



CONNECTICUT

Economic & Community Development
CT Office of the Arts

HOW TO ESTABLISH YOUR CULTURAL DISTRICT



Wings of Refuge - Ben Keller
Manchester Cultural District

AGENDA

Welcome & Goals

Overview

Step by Step

Tips & Common Mistakes

Outcomes & Impact

Q & A

Welcome & Goals

- PURPOSE OF THIS WEBINAR
- PARTNERS IN YOUR CULTURAL DISTRICT JOURNEY

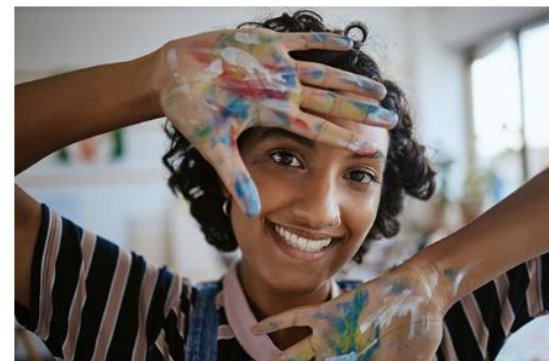
CT Office of the Arts (COA)

Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD)



- Home
- Grants
- Arts In CT
- Programs & Services
- Arts Directory
- Arts Education
- Creative Economy
- FAQ
- About Us

Arts Education



The Arts are Essential

We believe the arts are key to schooling and life-long learning. That's why we help arts educators and teaching artists:

- Provide high-quality arts experiences
- Deliver an excellent standards-based arts education
- Integrate the arts across teaching areas
- Nurture students' voices and leadership

Get Inspired!

The Office of the Arts is here to help people see the world from a different perspective. If you're a resident, we can help you enjoy new experiences. If you're an artist or arts organization, we can help you bring your vision to life. We have great programs for cities, towns, schools, and teachers, too!

Follow the links on this page to:

- Apply for a grant
- Find local artists and performers
- Access our programs and resources
- Find out where you can enjoy the arts in CT!

The Creative Economy



Arts and Creativity in Connecticut

The arts and culture sector plays a key role in our economy. Nonprofit organizations and for-profit businesses employ a significant workforce, and Connecticut is home to thousands of entrepreneur artists. Our museums, theaters, music venues, cultural institutions, organizations, and arts-related businesses help our state thrive by:

- Enriching the lives of residents and visitors
- Driving billions of dollars of local spending
- Generating hundreds of millions in tax revenues



EXTENDED DEADLINE!

The Every Child Art Experience Grant Program is now accepting applications!

*Open through November 7, 2025

Every Child Art Experience

EXTENDED DEADLINE The Every Child Art Experience Grant is now accepting applications through November 7, 2025! This grant gives \$2,500 awards to selected public schools to support taking students on arts based field trips. Click for more information.

[Every Child Art Experience Grant Overview >](#)

The Connecticut Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts (VLA) program provides legal services for the arts and culture sector. The services range from educational workshops through pro-bono attorney support.

[Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts services >](#)

Cultural Districts

Connecticut has a growing number of Cultural Districts around the state. Learn more about the program and the districts near you.

[Connecticut Cultural Districts >](#)

Designated Regional Services Organizations (DRSOs)



Supporting Arts and Culture in CT

The Connecticut Office of the Arts (COA) partners with regional organizations to help arts and cultural communities thrive. These organizations help us support your local creative economy by:

- Helping you access and use COA programs and services
- Providing hands-on support in your community, including marketing, technical assistance, arts and culture advocacy, and more
- Building relationships between artists, arts organizations, communities, municipalities, educators, and others in your area

- Arts Council of Greater New Haven
- Greater Hartford Arts Council
- Cultural Alliance of Fairfield County
- Arts & Culture Collaborative, Waterbury Region

- Cultural Alliance of Western CT
- Northwest CT Arts Council
- Shoreline Arts Alliance
- Cultural Coalition (Eastern CT)

Overview of the Cultural District Program

- ENABLING LEGISLATION
- DEFINITION OF A CULTURAL DISTRICT
- WHY ESTABLISH A 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.

State of CT Public Act No. 19-143

An Act Concerning the Establishment of Municipal Cultural Districts



WHAT IS A CULTURAL DISTRICT?

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.



Five years after CT Office of the Arts rolled out the Cultural District program, there are now 16 Cultural Districts in Connecticut, with more in the pipeline. Cultural Districts have been established in urban areas, suburbs, and rural areas. As each community is unique, each Cultural District looks different.

CELEBRATING CULTURAL HERITAGE IN ALL ITS FORMS

Ethnic and LGBTQ Cultural Heritage Districts

Cultural districts serve to support and celebrate the specific cultural identities of these communities, ensuring their legacy and traditions are recognized and preserved.

- [Chicago's Humboldt Park Puerto Rican Cultural District](#)
- [11 Best Chinatowns In The United States: History & Culture](#)
- [Oakland's Lakeshore LGBTQ Cultural District](#)
- [Austin's Black Cultural Heritage District](#)



WHY ESTABLISH A CULTURAL DISTRICT?

To Foster Community Wealth and Wellness

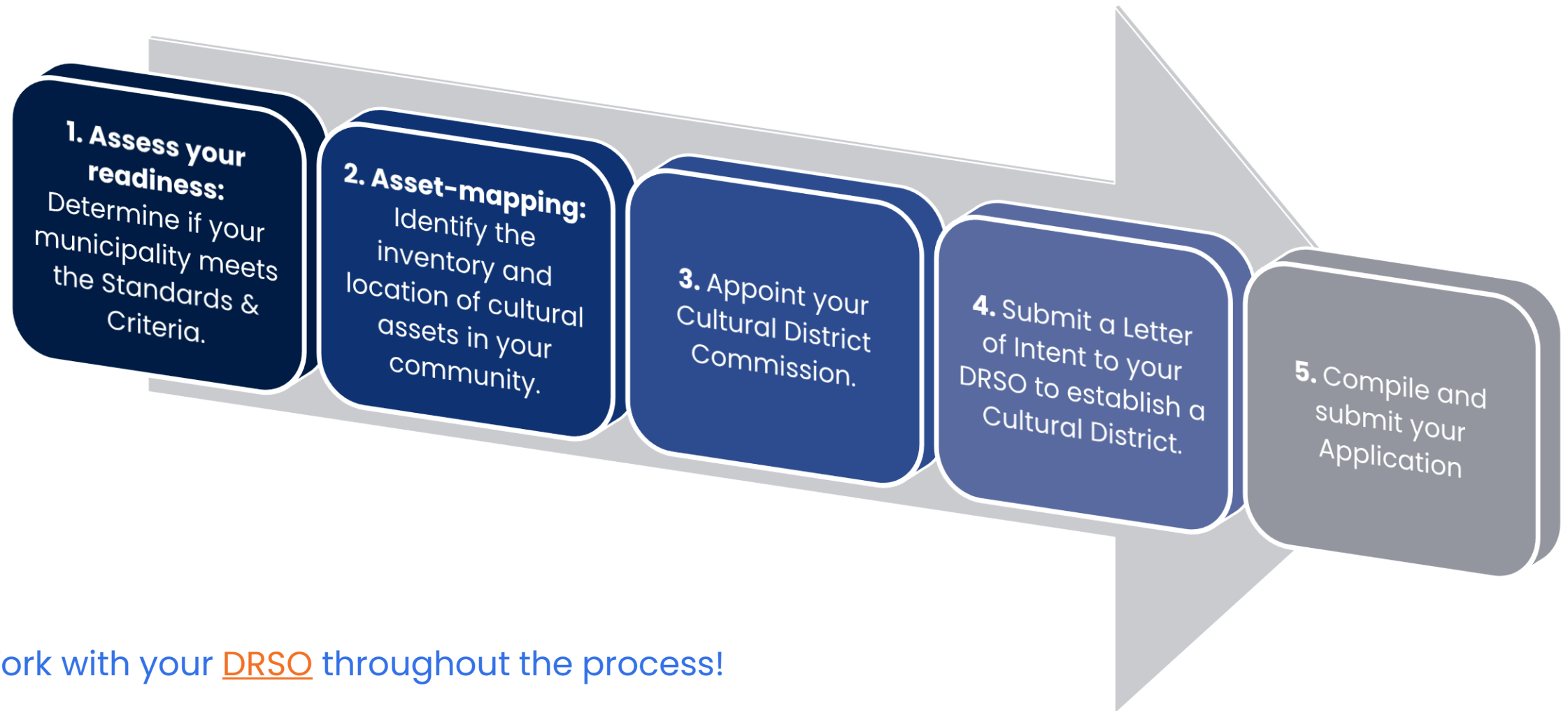
- Promote & encourage artists, entrepreneurs and creative businesses
- Promote tourism and increase visitation
- Improve quality of life for residents
- Strengthen distinctive character of communities
- Create a plan to drive economic growth and expand tax base
- Highlight culture & history of your community
- Contribute to CT's cultural assets



Step by Step

A WALK THROUGH THE PROCESS

STEP BY STEP: ESTABLISHING YOUR CULTURAL DISTRICT



Work with your [DRSO](#) throughout the process!

1. ASSESS YOUR READINESS

Convene a working group or steering committee to begin discussing your readiness to establish a Cultural District, to understand the standards & criteria, and to brainstorm community outreach and engagement.

- Ensure your working group is representative of the community.
- Download and discuss the [Standards and Criteria](#) to determine if you are ready.
- Brainstorm a preliminary inventory of cultural assets – *with the knowledge that this will be impacted by input from the community.*
- Plan community meetings to share the Cultural District program and invite input, and to continue to identify cultural assets.

STANDARDS & CRITERIA

- Must be in Connecticut.
- The proposed district must have defined boundaries, must be walkable and accessible, must have cultural facilities and assets, and should have public infrastructure and amenities.
- The municipality must hold at least one community input meeting.
- Municipality must vote to approve the Cultural District by passing a resolution following the community input meetings.
- The municipality must form a Cultural District Commission.
- The proposed district must meet the requirements of Cultural District definition.



STANDARDS & CRITERIA

- **Cultural Districts that span more than one municipality:** each municipality must pass a supporting resolution.
- **Municipalities that have more than one Cultural District:** a single resolution is fine.
- An inventory of cultural assets must be identified and indicated on a map.

2. ASSET MAPPING

- Identify the inventory and location of cultural assets in the proposed district.
 - The asset map should include cultural facilities, artistic spaces, creative businesses, historic sites, locations of cultural activities.
- ❖ *TIP: work with your municipal planning, economic development, or your COG to transform the identification of cultural assets into a map & listing.*

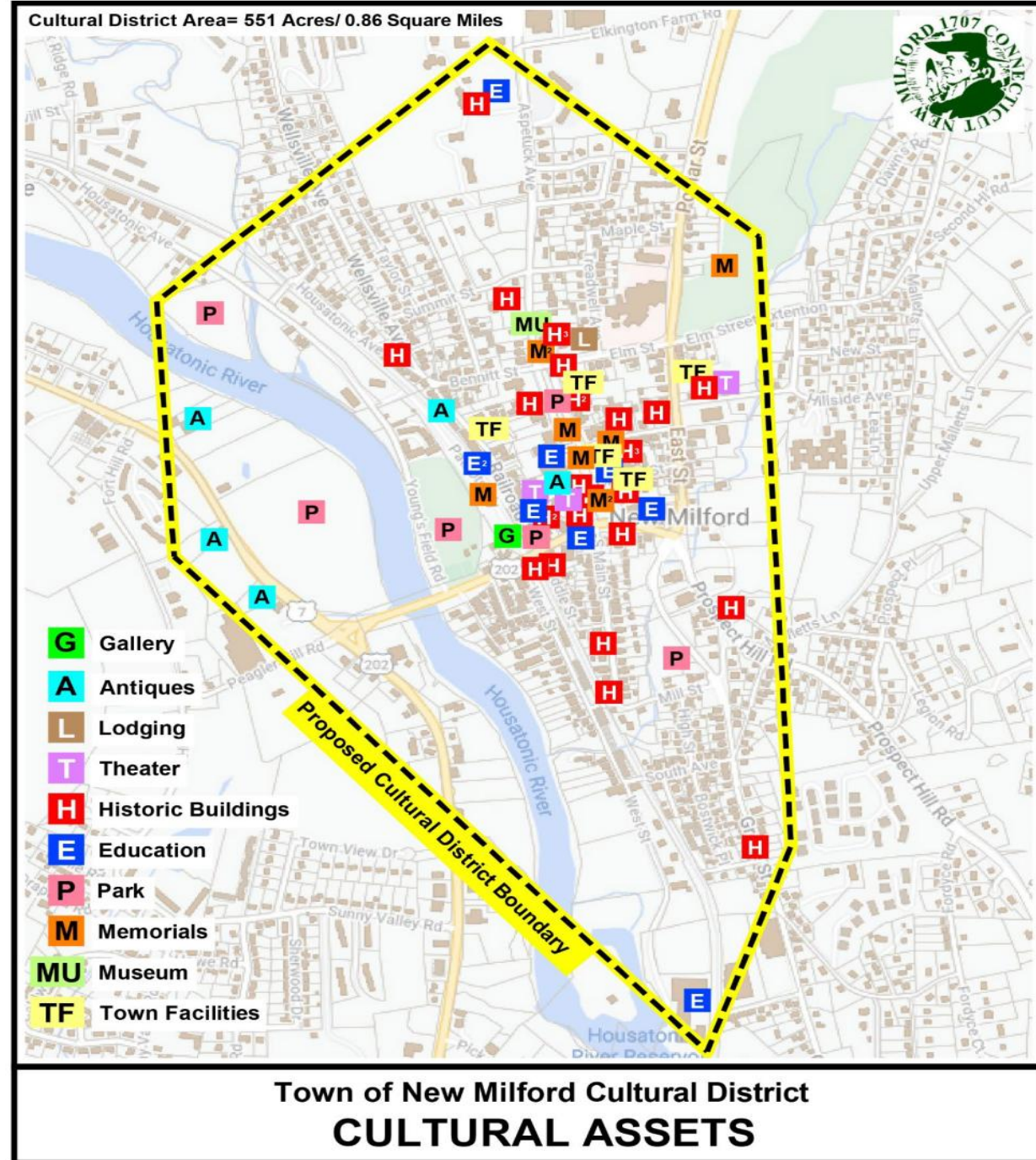
EXAMPLE: Asset Map

Bantam River Arts Cultural District



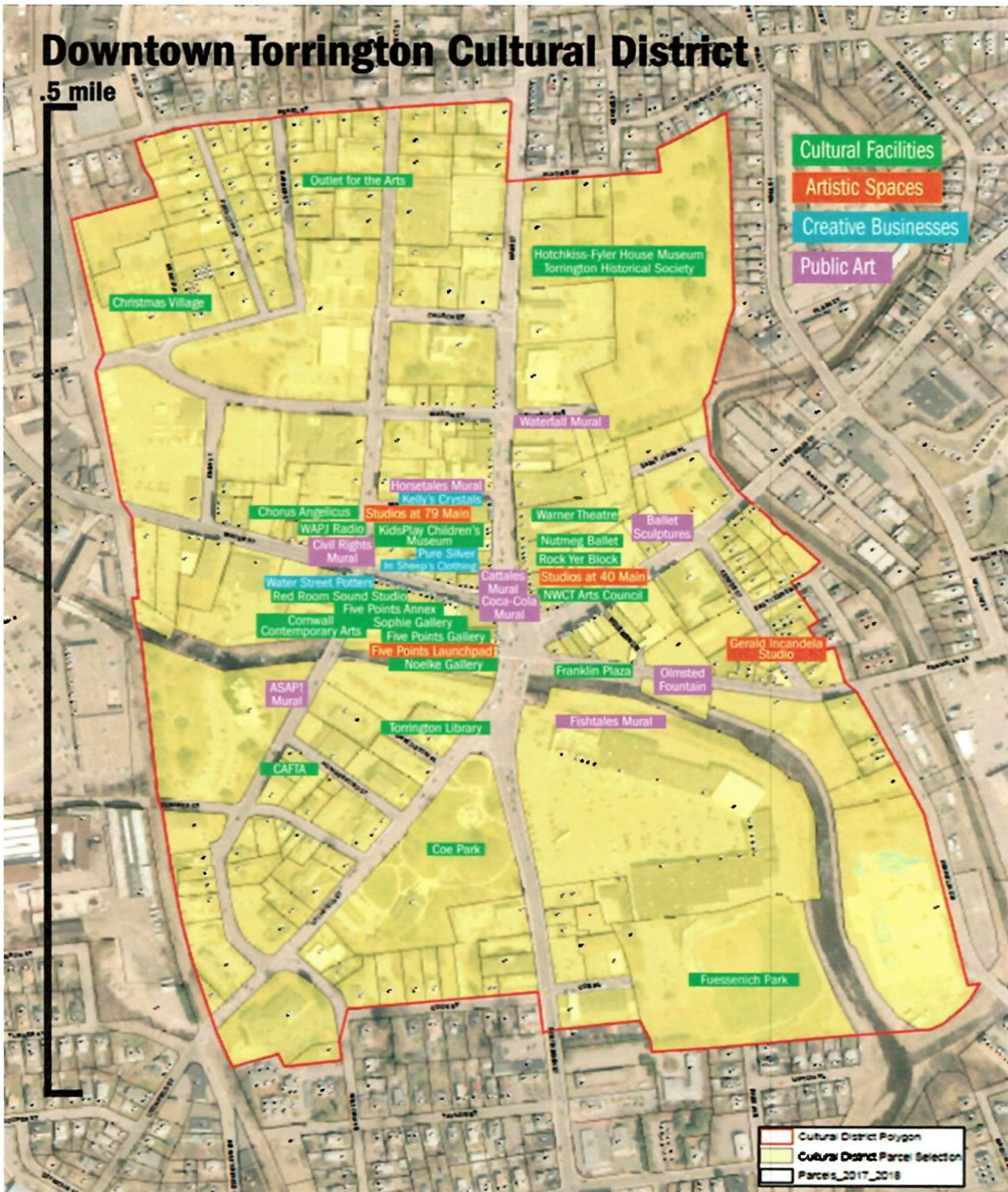
EXAMPLE: Asset Map

New Milford Cultural District



EXAMPLE: Asset Map

Torrington Cultural District



Walkability and Curating the Visitor Experience

The district should feel inviting and offer opportunities to pause, connect, and explore, whether through arts venues, shops, eateries, open spaces, or other gathering places that reflect the community's character through arts and culture.

The goal is to curate an environment where people can:

- *Access multiple cultural touchpoints within a reasonable distance, if possible,*
- *Find places to pause and engage, such as a café, a bench, or a public space,*
- *Navigate safely and comfortably, including for those using mobility devices,*
- *Experience a district that feels connected, vibrant, accessible, and welcoming.*



3. APPOINT YOUR CULTURAL DISTRICT COMMISSION

The municipality must establish a Cultural District Commission. A Cultural District Commission may be established through *one of three models*, and in accordance with the municipality's governance structure.



CULTURAL DISTRICT COMMISSION OPTIONS

1

Create a new Board/Commission in accordance with local charter requirements.

OR

2

Assign to an existing Board/Commission and create an Advisory subcommittee reporting to that Board/Commission.

OR

3

Assign Cultural District oversight to an existing Board/Commission, if that Board or Commission can meet the community representation requirement.

COMMUNITY REPRESENTATION REQUIREMENTS

Cultural District Commission members should include at least one representative from each of these six (6) categories:

- Municipality (City, Town, or Borough)
- 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
- For-profit creative business i.e. gallery, theater
- Local business and/or chamber of commerce or business organization

COMMUNITY REPRESENTATION REQUIREMENTS (continued)

The municipality 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 Industry (including restaurants, hotels and similar businesses)
- Educational Institutions
- Economic/Community Development

DUTIES & PROCEDURES

The Cultural District Commission will convene on a regular basis and operate in accordance with the municipality's governance structure.

The Cultural District Commission will be responsible for developing a Management Plan and provide oversight with implementation.

- Management Plan: Goals, Objectives, and Success Measures for the District
- A Cultural Assets Map & Inventory
- A Marketing Plan

4. SUBMIT LETTER OF INTENT TO ESTABLISH A CULTURAL DISTRICT



Town of Fairfield
Community and Economic Development

January 19, 2024

Ms. Erika K. Wesley, Executive Director
Cultural Alliance of Fairfield County
301 West Avenue, Norwalk, CT 06850

Re: Proposed Fairfield Cultural District

Dear Erika,

I am writing to inform you that the Town of Fairfield Arts Commission, at its meeting of January 16, 2024, voted unanimously to move forward with plans to establish a cultural district in downtown Fairfield.

We will be working to satisfy the other requirements in the coming months, and we look forward to working with you and your team to help foster and support artistic endeavors in the Town of Fairfield.

Thank you as always, for your support and guidance.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Charles MacDonald in cursive script.

Charles MacDonald, Chair
Fairfield Arts Commission

5. SUBMIT YOUR APPLICATION

- Letter of endorsement signed by Mayor/First Selectman
- Municipal resolution
- Cultural District governing body members and their roles
- Map of proposed Cultural District showing all cultural assets and a list of those assets
- Available municipal resources that would support and/or benefit the Cultural District
- Official legal documents on zoning overlaps or ordinances relevant to the Cultural District
- Marketing materials that are for or include the Cultural District
- Supporting sections/references in the municipal POCD
- K-12 arts education information
- All relevant town committees and commissions that will interact with the Cultural District

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

1. Your application is reviewed by your DRSO and CT Office of the Arts.
 - *CT Office of the Arts will be back in touch if there are any questions, missing material, etc.*
2. If the application is complete, CT Office of the Arts will be in touch to schedule a Review Tour.
 - *State officials and Arts & Culture statewide partners will be invited to this walking tour and meeting in the proposed district.*
3. Once the Cultural District is approved, DECD and the Office of the Arts will work with the municipality and the Office of the Lieutenant Governor to schedule an announcement event.
4. CT Office of the Arts hosts quarterly meetings of all CT Cultural Districts and provides ongoing support to your district.

While designation as a Connecticut Cultural District does not currently include direct state funding, DECD provides valuable statewide marketing and visibility, along with a modest amount of seed funding.



STAY

EAT

PLAN

EVENTS

MEETINGS

REGIONS

SEASONS

CULTURAL DISTRICTS

Connecticut's Cultural Districts help market arts and cultural attractions to visitors, support artists and creative businesses, and strengthen the distinctive character of their communities.

Connecticut's Cultural Districts are buzzing, walkable hubs where art, culture, and community collide. Each one is unique, bursting with local flavor and packed with cultural hotspots, showcasing a mix of nonprofit and for-profit gems, events, and experiences. No two are the same—just like the communities they call home.

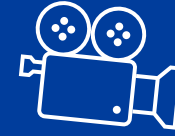


Each month, FOX61 features a different Cultural District via on location and in-studio interviews with artists, business owners, and local officials. Segments air each Friday during the 10 am FOX61 morning news hour. All segments are posted on FOX61's website, streaming app and social media.

Coming in Fall 2026

In the Districts

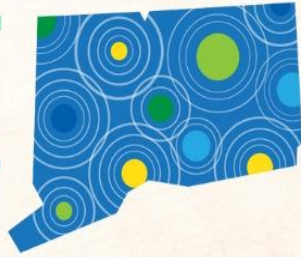
Video travel log of CT Cultural Districts



- 2 hosts with consistent on-camera presence
- Experiential & interactive, showcasing people & places
- 15 short, bingeable episodes on YouTube
- Cross promoted on Instagram & TikTok
- Each release serves as a mini cultural campaign for Connecticut



Sustainable CT
Local Actions. Statewide Impact.®



February Coffee Hour

Topic: CT Cultural District Program and the Creative Economy

Date: Thursday, February 19, 2026

Time: 10:00 am to 11:00 am

Join Kimberley Parsons-Whitaker from DECD's CT Office of the Arts in this webinar which explores how aligning Cultural Districts with community goals can foster thriving, resilient places.



Common Mistakes & Tips

HELPFUL TIPS

1) Work with your DRSO.

- *This is your regional arts council that encourages and supports arts & culture on the local level.*

2) Robust community engagement.

- *Engage a diverse representation of the community from the start. This will ensure enthusiasm, support, and an authentic process.*

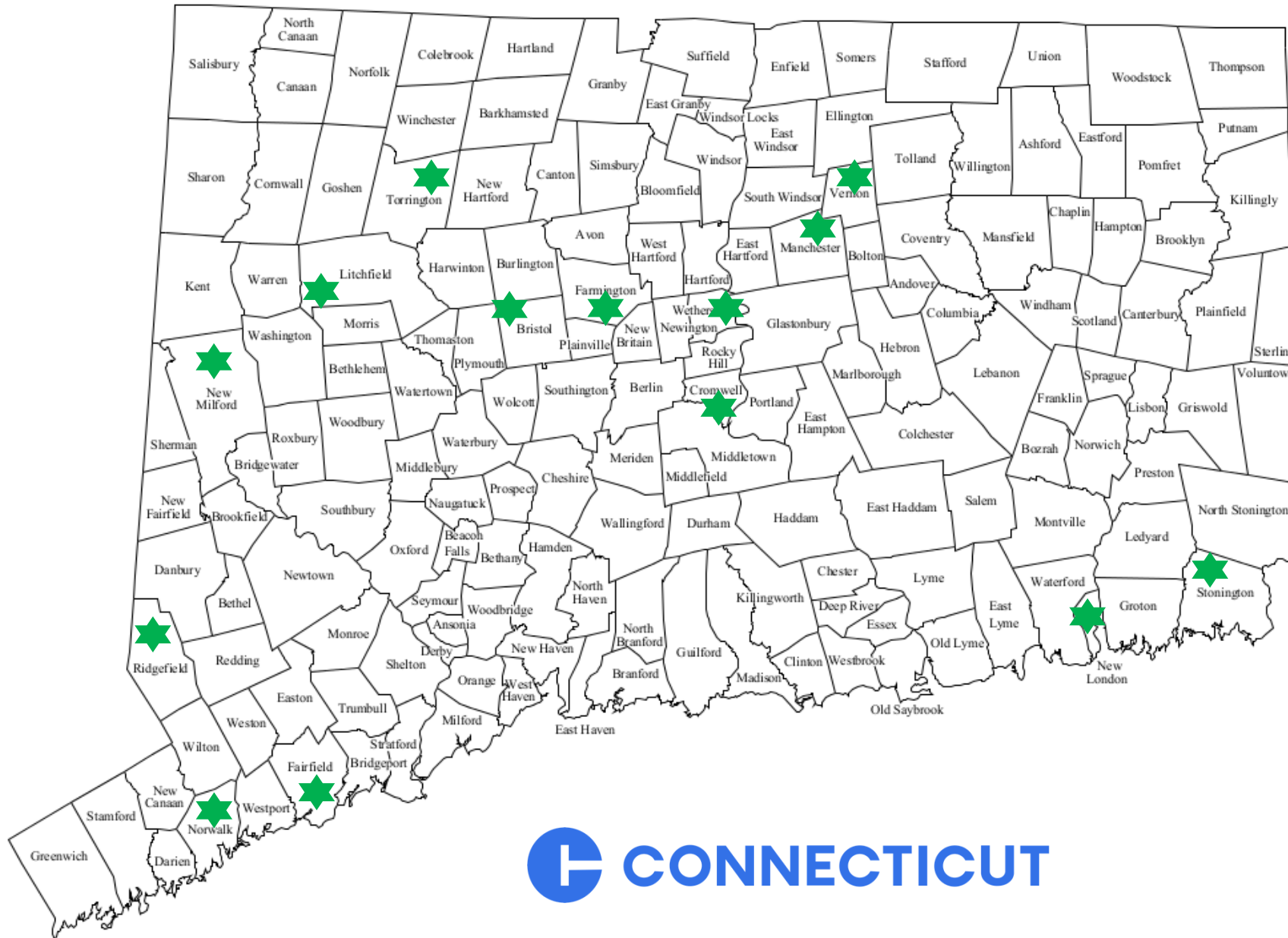
3) Walk the proposed district.

- *Do not attempt to create a district that is simply too large, or one that has physical barriers to walkability.*

4) Make sure your application is complete.

- *Consult the checklist of all required material.*

Outcomes & Impact



★ Designated Cultural Districts

- Bantam
- Bristol
- Cromwell
- Fairfield
- Farmington & Unionville
- Manchester
- New London
- New Milford
- Norwalk
- Ridgefield
- Stonington Village & Mystic Bridge
- Torrington
- Vernon
- Wethersfield

CULTURAL DISTRICT ECONOMIC IMPACT SNAPSHOT 2025

\$398,963,124

Spent in 15 Cultural Districts at Arts & Culture Destinations, Restaurants, & Retail
Average Cultural District Budget: \$6,701

1,113

Creative Jobs

249

Creative
Businesses

2,619,340

Destination
Visitors

1,320,983

Event Attendees

274 Cultural District Events

Drawing Over 1.3 Million Attendees



OUTCOMES & IMPACT

“All of the pieces we’ve been working on for many years are coming together (redevelopment, business development, collaboration between arts & business, and a more engaged citizenry). Having a Cultural District is one component of a more comprehensive approach to our downtown revitalization plans.”

Bristol Cultural District



OUTCOMES & IMPACT

“The Cultural District is more than just a destination – it’s a gathering place bringing people together, creating a sense of connection and shared experiences that defines the spirit of Norwalk.”

Norwalk Cultural District





OUTCOMES & IMPACT

“The designation of a Cultural District for Wethersfield is the result of long-standing partnerships and collaborations designed to boost tourism, increase the amenities and cultural opportunities for visitors and residents.”

Wethersfield Heritage Commission



OUTCOMES & IMPACT

"We have seen a renewed focus on the downtown through the culture and arts lens... This has led to a more productive relationship with our municipal partners in city departments...[and] allowed us to bring our businesses, restaurants and non-profits to the table to discuss ways that we can work together for mutual benefit."

New London Cultural District Commission





OUTCOMES & IMPACT

“The Town of Manchester understands the necessity of art and culture for creating and maintaining a vibrant community and sustainable economic infrastructure.

When residents feel their culture is being represented through entertainment, festivals, education, the arts, and events, and that resources like the library and hospital are accessible, then the Town is a welcoming place.”

Manchester Plan of Conservation & Development

Q & A



Stonington Village Cultural District
Photo by Clay Burkholder



CONNECTICUT CULTURAL DISTRICTS



Kimberley Parsons-Whitaker

DECD / CT Office of the Arts

860-205-6350

kimberley.parsons-whitaker@ct.gov