective in engaging excluded community groups, including those who have developed distrust of government agencies based on past experiences. The willingness to start with a listening stance can help establish credibility and open a pathway to trust.

Rather than public engagement being a box to check—a process where planners present project that will happen to the community—planners must center local communities in the planning process. As PlanRVA discovered, "showing up places when they don't need something" and building relationships before asking for input made a significant difference in how the community relates to and trusts the agency.

**Martha Shickle, PlanRVA Executive Director:** "A visual display of information hits people differently than a dryly written report. It shows up differently in people's hearts."

**Risk tolerance** is essential for organizations conditioned to systematic procedures and bureaucratic processes. In arts and culture efforts, progress may not be linear and may look different than leaders expect. Re-establishing trust with communities may be a bumpy road.

However, as Shickle noted, "We're in an environment where failure is not an option" as stewards of public money. Starting small and building through practice and action can help establish trust and tolerance for risk. Low-stakes experiments build confidence and evidence.

A staff self-assessment can help identify staff strengths and their roles in arts and culture efforts, as well as what can restore them and make these strategies sustainable.

Mike Alexander emphasized there must be "bureaucratic determination" in supporting arts and culture strategies, with wide guardrails and support for innovation. "You have to be willing to say, 'let's experiment with this,' and give it the space, time, and opportunity to develop, learning along the way. That takes patience. That in itself is a form of innovation."

**Lived experience and a creative mindset** can bring a more imaginative approach than an administrative mindset more typical found in planning agencies. Not everyone will identify as an artist, but everyone has the ability to be creative, to cultivate openness, and engage their imagination.

Examples across CCN agencies include:

- **PlanRVA:** Kristin Hott brings quilting as both personal practice and metaphor for community planning; Emily Williams leverages a background in higher education and union organizing.
- **Metro:** Lakeeyscia Griffin bridges her roles as photographer, musician, and videographer with professional work.
- **CMAP**: Elizabeth Miller began a career in the arts world working in grantmaking; Asha Barnes studied anthropology and uses poetry as artistic outlet; Sema Abulhab has long been interested in arts, languages, and design.
- **Flint Hills:** Janna Williams and Abigail Danner both have a landscape architecture background; as a city planner, Angela Schnee is interested in bringing artistic elements into transportation projects.

PlanRVA emphasizes "bringing your whole self to work" as an asset rather than something to compartmentalize. CMAP staff noted that CCN was the first

professional development opportunity that felt both national in scope and grounded in real practice, providing affirmation that others at MPOs are grappling with the same questions.

**Autonomy, support, and patience** are needed for staff and artists implementing these strategies so genuine connections can be forged with communities the organization may have previously had trouble reaching and supporting. Critically, arts and culture efforts will take dedicated staff and dedicated time. Setting aside space and time for something staff feel connected to and involved in will be more effective and authentic when consciously included as part of work responsibilities rather than added on top of already full plates on a volunteer basis.

*Culture and Community Network participants pose during an applied theatre exercise, June 2025.*

**Intentionality and fidelity** to the ultimate purpose of integrating arts and culture within an agency's work is critical. Since this work seeks to engage communities that have been harmed by infrastructure projects and excluded from participation, an organization must identify which groups are typically not at the table during public involvement and make intentional efforts to reach and include those groups. Collecting and tracking data about who participates can help set a baseline to measure progress.

Metro faces the challenge of ensuring geographic representation across its region. While most placemaking applications come from Portland, resources must be distributed region-wide. MPO governance structures can give disproportionate power to suburban jurisdictions or state agencies, further distancing decision-making from those most impacted.

Understanding your agency's readiness is essential, but readiness alone doesn't create change. Translating assessment into action requires people—internal

champions who can advocate for new approaches and enroll partners across the organization in this vision. The following section explores how to identify, support, and mobilize these changemakers.

## Cultivating internal champions and partners

Large planning agencies often answer to a board that directs organizational activities. Allies among the highest levels of authority are necessary to advance arts and culture strategies. The same is true of allies in executive leadership, who will be in charge of giving arts and culture work the time, space, and perhaps funding to be effective.

How leadership support manifested across agencies:

- **PlanRVA:** The executive director attended art installations in the community and created space for staff to express interest before formalizing programs. The board created a dedicated engagement position in 2019, distinct from compliance-focused public participation. Local art and innovation consultancy Another Limited Rebellion hosted a "creative sprint" that let staff discover one another's creativity and talent.
- **Metro:** Leadership allowed experimentation and learning from imperfect processes, recognizing that mistakes would be made and committing to continuous improvement with each cycle or project.
- **Metro:** Leadership worked closely with procurement and legal staff to minimize restrictions and make grants accessible to community organizations new to the grant process, demonstrating willingness to experiment and allow freedom while committing the time required for success.
- **DVRPC:** Executive leadership encouraged staff participation in CCN as a strategic learning opportunity.

**"Start where the soil is fertile":** Metro's team learned from Seattle Director of Arts and Culture Gülgün Kayim at a CCN in-person convening to focus first on staff with a creative practice or those who are already eager to engage with arts and culture. Dana Lucero saw opportunity in her transition from a transit role to repurpose dormant funding into something meaningful.

**Identify internal champions and skeptics:** An organization wanting to employ arts and culture strategies will need to identify internal champions for the work and support them, and identify skeptics who may need to be brought on board before work can advance. "Just try and make sure there aren't obstacles in the way of these high-performing people," said Alexander.

Spending time power-mapping can help changemakers identify the best way to

move forward: which decision-makers need to be on board, who can support their efforts, and where to focus initial casemaking efforts.

With champions identified and leadership support secured, the next challenge emerges: how do planners and artists—professionals from different worlds with different vocabularies and ways of working—learn to collaborate effectively? This requires developing a common language and shared understanding of what arts and culture integration means in practice.

*Artist Scott Oshima leading the group in a kazoo symphony while on a tour of the Seattle Chinatown-International District, Culture and Community Network convening, June 2025.*

## Framing the issue and developing shared language

Everyone is able to be creative, but planners don't always have their creative side cultivated as part of professional training, and artists aren't always familiar with the planning process. It is rare to have everyone on the same page and speaking the same language at the outset, so it is essential to establish a shared commitment to staying curious and open-minded. This includes being in constant communication, spending time to understand and validate others' perspectives and meanings, and being willing to make adjustments.

"Part of talking the same language is…you have to be in the environment to learn the other culture's language. Planners have to spend more time in the arts world and invite artists to spend more time in the planner's world," said former ARC executive director Doug Hooker. "There needs to be a regular, ongoing, mutual conversation and dialogue professionally and socially."

One approach Director of Community Engagement and Culture Roshani Thakore has taken at ARC is hosting planning meetings in artistic spaces to provide more exposure to a broader artistic approach. This can help build relationships and understanding, shift perspectives, and open future possibilities for local work.

**Practices to establish while shifting organizational culture (revisit regularly rather than do once):**

- Understand and expect that the organization is shifting its culture.
- Collaboratively define principles and values, as well as commonly agreed upon ground rules for working together.

- Take time together periodically to imagine the possibilities of these strategies.
- Bring in positive examples of successful participation and collaboration from staff's own lives as inspiration.

*Grand Valley Metro Council partnered with the Earthkeepers student group for a screenprinting event around sustainability at Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Participating students also received ten dollar vouchers for a campus coffee shop.*

- Define (and remind each other) what the program is not: typically not merely public art and murals, not city beautification, not an effort to boost tourism.

**Artists should be expected to be thought partners with planners rather than fee-for-service contractors.** And planners can bring their own, often untapped, creativity to the table.

**Examples of creative engagement methods:**

- **DVRPC:** Scale models and Matchbox cars to explain street design changes (described as "joyful, silly, and effective").
- **Metro:** Artists leading storytelling projects and community gatherings that reframe planning issues.
- **Flint Hills:** Trivia nights at local breweries; participating in Third Thursdays arts event with mental mapping and sketching; cultural asset mapping.
- **CMAP:** Screen-printing activities where residents designed images for tote bags; zines as an engagement tool.
- **MTC-ABAG:** Photography projects highlighting human stories.

**The power of informality:** Flint Hills learned that trivia nights and arts festivals attract audiences that might never attend a traditional public meeting or town hall. Creative activities don't need to result in a polished product—they serve as entry points to help residents share ideas.

Periodically assessing where current practices fall short can highlight where changes need to be made. Examples might include community members

experiencing participation fatigue, language barriers, lack of understanding of opaque government processes, lack of access to decision-making, or other exclusionary experiences, depending on local context.

**Understanding the theory and potential of arts and culture strategies is important, but at some point, organizations need to move from conversation to action. The question becomes: what does the first step actually look like?**

### Identifying and allocating internal funding sources

As pilot projects demonstrate value and organizational interest grows, questions about resources and sustainability inevitably arise. Arts and culture strategies require investment—in artist fees, staff time, and program support. Understanding funding options and how to access them becomes critical for moving from small experiments to sustained programs.

Arts and culture strategies in public involvement can be funded through federal transportation dollars, including the Surface Transportation Block Grant Program administered by FHWA and through FTA Metropolitan and Statewide Planning funds. Community-preferred engagement strategies, understanding community wants and needs, and broad community representation have been considered "features of meaningful public involvement" in USDOT guidance.

**Funding models and amounts from CCN agencies:**

- **ARC:** Started with MPO membership dues and matching state/federal grants. Evolution of the ALMA program to Culture and Community Design was initiated with a $15,000 budget to pay artists, culture bearers, and CBOs. Some funding comes through program registration fees.
- **Metro:** Launched Community Placemaking with $100,000 to six organizations in 2017 by repurposing "dormant funding pool"; program has doubled in size with grants of $5,000 to $25,000, and still receives many more applications than it can fund. Draws from construction excise tax.
- **MTC-ABAG:** Just launched the Community Action Resource and Empowerment (CARE): Power-building and Engagement Program, which includes a $250,000 cultural placemaking component for community-based organizations. Grants ranging from $50,000 to $100,000 support leadership development, multi-sector partnerships, and community-driven projects across the region.
- **PlanRVA:** Board piloted $50/meeting stipends for transportation advisory committee members, compensating for "lived experience and expertise."

**Starting without dedicated funding:** Flint Hills demonstrates that creativity in planning doesn't require large budgets or fully developed programs from the outset. Small steps using existing resources—like trivia nights at breweries or participating in existing community arts events—can spark imagination and create opportunity for more systematic integration later.

*Street photowalk led by the Boyle Heights Arts Conservatory for Smart Growth America's Healing Our Highways program, 2024.*

**Funding challenges:**

- **Restricted funding:** MPO funding comprises federal, state, and local sources, each with varying degrees of flexibility, with most being highly restrictive. As PlanRVA's Executive Director Martha Shickle notes, "We're a public entity with no nonprofit arm, so we are not eligible to go after more creative and flexible private sources."
- **Federal uncertainty:** Practitioners should pay close attention to rules and guidance about these funds in the future.

**Planning ahead:** Preparing for the future by setting aside independent funds for arts and culture can help make the organization more resilient to future funding changes.

**Securing funding is one thing; demonstrating value is another. Planning agencies accustomed to quantitative metrics and traditional measures of success may struggle to evaluate the impact of arts and culture strategies. Yet without ways to assess progress, it's difficult to make the case for continued investment or learn what's working and what needs adjustment.**

## Defining and measuring progress

Measuring progress in arts and culture strategies is difficult to do with traditional methods and according to traditional metrics. Arts and culture is an expression of the heart and soul whose impact and value are felt rather than captured in a chart. That said, there are still ways to quantify impact and value on community and organizational outcomes.

**Community Outcomes:** Any effort to engage the public should ask whether the needs of the community, and particularly those members who have been historically excluded and harmed by transportation infrastructure, are being met, which is the ultimate measure of the agency's success.

*Quantitative metrics:*

- Inclusion of new participants in public involvement (can be measured with numbers).
- Who participates in planning (tracking demographics, geographies, etc).

*Qualitative measures:*

- Developing the community's ability to engage effectively with sometimes opaque government processes.
- Whether community knowledge of processes has increased.
- Whether community members are better able to speak up for their needs in an informed way.
- Empowerment and the ability of community groups to organize themselves.

**Balancing quantitative and qualitative:** MTC-ABAG's Judis Santos champions the need to make space for emotional expression in policymaking alongside data-driven analysis. This dual approach of anchoring decisions in both quantitative metrics and lived experience has the potential to change how planning conversations unfold, making them more accessible and human-centered.

**Agency Outcomes:**

*Process changes:*

- Whether agency practices and processes have shifted as a result of incorporating arts and culture strategies.
- Whether the organization is valuing other ways of communicating, knowing, and building, especially from community members not engaged in the past.
- Whether the organization has a better understanding of where there are gaps in its work and services.

*Integration depth:*

- Deepening integration of arts and culture strategies across the work of the entire organization.
- Identifying specific places where creative thinking has been encouraged.
- Establishing a daily, ongoing intention of starting community engagement from a different place than previously.

**Structural changes:**

- **ARC:** Mike Alexander now requires all engagement efforts across the agency

to coordinate with the department where arts and culture strategies are housed to integrate them throughout agency work.

- **Metro:** Creating an internal arts and culture cohort of staff to meet regularly, hear from artists, and pilot experiments.
- **DVRPC:** Internal survey revealed "strong potential for risk-taking"; preparing to embed arts and culture in the FY2027 work program.

*Lizzi Weyant, Executive Director of Metropolitan Area Planning Council, and Samyukth Shenbaga, Managing Director, Community Development, Atlanta Regional Commission providing feedback during a workshop at the Culture and Community Network Seattle convening, June 2025.*

Measuring these changes effectively may require establishing a data-driven baseline for comparison. Rather than this being a negative focus, it can be a starting point to help demonstrate the positives that new strategies may bring.

Ultimately, the measures that matter most are those that capture relationship quality and community trust. These outcomes emerge not from internal processes alone, but from sustained, authentic engagement with external partners, particularly communities that have been historically excluded from and harmed by planning processes.

## Relationships and trust with external partners

"We're embracing complexity," said Alexander, discussing the work of forging connections with the Clarkston community through the One Clarkston project and other efforts at engagement through arts and culture. "We know we're going to do this, and it's starting to sink in." Though difficult at times, every year is less so.

**Building relationships and rebuilding trust in the community isn't easy, and it takes time. There are no shortcuts, and the process has to be authentic. Artists and arts and culture organizations often have organic, authentic relationships in their community that can provide a trustworthy starting point for connection. It takes commitment over time to continue building those connections.**

ARC found that it is easier to involve historically excluded and harmed groups when there's community infrastructure in place—like community groups with their own buildings and spaces as well as connections, social infrastructure, and networks—to help organize and gather people. The planning organization can have a role in supporting that infrastructure. Ultimately, building trust and relationships in the community require consistency, maintenance, and a commitment to reciprocity as arts and culture strategies are implemented, rather than one push with a defined ending point.

## Processing learning and institutionalizing change

**Establishing feedback loops:** ARC's Roshani Thakore established a feedback loop based on an adapted toolkit from the Center for Artistic Activism to evaluate the effectiveness of arts and culture engagement events. Mike Alexander requires engagement efforts to coordinate with Thakore's department to see what collaboration is possible.

**Making the case through storytelling:** Finding ways to tell the story of the difference being made can help cement change. Documenting case studies can show how unique and important outcomes emerged, like how trust from the community made an impact on particular projects. Creating materials that tell the stories of these efforts can help with the agency's culture shift, showing that more meaningful public involvement is possible and that outcomes can change.

**Ongoing education:** Several staff noted that educational work and building support should be ongoing processes among many stakeholders, including the local community, elected leaders, consultants, the agency's board, and others. Turnover will mean that some work will likely always involve teaching newcomers to begin from a different place with a new mindset.

**Communities of practice:** Working within a community of practice can help continue to distill best practices and provide learning from others doing similar work, as well as inspiration, community, creativity, and the energy to keep it all going.

## Peer networks and support

A community of practice—a group of other professionals with shared goals and similar work who come together to share with and learn from one another—can help restore staff and inject new ideas into the program to keep it fresh and vital. This is especially important for avoiding loss of inspiration or momentum down the road.

*Smart Growth America's Culture and Community Network established a peer network for MPOs and provided essential support to participating MPOs in ways that went*

*beyond technical assistance. Learn about some of the benefits that partner organizations cited in their participation in CCN.*

**Key benefits cited across agencies:**

- **Legitimacy and internal support:** "CCN legitimized and boosted efforts internally" (DVRPC), providing evidence to strengthen internal casemaking. CMAP noted that arts integration must be framed in ways that align with agency-wide goals, such as transparency, good governance, and data-driven planning—and CCN helped make those connections.
- **National perspective:** "Examples from peer MPOs and regional planning agencies such as Boston, Atlanta, Seattle, and the Twin Cities offer evidence" (Metro). MTC-ABAG drew inspiration from Portland's community placemaking program in designing their CARE initiative.
- **Space for reflection:** "Valuable space for reflection and connection" (PlanRVA).
- **Practical examples and inspiration:** "Not only practical examples but also inspiration" (PlanRVA). As one participant noted, "I love the case studies and the other examples from other MPOs, because I feel like it's hard to just start. But if you use other ideas as a springboard, it helps so much."
- **Permission structure:** CCN helped DVRPC build "the permission and structure needed to make creativity part of planning and engagement at every step."
- **Peer learning:** Flint Hills noted that "exposure to practices in other cities and discussion with other CCN participants has given the team permission to try, fail, and adapt."
- **Tailored support:** Smart Growth America provided office hours, technical assistance, and brainstorming sessions, helping MPOs translate ideas into action.

*Culture and Community Network group photo in Seattle, June 2025.*

# KEY TAKEAWAYS

## WHAT WORKS

**Creativity is a process, not a product:** Engagement doesn't need polished visual art to be meaningful—it can serve as an entry point for sharing ideas.

**Start where you are—and start in fertile soil:** You can begin from nothing, build on past experiments, or expand existing programs. Small MPOs can be nimble; larger MPOs can leverage scale and resources—but organizational culture often matters more than size. Focus first on staff who already have creative practices or are eager to engage. Identify community-identified solutions and local champions.

**Staff backgrounds matter:** Non-traditional pathways bring valuable perspectives; cultivate staff who bring their whole selves to work. Examples from the cohort include quilting, photography, poetry, union organizing, landscape architecture, and skateboarding.

## WHAT TO AVOID

**Creativity as add-on:** Multiple agencies noted the risk that creativity remains an add-on at the tail end of projects rather than being part of the process from the beginning.

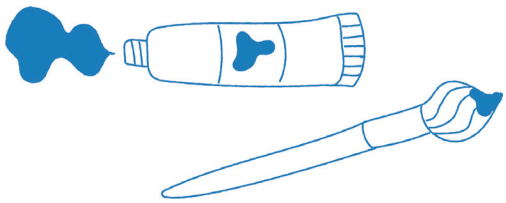
**Waiting for perfect conditions:** Small MPOs with limited capacity shouldn't wait for perfect conditions. Small steps can spark imagination and broaden participation. As one CCN participant noted, "I love the case studies and the other examples from other MPOs, because I feel like it's hard to just start."

**Single points of failure:** Metro learned that sustainability requires distributing knowledge and capacity across multiple staff members. "We can't have a sustainable program where all the knowledge lies in one person." While dedicated champions are essential, plan for knowledge transfer from the outset.

## WHAT WORKS

**Don't wait for permission:** Some successful experiments weren't formally approved in advance—they became celebrated by proving their value.

**Artists as collaborators, not vendors—and balance quantitative and qualitative data:** This fundamental distinction transforms the nature and impact of the work. Engage artists as thought partners in co-designing solutions and processes, not just creating deliverables. Combine metrics with lived experience and emotional resonance to make planning more accessible and human-centered.



**Staff backgrounds matter:** Non-traditional pathways bring valuable perspectives; cultivate staff who bring their whole selves to work. Examples from the cohort include quilting, photography, poetry, union organizing, landscape architecture, and skateboarding.

## WHAT TO AVOID

**Saying "no" to yourself:** Don't assume something won't be allowed; often, creative engagement happens by experimenting with possibilities. Some of CMAP's most successful experiments, like zines, weren't formally approved in advance.

**Superficial approaches with traditional metrics:** Not every use of arts and culture leads to real change. One-off projects or primarily aesthetic changes can generate temporary excitement but fail to influence decision-making. Worse, communities may become skeptical if these efforts feel symbolic or extractive.

True impact comes from deeper engagement: designing the artist's role as collaborator versus vendor, compensating artists fairly, investing in underrepresented community-based organizations, and embedding relational practices like listening, trust-building, and care into institutional processes.

**Single points of failure:** Metro learned that sustainability requires distributing knowledge and capacity across multiple staff members. "We can't have a sustainable program where all the knowledge lies in one person." While dedicated champions are essential, plan for knowledge transfer from the outset.

## WHAT WORKS

**Document and learn—and peer learning is essential:** Create structures to sustain lessons learned rather than starting over each time. Build inventories of past approaches. Communities of practice provide inspiration, evidence for casemaking, and energy to persist. Using other ideas as springboards helps get creative juices flowing.

**Innovation requires patience and cultural change:** Non-linear progress and messiness are part of the process. Provide wide guardrails and support for experimentation. Be willing to innovate and set new precedents with respect to internal bureaucracy, procurement processes, and legal barriers.

**Move from tactical to transformational:** Use temporary demonstrations as learning tools, not endpoints. The goal is changing how planning happens, not just adding art to streets.

## WHAT TO AVOID

**Lack of documentation and learning structures:** Being too interested in measuring results according to traditional practices, or staying comfortable with tactical/temporary installations without pushing for deeper institutional change, undermines arts and culture strategies. Talking the talk without challenging internal processes keeps work stuck at the surface level.

**Paralyzing risk aversion:** Unwillingness to upset established processes can limit effectiveness. Large planning organizations are sensibly risk-averse, but risk tolerance is necessary for these efforts to be successful. Being too interested in measuring results according to traditional practices can undermine arts and culture strategies that may not have linear progress, clear, immediate, quantifiable outputs, and may require more patience than in the past

**Getting stuck in tactics:** Remaining comfortable with temporary installations and visual art without evolving toward co-design, equitable systems change, and transformed internal processes limits impact and keeps work from influencing decision-making.

Innovation requires PATIENCE

# QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

The questions below are organized into five areas that correspond to key phases of implementing arts and culture strategies: understanding your starting point, assessing leadership and culture, identifying champions and opportunities, understanding community context, and envisioning change.

These questions can be used in multiple ways: as a self-assessment tool for individual staff members; as discussion prompts for team meetings or planning sessions; as a framework for conversations with leadership or board members; or as a guide for strategic planning processes. Return to them periodically as your work evolves—your answers will likely shift as you gain experience and your organizational context changes.

## Understanding your starting point

- Describe your agency's institutional experience, knowledge, and growth around arts and culture and creativity. Who should you speak to in order to learn more?
- What dormant funding sources or underutilized resources might be repurposed for arts and culture work?
- What are existing arts and culture initiatives or programs with arts and culture elements that can be expanded upon or redesigned to incorporate greater artist involvement, creative approaches, or cultural engagement?
- What one-off or sporadic arts initiatives have you tried? How might you build on or learn from them?

## Assessing leadership and culture

- Describe the state of your agency leadership's openness to and support for arts and culture initiatives and cross-sector collaboration with artists and cultural workers, or arts and cultural organizations in your community.
- What is the culture of creativity, openness to risk, experimentation, evolution, self-reflection, failure, transparency and accountability, learning, and unlearning across the agency? How does it vary from department to department, team to team, manager to manager?
- What does "failure" mean in your organizational culture, and how does that affect your risk tolerance?
- How is learning and culture change shared, socialized, and spread throughout the organization? Through which channels and which people?

## Identifying champions and opportunities

- Who on your staff has creative practices or non-traditional backgrounds that could be assets?
- Where is "fertile soil" in your organization for starting this work?
- Who are the internal champions who could advance this work? Who are the skeptics who may need to be brought on board?
- Where is there an opportunity to incorporate creativity into already ongoing efforts rather than starting something from scratch?

## Understanding community context

- How is public involvement and community engagement measured? How does your agency track who is involved in participating in planning projects? Is there other data that should or could be collected?
- Which groups are typically not at the table during public involvement in your region? What are the dividing lines in your community?
- How does your organization currently show up in communities when you're not asking for something?
- What community infrastructure exists (community groups with buildings, spaces, connections, networks) that could be partners in this work?

*Photo courtesy of ARC*

## Envisioning change

- Describe your understanding of the state of your agency's community engagement values, policies, and processes. How do or don't they embody agency values? Your personal and professional values?
- How might you draw from your experiences with arts and culture and creativity to strengthen your agency's community engagement efforts?
- What would success look like for arts and culture integration at your agency in one year? Three years? Five years?

# EXERCISE

To figure out your organization's starting point, review the questions outlined in the previous section and then use the scales below to mark where you believe your organization lies along the scale at present.

After completing the exercise, designate a timeframe in the dedicated space below to re-evaluate your progress and see where your organization was able to improve.

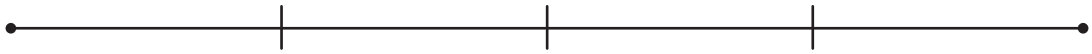
## ART

PRODUCT — PROCESS

## ARTIST

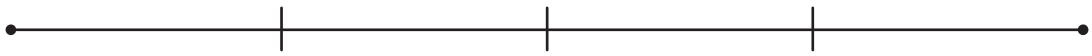
VENDOR — THOUGHT PARTNER

## AGENCY



STATUS QUO — LEADER

## COMMUNITY



ENGAGEMENT — STEWARDSHIP

## INTEGRATION

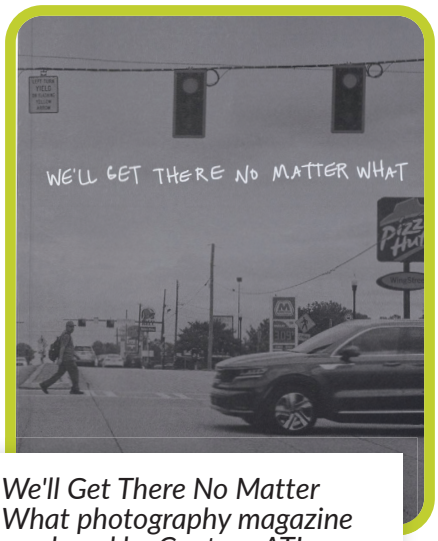
ISOLATED PROGRAM — INCORPORATED THROUGHOUT AGENCY

**Re-evaluation date:** _____

# CONCLUSION

The integration of arts and culture into regional planning represents more than a new engagement technique—it reflects a fundamental shift in how planning organizations understand their role and responsibility to the communities they serve. The experiences documented in this report demonstrate that this shift is both possible and powerful, yielding deeper community relationships, more inclusive processes, and planning outcomes that better reflect the needs and aspirations of all residents.

Such a shift requires patience, risk tolerance, authentic commitment, and sustained effort. It demands that organizations "get comfortable being uncomfortable," as ARC's Samyukth Shenbaga noted, and embrace non-linear progress and messy processes. But for the MPOs and regional planning agencies that undertake this work, the rewards extend beyond better engagement metrics or more diverse public meeting attendance. They include rebuilding trust with communities harmed by past planning decisions, elevating voices historically excluded from decision-making, and creating the conditions for truly collaborative, community-centered planning.




*We'll Get There No Matter What photography magazine produced by Captura ATL with a Smart Growth America Healing Our Highways grant, 2025.*

As Deputy Director Malu Wilkinson of Metro observed, incorporating arts and culture provides "a way to get community voices telling us what they wanted to invest in and giving them money to follow through." This shift from agencies imposing their vision to communities shaping their own futures represents the deepest promise of integrating arts and culture into regional planning.

Whether your organization is just beginning to explore this work or seeking to deepen existing efforts, the experiences shared in this report offer both inspiration and practical guidance. The most important step is to begin wherever you are, with whatever resources you have, in whatever way aligns with your organizational culture and community context. As countless CCN participants learned, you don't need perfect conditions or complete certainty. You need curiosity, commitment, and a willingness to learn alongside the communities you serve.

The future of regional planning depends not only on data and engineering, but also on creativity, culture, and human connection. **By embracing arts and culture, MPOs can design engagement that reflects their communities, build trust for long-term collaboration, and create more resilient regions. At Smart Growth America, we see MPOs as essential to this transformation and are committed to supporting them as they lead the way.**

## WORKS CONSULTED


Arnstein, Sherry R. "A Ladder Of Citizen Participation." Journal of the American Institute of Planners, July 1, 1969.

Bissell and Sen. "Risk, Trust, and Strengthening Belonging: Lessons and Insights from Cycle 2 2022-2023." Cultural Strategists in Oakland City Government (2024).

Cidell, Julie, et al. "Utilizing Arts and Culture to Mitigate the Negative Impacts of Transportation Infrastructure on Communities." Minnesota Department of Transportation Final Report (June 2024).

Cidell, Julie, Brenda Kayzar, and Andrea Pimentel Rivera. "Evaluating the Productive Frictions of Artist-in-Residence Programs in Departments of Transportation." Transportation Research Part D: Transport and Environment 139 (February 2025): 104582.

Federal Transit Administration. "Public Involvement & Outreach in Transportation Planning." Accessed February 26, 2025. https://www.transit.dot.gov/regulations-and-guidance/transportation-planning/public-involvement-outreach.

Garcia, R. "Creative Strategist Program Evaluation." Los Angeles County Arts & Culture (December 2021).

Horntvedt, J. "Five Reasons to Involve Others in Public Decisions." University of Minnesota Extension. Retrieved February 6, 2025. https://extension.umn.edu/public-engagement-strategies/five-reasons-involve-others-public-decisions.

Innes, Judith E., and David E. Booher. "Reframing Public Participation: Strategies for the 21st Century." Planning Theory & Practice, December 1, 2004.

Karas, David. "Highway to Inequity: The Disparate Impact of the Interstate Highway System on Poor and Minority Communities in American Cities." New Visions for Public Affairs Volume 7 (2015).

Karner and Marcantonio. "Achieving Transportation Equity: Meaningful Public Involvement to Meet the Needs of Underserved Communities." Public Works Management and Policy (2017).

Manville, Michael, and Paavo Monkkonen. "Unwanted Housing: Localism and Politics of Housing Development." Journal of Planning Education and Research 44, no. 2 (June 1, 2024): 685–700.

Nezam, Mallory Rukhsana. "Community Planning Through Arts and Culture." Final Report for ARC Arts & Culture team (December 2022).

Paget-Seekins, Laurel. "Equity Change-Making for Transit (and Other Government) Agency Insiders" (2025). [zine]

Saporta, Maria. "Atlanta Regional Commission Is New Home for Arts and Culture Coalition." SaportaReport, June 25, 2012. http://saportareport.com/atlanta-regional-commission-becomes-the-new-home-for-the-metro-arts-coalition/columnists/mariasmetro/maria_saporta/.

Slotterback and Lauria. "Building a Foundation for Public Engagement in Planning." Journal of the American Planning Association (2019).

United States Federal Highway Administration Office of Planning. "How to Engage Low-Literacy and Limited-English-Proficiency Populations in Transportation Decisionmaking," February 1, 2006.


## INTERVIEWS

**Atlanta Regional Commission**

Michael Alexander, Chief Operating Officer, February 2025.

Haley Berry, Financial Services Administrator, January 2025.

Doug Hooker, former Executive Director, February 2025.

Marian Liou, former Community Engagement & Arts Program Director, currently Director of Arts & Culture at Smart Growth America, January 2025..

Samyukth Shenbaga, Managing Director, Community Development, January 2025.

Roshani Thakore, Director, Community Engagement and Culture, January 2025.

**Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission**

Cassidy Boulan, Associate Manager, Office of Transit, Bicycle, and Pedestrian Planning, July 2025.

Lillian Drake, Public Participation Planner, July 2025.

Jen Farris, Transportation Planner, July 2025.

William Laidlaw, Accounting Manager, October 2025.

**Metro**

Molly Cooney-Mesker, Planning, Development, and Research Communications and Engagement Manager, September 2025.

Lakeeyscia Griffin, Senior Public Affairs Specialist, September 2025.

Duncan Hwang, Metro Councilor, October 2025.

Christine Lewis, Metro Councilor, October 2025.

Dana Lucero, Principal Planner and Community Placemaking Grant Manager, September 2025.

Malu Wilkinson, Planning, Development, and Research Deputy Director, October 2025.

**PlanRVA**

Kristin Hott, Engagement Coordinator, June and August 2025.

Martha Shickle, Executive Director, October 2025.

Emily Williams, Grants Specialist, June and August 2025.