

Connecticut Cultural Districts - Standards & Criteria
Connecticut Office of the Arts
Department of Economic & Community Development
(updated July 2021)

CULTURAL DISTRICT LEGISLATIVE STATUTE - [An Act Concerning the Establishment of Municipal Cultural Districts](#) effective October 2019

CULTURAL DISTRICT DEFINITION

A Cultural District is a specific area of a city or town identified by the municipality that has a number of cultural facilities, activities and/or assets – both for profit and nonprofit. It is a walkable, compact area that is easy for visitors to recognize. It is a center of cultural activities – artistic and economic. It is a place in your city/town where community members congregate, and visitors may enjoy those places that make a community special. Because each community is unique, each Cultural District will look different.

REASONS TO ESTABLISH A CULTURAL DISTRICT

- Market arts and culture attractions to visitors
- Promote and encourage artists, entrepreneurs and creative businesses
- Promote tourism and increase visitation
- Improve the quality of life for residents
- Strengthen distinctive character of communities
- Create a plan to drive economic growth and expand tax base
- Support Sustainable CT certification <https://sustainablect.org/actions-certifications/>
- Contribute to Connecticut's cultural assets
- Highlight culture and history of your community

Cities and towns should assess their readiness to establish a Cultural District.

1. Assess the inventory and location of cultural assets in the municipality.
2. Confirm if your city or town is eligible by reviewing the Standards & Criteria.
3. Submit a letter of intent to establish a Cultural District to your [Designated Regional Service Organization](#) (DRSO).

STANDARDS & CRITERIA

In order to establish a Cultural District:

- The municipality must be in Connecticut.
- The Cultural District must have defined boundaries.
- The Cultural District must be walkable and accessible.
- The Cultural District must have cultural facilities and assets.
- The Cultural District should have public infrastructure and amenities.
- The municipality must hold at least one community input meeting in order for people to learn about the proposed Cultural District and goals.

- The municipality must vote to approve Cultural District by passing a resolution following the community input meeting/s.
- The municipality must form a Cultural District Commission.
- The Cultural District must meet the requirements of Cultural District definition. (*Above*)

For Cultural Districts that span more than one town/city, both municipalities must have a supporting resolution. For municipalities that have more than one cultural district, one resolution is sufficient.

An inventory of cultural assets must be identified and included on a map. This defines and locates the district's cultural assets. Many municipalities have access to Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping system and tools. Google maps and other asset mapping software may be utilized. DRSOs may be able to help identify and develop a list of assets.

The map should show the boundaries of the proposed Cultural District and where the district is located in the municipality (color maps are best). Include a key to the assets and define a scale of distance. Show the location of cultural assets, both for profit and nonprofit. The map should include the following:

- Cultural facilities
- Artistic spaces
- Creative businesses
- Historic sites
- Locations of cultural activities (indoor and outdoor, such as festivals, etc.) *If applicable, list the events and activities that take place at each location.*

Municipalities may mark cultural assets that are located outside the proposed district on the map.

CULTURAL DISTRICT COMMISSION

A city or town must establish a Cultural District Commission. A Cultural District Commission may be established through one of the following models and in accordance with the municipality's governance structure and the State's statutory requirements:

1. Create new Board/Commission in accordance with local charter requirements. This requires new volunteers to serve as Commissioners. [Suggested]
2. Assign to an existing Board/Commission, and create an Advisory Council subcommittee reporting to the existing Board/Commission. This creates a non-voting advisory council and could be an informal working group, where there is some fluidity in membership. This requires additional volunteers. [Suggested]
3. Assign Cultural District oversight to an existing Board/Commission, if the Board or Commission can meet the community representation requirement (noted below under "Members" section). This could be an existing entity, such as an Economic Development Commission, or it could be the municipality's governing body (Council/Board of

Selectmen). This does not require additional volunteers, but places increased responsibilities onto existing volunteers.

The Cultural District Commission should be able to exercise any power and perform any duties necessary or desirable for the purpose of managing the district, including but not limited to consulting / collaborating with the Office of the Arts, Tourism (state and local) and the DRSO for assistance with marketing, connecting with and/or convening local arts and culture community representatives, asset mapping, advocacy, directing resources, and applying for or soliciting and accepting any grant, contribution, or other funding from any source.

Members

Cultural District Commission members should represent a diverse mix of organizations and businesses. Three-quarters of the membership must represent the arts/culture community. The Cultural District Commission should represent the shared interests of the district. The majority must live or work in the district. The size of the Cultural District Commission should be commensurate with the needs of the municipality and its population, with a minimum of six (6) members.

Cultural District Commission members should include at least one representative from the six (6) following categories:

- Local cultural council / arts council
- Cultural organizations (historical society, museum, ethnic heritage organization)
- At least one artist that lives and/or works in the district
- Organizations that represent artists (artist cooperative, etc.) *if applicable*
- For-profit creative business i.e. gallery, theater
- Local business and/or chamber of commerce

A city, town or borough may elect to include additional representatives. This will depend on the assets in the Cultural District and the district's goals. They can be from:

- Tourism
- Historic Preservation/History
- Leisure & Hospitality Industry (including restaurants, hotels and similar businesses)
- Educational Institutions
- Economic/Community Development

Duties and Procedures

The Cultural District Commission should be responsible for developing a management plan and provide oversight with implementation. The Cultural District Commission should convene on a regular basis and operate in accordance with municipality's governance structure.

The Cultural District Commission must develop:

- Goals and objectives
- A management plan

- A cultural assets map and inventory
- A marketing plan*
- Goals and success measures for the district

*The municipality must utilize state Cultural District branding as part of any signage, marketing, promotion, and/or recognition. A minimum of two (2) signs at municipality's cost is suggested and municipality shall determine the location of signs.

Cultural Districts Commissions may be asked for data from the DECD and/or DRSO to help measure the impact of the district. The data should reflect the Cultural District's specific goals. Examples include: visitation data, building occupancy rates, aggregate sales tax in the district, number of full-time jobs, number of artists, box office sales, and consumer surveys. Cultural District commissions must respond to requests for data from the state in a timely fashion.

TO QUALIFY FOR STATE'S INVESTMENT OF RESOURCES

The Department of Economic and Community Development, including the Office of the Arts and the Office of Tourism, and the Designated Regional Service Organizations are committed to supporting the formation, development and establishment of Cultural Districts. All of the above agencies can provide additional in-kind marketing, promotion and resources for established Cultural Districts.

Types of investment in Cultural Districts:

- Promotion of Cultural District by CT Office of Tourism and recognition on State's tourism website, CTVisit.com
- Promotion of Cultural Districts by CT Office of the Arts
- Promotion of Cultural Districts by local Designated Regional Service Organization

To apply to become a state-recognized Cultural District, established Cultural Districts must electronically submit the following documents to your DRSO that will submit your application for review by DECD:

- Letter of endorsement from Chief Elected Official
- Copy of Resolution from the City Council/Board of Selectmen (see sample resolution)
- List of Cultural District Commissioners and their relevant role/category as per representation guidelines
- Master Map: Please provide a map of the Cultural District
- List of cultural assets, including cultural events held at locations within the proposed Cultural District
- List of available municipal resources that would support and/or benefit Cultural District (ex. tax credit, incentives, etc.)
- Official legal documents on zoning overlaps or ordinances relevant to the Cultural District, such as existing Arts or Historic District (if applicable)
- Marketing materials, if relevant to the Cultural District

The CT Office of the Arts collects information about all its applicants. In addition to the above documents, the Office of the Arts requests that you provide the following materials. These materials will be used to develop information about Designated Cultural Districts applicants for reports purposes. **Your responses will not be a factor in the review of your application.**

Provide the information below if available:

- Supporting Section/Reference in municipal Plan of Conservation and Development
- Existing complete cultural resources inventory/map, if available
- Maps of any relevant existing districts, such as an Arts District and/or Historic District
- K-12 Arts Curriculum Education information – Number of art/s teachers in the middle and high schools? Does the district have an Arts Curriculum coordinator, or a teacher that has time dedicated to fill that role?
- List of all relevant town committees and commissions that will interface with the Cultural District Commission due to the nature of their responsibilities, ex. Arts Commission, Historic District Commission, and/or Architectural Advisory Committee. Include list of members, commission budget, their qualifications, and if commissioners receive any training.

Contact your DRSO for questions and assistance with your application.

After Your Application Has Been Submitted

Once the materials are submitted, you will be contacted to arrange a site visit for representatives from DECD, COA and local DRSO. Coordinating and conducting a site visit, as part of a review for additional investment, is intended to share information and build and strengthen relationships between DECD, COA, DRSOs and Cultural Districts in order to maximize mutually beneficial opportunities. The site visit includes a tour of the proposed cultural district and a meeting to discuss and highlight plans, assets and goals for the district.

The site visit has three parts:

1. A meeting with the chief elected official and/or designee and/or other relevant municipal employees
2. A walking tour of the proposed Cultural District
3. A meeting with the Cultural District Commission/Committee members and appropriate stakeholders to hear about the goals, objectives and plans for the Cultural District

Notice of the outcome of the review to the city or town will be sent via email. Final decisions are made by DECD's CT Office of the Arts.

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- Municipality (town, city, borough, consolidated town and city, consolidated town and borough)

- Municipality must vote to approve
- 1 or more Cultural Districts
- “to promote the educational, cultural, economic and general welfare of the public through the marketing of arts and culture attractions, the encouragement of artists and artistic and cultural enterprises and the promotion of tourism.”
- Once approved, municipality must establish a Cultural District commission. DECD shall determine the number of members to serve on the commission, and the manner in which they are appointed, and in what way any vacancy will be filled
- Once appointed, commissions may exercise any power and perform any duty necessary or desirable for the purpose of carrying out the provisions of this section, including (but not limited to):
 - Consulting / collaborating with commissioner and DRSO for assistance with marketing, advocacy and other efforts
 - Applying for or soliciting and accepting any grant, contribution, gift, bequest, devise or other donation from any source

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Sustainable CT Alignment

Municipalities participating in Sustainable CT may be able to meet the criteria and received points for Action Item 3, Vibrant and Creative Cultural Ecosystems, through the Cultural District designation. Sustainable CT municipal participants are eligible to apply for [Community Matching Funds](#). Community Matching Funds provide one-to-one matching funds for projects that align with Sustainable CT actions and Community Match Fund projects helps towns earn points towards certification.

At present, the statute that established the legislation does not include grant funds. A variety of funding opportunities are available through the Connecticut Office of the Arts, the State Historic Preservation Office, [Sustainable CT](#), and Connecticut Humanities.

[CT Office of the Arts](#)

[State Historic Preservation Office](#)

[Connecticut Humanities](#)

[CT Tourism Districts](#)