



# LEVERAGING CENTRAL INDIANA'S STRENGTHS TO GROW ITS CREATIVE ECONOMY

DECEMBER 2025



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OVERVIEW

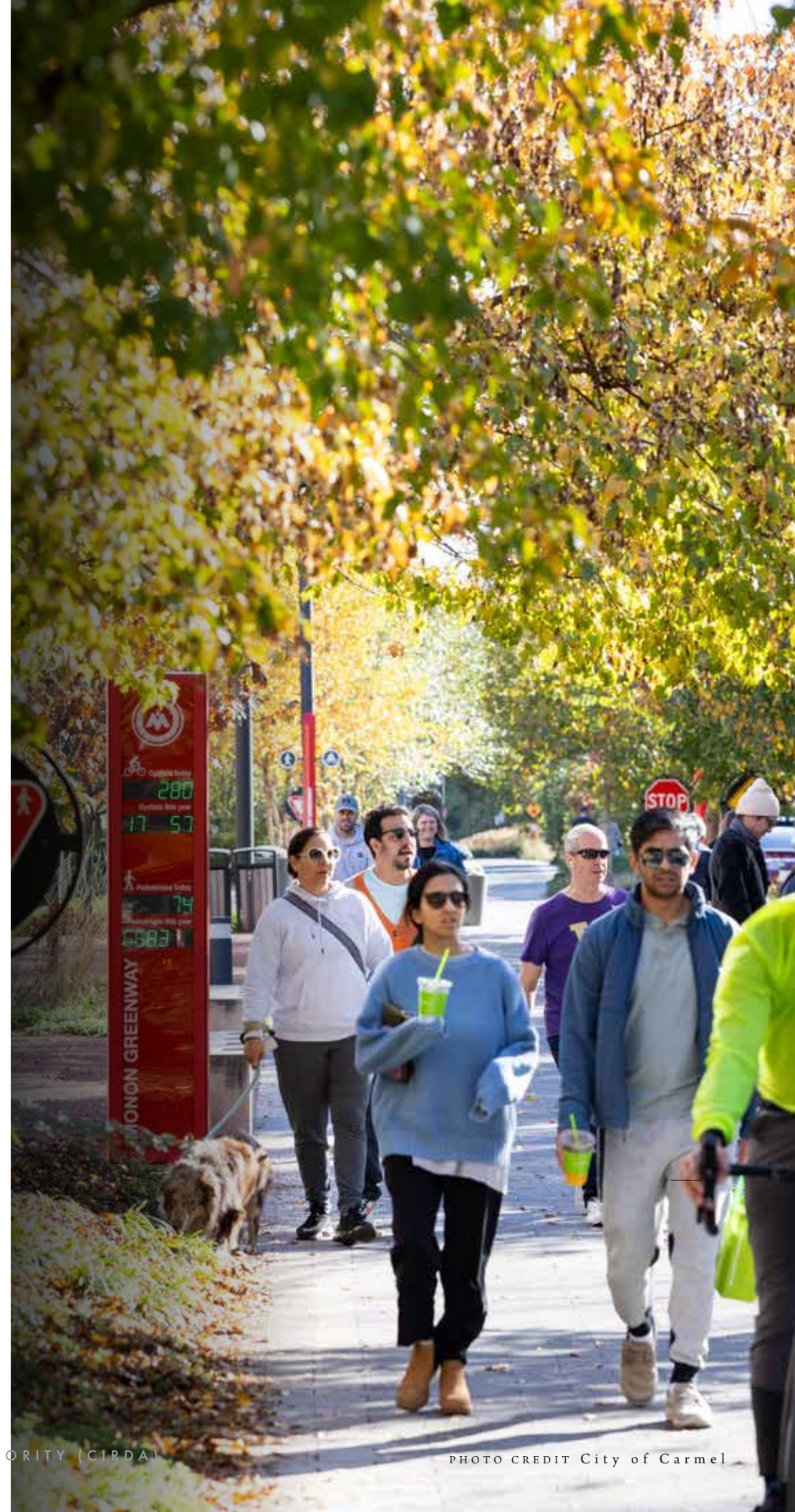
# Introduction

Strong creative economies drive economic growth and prosperity, and Central Indiana is fortunate to have a host of strengths and assets related to its creative economy, including a myriad of arts and cultural assets and resources. However, too often, these strengths operate independently of each other, keeping them from realizing their full potential impact.





Gaps in the creative ecosystem remain, and chief among these is the regional organizational structure to harness the assets and build on them. To highlight and grow the region's creative economy while bolstering arts and cultural amenities, sustained and long-term collaboration that maximizes assets and financial resources is required. Accordingly, Central Indiana will establish a continuing committee on the creative economy and use a hub-and-spoke model that will strengthen cultural nodes (creative organizations and locations) by facilitating collaboration among organizations throughout the region. The region's unique differentiators such as an enviable trail system, matchless sports identity, and robust talent ecosystem will be important ingredients in the work ahead.



The increased attention on strengthening arts and culture in Central Indiana and beyond—including through the State's Regional Economic Acceleration and Development Initiative (READI) 2.0 and Lilly Endowment's funding—is encouraging. Undoubtedly, increased public and philanthropic funding can have a transformative impact in the region *if that money is used well*. To compound the impact of the investments that continue to be made, the planning team focused on creative economy growth as a more sustainable and far-reaching strategy for elevating arts and culture than consistently relying on public grants or subsidies.

To develop this plan, the Central Indiana Regional Development Authority (CIRDA) assembled an arts and culture advisory committee (the Advisory Committee) comprised of 13 leaders and planners from arts and culture not-for-profits, municipalities, and economic development organizations. Chaired by Carmel Mayor Sue Finkam, the Advisory Committee includes mayors and representatives from 10 cities and towns in the CIRDA region. A list of committee members is included on **Appendix 1**. The Advisory Committee met regularly throughout the strategic planning process and was highly engaged

in discussing regional creative assets and data, governance structures, marquee programs, and public policies for growing Central Indiana's creative economy. The group was supported and advised by independent artists and representatives from organizations related to tourism, arts, trails, sports, and more.

Early in the planning process, the Advisory Committee arrived at the premise that lack of coordination and minimal cohesive storytelling, along with other factors, have resulted in Central Indiana's creative economy being undervalued. As a result, Central Indiana has significantly lower-than-average public arts funding and wages for creative occupations. In contrast, metropolitan areas that have intentionally elevated their creative sectors—such as Boston, Denver, Nashville, and Austin—have seen significant returns in innovation, economic dynamism, and talent attraction. After Nashville leaders decided in 2003 to embrace and elevate the city's country music identity, for instance, the Nashville metropolitan area more than tripled the Indianapolis area's rate of business creation over 13 years.<sup>1</sup> Since 2003, the Nashville area's total employment has grown more than twice as fast as employment in the Indianapolis metropolitan statistical area.<sup>2</sup>



# Five Strategies

Elevating the region's existing arts and cultural assets while bolstering the creative economy and better leveraging it to drive broader economic growth has been an important focus for CIRDA. This plan builds on CIRDA's READI 2.0 Main Street Matters strategy, which sought "the development of walkable and connected districts that serve as magnets for talent attraction, hubs of innovation, and links to arts, culture, and recreation."<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, the Advisory Committee determined the best way to build creative economic momentum is through continued regional collaboration with a focused effort on the following five strategies:



1

## Continued collaboration.

Invest in infrastructure to support the creative economy by forming a Regional Creative Economy Committee (RCEC) as a continuing task force under CIRDA that brings together the region's creative assets as well as public arts and culture leaders, and seeks and evaluates reliable funding streams at the state, local, and federal levels for greater investment (financial and otherwise) in the creative economy.

4

## Develop programming to boost talent and grow the creative economy.

The region should bolster creative talent by strengthening the pipeline of skilled creators, develop key creative sectors through industry connections and strategic programming, and link innovation and entrepreneurship with creativity.

2

## Leverage sports as a platform for arts, culture, and creativity.

The region must develop a more formal framework for embedding the arts into major sporting events, build creative partnerships with professional teams and venues, and activate youth and amateur sports as cultural gateways.

5

## Increase public sector support for the creative economy.

To increase arts funding and improve support for the creative economy, CIRDA municipalities should creatively use available tools such as tax increment financing, planning and zoning, arts funding ordinances tied to new developments, education programs, or artist activations of existing spaces.

3

## Connect arts and culture with trails, parks, and the built environment.

Central Indiana should leverage trails to develop a creative corridor, transform parks into cultural campuses, and integrate art into everyday infrastructure.

## THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE CONCLUDED

that by investing in the infrastructure to support the creative economy—by standing up a Regional Creative Economy Committee as an enduring task force that brings together the region's creative assets, public arts and culture ecosystem leaders, reliable funding streams, creative workforce pipelines, and more—Central Indiana can unlock broader and more durable arts outcomes. Because creative enterprises generate employment, attract residents and workers, and help establish vibrant places where arts and culture thrive, the principles and strategies in this report seek growth of the creative economy and arts and culture together, as overlapping drivers of the region's economic vitality.

Note that this plan is not intended to be a prescriptive implementation roadmap. Rather, it outlines a range of strategies, tactics, and opportunities that surfaced through research and engagement. The responsibility for prioritizing, refining, and executing specific actions over time will rest with the Regional Creative Economy Committee, ensuring the work remains coordinated and responsive to evolving regional needs.



# VISION AND MISSION

From Fragmentation to Cohesion  
Leveraging Central Indiana's Strengths to Grow its Creative Economy

## VISION

*In 10 years, CIRDA envisions Central Indiana as a nationally recognized hub of creativity where arts and culture are seamlessly woven into the region's identity and leveraged as a driver of innovation and economic development. In this vision, creativity fuels prosperity, workforce attraction and retention, civic pride, and quality of life and place. By highlighting the creative economy alongside other industry sectors such as technology and life sciences, CIRDA intends to foster a creative economy that is a powerful catalyst for regional growth.*

## MISSION

**CIRDA's mission in this effort is to align, connect, and champion Central Indiana's creative sector so it can realize its full potential as an engine of regional economic growth.** Through a Regional Creative Economy Committee, CIRDA will amplify existing efforts and facilitate collaboration among cultural institutions, municipalities, private-sector partners, and creative professionals. The region can best achieve this through a hub-and-spoke model, building on existing assets like Central Indiana's trail network to connect cultural spokes to a new, unifying hub. This requires building the infrastructure and developing the strategies that empower creatives to thrive, advancing policies and partnerships that unlock new funding, and ensuring arts and culture are visible and accessible throughout the region. This will make the creative economy a durable and celebrated strength of Central Indiana.

The strategies in support of CIRDA's vision were developed through a broad and inclusive stakeholder engagement process. More than 570 residents from across all counties in Central Indiana completed a survey sharing how they interact with and hope to see the region's creative economy evolve. Beyond the survey, dozens of leaders from arts, tourism, education, private sector, sports, trails, and community development organizations contributed insights through discussions and interviews. The Advisory Committee, comprised of 13 representatives from arts nonprofits, municipal governments, and economic development organizations, met regularly throughout the process to guide strategy formation and ensure the plan reflects the shared aspirations of stakeholders across the region.





# Regional Assessment *of* Central Indiana's Creative Economy

Effectively determining the best paths forward first requires a strong understanding of the current landscape. As part of this planning effort, we analyzed Central Indiana's creative industries and occupations, arts and culture economic impact, current resident and stakeholder engagement with the creative economy, and the region's creative assets.



PHOTO CREDIT City of Carmel

PHOTO CREDIT City of Carmel



# Creative Industries

The Indianapolis-Carmel-Greenwood Metropolitan Statistical Area (the Indianapolis MSA) has higher-than-average concentrations of several industries that could be categorized as “creative.” Below is a list of 25 such industries with more employees per capita than the national average as of 2023.<sup>4</sup> This metric is called a location quotient, with a location quotient of 2.0 indicating the regional industry has twice as many employees per capita as that industry nationwide. A more complete list of information on the MSA’s creative industries can be found in **Appendix 2**.

Industry Subsector	Number of Employees in the MSA	Location Quotient (1 = Average Concentration Nationally)	Number of Establishments in the MSA	Pay Per Employee in the MSA
ALL OTHER PUBLISHERS	213	5.05	4	\$63,418
COMMERCIAL SCREEN PRINTING	2,298	4.80	49	\$46,114
HISTORICAL SITES	370	4.76	6	\$35,389
USED MERCHANDISE STORES	3,095	2.05	156	\$20,657
GRAPHIC DESIGN SERVICES	617	1.85	127	\$65,036
CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAUS	100	1.66	9	\$96,510
COSMETOLOGY AND BARBER SCHOOLS	198	1.57	16	\$38,328
MUSICAL GROUPS AND ARTISTS	393	1.44	28	\$37,201
BOOK PUBLISHERS	625	1.41	12	\$43,469
COMMERCIAL PHOTOGRAPHY	128	1.40	32	\$34,484
COMPUTER SYSTEMS DESIGN SERVICES	7,237	1.39	369	\$81,736
COMMERCIAL PRINTING <i>(except screen and books)</i>	2,518	1.33	95	\$54,864
MUSEUMS	805	1.30	23	\$50,168
PUBLIC RELATIONS AGENCIES	519	1.27	53	\$139,669
FLORISTS	454	1.21	61	\$21,593
MUSICAL INSTRUMENT + SUPPLIES STORES	221	1.16	16	\$40,683
DIRECT MAIL ADVERTISING	235	1.14	10	\$35,711
NEWSPAPER PUBLISHERS	693	1.12	31	\$53,691
ARCHITECTURAL SERVICES	1,434	1.12	112	\$84,783
FULL-SERVICE RESTAURANTS	40,114	1.10	1,613	\$24,905
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURAL SERVICES	216	1.10	33	\$78,597
MOTION PICTURE THEATERS <i>(except drive-ins)</i>	900	1.09	28	\$15,796
CUSTOM COMPUTER PROGRAMMING SERVICES	7,370	1.07	416	\$82,232
SFINE ARTS SCHOOLS	925	1.07	100	\$18,012
SOFTWARE PUBLISHERS	7,146	1.04	87	\$200,557



## Why This Matters

The Indianapolis MSA has strong representation in certain creative industry subsectors such as publishing, printing, graphic design, and museums and historical sites. However, the region underperforms in many areas that are critical to building a vibrant, independent creative ecosystem. For example, the region has significantly below average concentrations of independent artists, writers, and performers; art dealers; sound recording studios; and entertainment promoters. While the MSA has some strong institutional and commercial anchors, it lacks sufficient infrastructure for individual creatives to showcase their work and build sustainable careers. The limited presence of dealers and promoters restricts opportunities for creatives to connect with audiences and patrons, and the lack of sound recording studios restricts the maturation of the region’s music scene.

For CIRDA, this imbalance underscores why regional coordination and intentional investment are so critical. Without complementary supports such as dealers, promoters, and platforms for independent artists, the ecosystem remains incomplete and underperforms relative to its potential. Building a stronger pipeline for creatives, promoting their work more visibly, and attracting businesses that enable them to thrive will boost Main Streets and Central Indiana’s economy. Our strategic plan directly responds to this need by calling for a regional front door to the creative economy, shared marketing and promotional platforms, and policies that elevate creatives. The region must fill gaps in the creative economy while strengthening what it already has.



# Creative Occupations

A snapshot view of the region’s creative occupations provides additional insights. Below are 23 occupations with higher concentrations of employees in the Indianapolis MSA than the national average, as of 2023.<sup>5</sup> These occupations are listed by the number of employees, and a more complete listing of creative occupation data is included in **Appendix 3**.

Occupation	Number of Employees in the MSA	Location Quotient	Mean Annual Wage
MARKET RESEARCH ANALYSTS AND MARKETING SPECIALISTS	6,420	1.06	\$75,820
RECREATION WORKERS	2,130	1.06	\$32,550
PRINTING PRESS OPERATORS	1,720	1.59	\$45,250
ARCHITECTURAL AND ENGINEERING MANAGERS	1,590	1.07	\$151,430
GRAPHIC DESIGNERS	1,570	1.03	\$53,180
COMPUTER PROGRAMMERS	1,280	1.49	\$103,990
AUDIO AND VIDEO TECHNICIANS	960	2.01	\$53,270
INTERPRETERS AND TRANSLATORS	630	1.72	\$49,240
PRINT BINDING AND FINISHING WORKERS	520	1.87	\$38,830
INTERIOR DESIGNERS	510	1.06	\$61,970
ACTORS	450	1.01	Undisclosed
TOUR AND TRAVEL GUIDES	390	1.17	\$29,900
TECHNICAL WRITERS	380	1.12	\$78,950
BROADCAST TECHNICIANS	350	1.85	\$57,240
NEWS ANALYSTS, REPORTERS, AND JOURNALISTS	330	1.02	\$66,100
BROADCAST ANNOUNCERS AND RADIO DISC JOCKEYS	320	1.79	\$65,060
BARBERS	200	1.76	\$45,150
DANCERS	140	1.73	Undisclosed
CAMERA AND PHOTOGRAPHIC EQUIPMENT REPAIRERS	100	5.41	\$35,950
MUSEUM TECHNICIANS AND CONSERVATORS	90	1.04	\$49,150
PHOTOGRAPHIC PROCESS WORKERS & MACHINE OPERATORS	60	1.55	\$38,240
ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND ARCHEOLOGISTS	60	1.16	\$65,690
HISTORIANS	30	1.46	\$68,110

Compensation for many creative occupations in Central Indiana is significantly lower than the pay for the same types of jobs in other regions. Average wages in 2023 for Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media Occupations (the vast majority of which are widely considered creative occupations) in the Indianapolis Metropolitan Statistical Area were \$55,540. This is nearly \$20,000 (26.5%) less than the \$75,520 average wage for these occupations nationwide.<sup>6</sup>



## Why This Matters

While the occupational data supports some of the findings from the industry data (e.g., worker concentrations in printing and museums), it also shows some differences and additional strengths. Central Indiana has a strong technology sector, which is an important driver of creative economic activity. Subsectors such as dance, radio, and media represent additional strengths in the region. On the other hand, many core creative occupations such as arts professors, producers and directors, and even architects have below-average concentrations. In the case of some occupations on the edge of the creative economy, such as software developers and marketing managers, the wages are high but Indianapolis’ concentrations are low. Lower wages for creative occupations could suggest regional employers place a lower value on these jobs and that Central Indiana’s creative jobs may be lower-skilled jobs compared to occupations in other regions. Central Indiana has an opportunity to strengthen its economy and increase wages by growing creative sectors through increased connectedness with the broader corporate, technology, and business services sectors.

Building a more creative ecosystem means developing the onramps for creatives to connect with employers and complementary businesses they can support. In practical terms, this means CIRDA’s regional strategy should seek to bridge gaps between institutional and corporate anchors and the broader creative workforce. Doing so will strengthen the creative economy and produce a thriving, interconnected pool of creative workers.



# Economic Impact of Arts and Culture

The economic impact of arts and culture is both substantial and far-reaching, making clear why it deserves intentional focus within economic development efforts. Beyond enriching quality of life, arts and culture add billions of dollars to the regional economy, generate local spending, support jobs, and strengthen the region's fiscal base through tax collections. National studies on the nonprofit arts sector provide benchmarks that show where Indianapolis performs well (e.g., tax revenues and nonprofit engagement) and where it lags peers (such as job creation). Understanding these dynamics helps ground the case for coordinated regional investment and policy action that can unlock the sector's full potential as an engine of prosperity.

Americans for the Arts has periodically conducted survey-based evaluations and economic impact analyses of nonprofit arts and cultural organizations in cities and regions throughout the country. The most recent of these studies is *Arts & Economic Prosperity 6 (AEP6)*, which uses data from 2022.<sup>7</sup> Only a few Indiana cities are featured in the study, but Indianapolis data provides numerable comparisons and benchmark findings that have informed our work—several of which are summarized below.

**PEER COMPARISON.** The benchmark group for Indianapolis' AEP6 comparisons is comprised of 31 communities in the U.S. with populations between 500,000 and 1,000,000 residents in fiscal year 2022. The City of Indianapolis only had 134 nonprofit arts and culture organizations that met the criteria for participating in this survey—far fewer than the national average of 308. However, the participation rate of Indianapolis' organizations was 72%, well above the 30% participation rate nationally.<sup>8</sup> This highlights a core group of highly engaged members of the area's nonprofit community.

**ECONOMIC IMPACT.** According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, arts and culture added \$10.1 billion to Indiana's statewide economy in 2023.<sup>9</sup> For context, the Central Indiana region makes up 31% of the state's population but accounts for a greater proportion of the state's creative economy—39% of the state's creative jobs<sup>10</sup> and 46% of the state's creative industry payroll.<sup>11</sup>

The AEP6 study found that spending by Indianapolis' nonprofit arts and culture organizations added \$474 million to the region's gross domestic product.<sup>12</sup> With Indianapolis making up 45.9% of the CIRDA region's total population,<sup>13</sup> the regional impact of nonprofit arts and culture organizations could very well exceed \$1 billion. Nonprofits make up just 14% of the national arts and culture economy,<sup>14</sup> so this \$1 billion economic contribution is just a fraction of the region's total creative economy. Based on these datapoints, arts and culture contributes at least an estimated \$4 billion to the CIRDA region's economy.<sup>15</sup>

While these totals are large and significant, the economic impact of arts and culture in Indianapolis lags the nation in several areas. For instance, the economic impact per \$100,000 in direct spending by Indianapolis' participating nonprofit arts and culture organizations was below the national average when measuring by total jobs (1.43 jobs per \$100,000 in direct spending vs. 2.13 among national peers), resident income (\$74,563 vs. \$90,284), value added (\$100,168 vs. \$106,693), and output (\$165,263 vs. \$174,332).<sup>16</sup>

However, the area where Indianapolis' economic impact from arts and culture exceeded the national average was in local and state taxes collected (\$5,524 in local Indianapolis taxes collected per \$100,000 in direct spending by nonprofit arts and culture organizations vs. an average of \$2,835 for local taxes nationally; \$10,329 in Indiana state taxes contributed vs. an average of \$3,785 in state tax collections nationally).<sup>17</sup> The tax impact from organizational spending was \$108 million in total, more than twice the national average (\$47 million).<sup>18</sup>

## Arts and culture contribute at least \$4 billion to Central Indiana's economy.

Engagement with Arts and Culture. Indianapolis attendees of nonprofit arts and culture events are wealthier than the national average. About 20.2% of Indianapolis resident attendees have household incomes of \$200,000 or more, versus 14.7% nationally. This is a much higher percentage than peer cities such as Denver (14.3%), Nashville (12.7%), Milwaukee (11.2%), or Louisville (8.3%). Indianapolis has higher-than-average rates of attendees at every income level above \$100,000, and lower-than-average rates of attendees at every income level below \$100,000.<sup>19</sup>

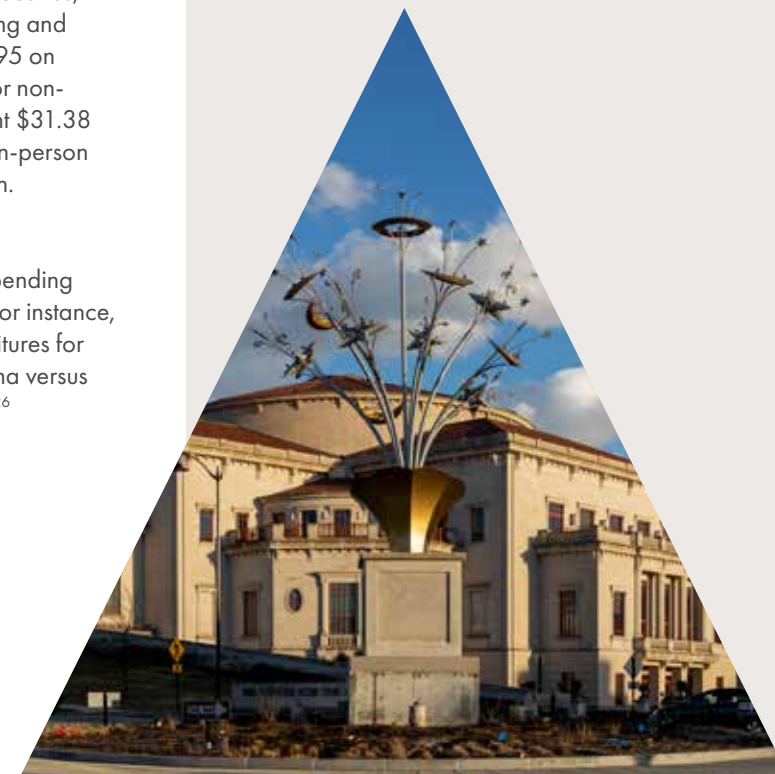
This trend is even more pronounced for non-resident attendees of Indianapolis' nonprofit arts and cultural events. While 25.6% of Indianapolis' non-resident attendees earn \$200,000 or more, just 16.1% of non-resident event attendees nationally are in the same income bracket.<sup>20</sup> Also, Indianapolis has much lower-than-average rates of attendees with a disability,<sup>21</sup> and slightly higher rates of attendees with a master's or doctoral degree.<sup>22</sup>

**SPENDING.** The average attendee spent \$36.72 in the Indianapolis economy when attending an in-person activity at an arts and culture organization, roughly in line with the average among peers of \$37.44.<sup>23</sup> This includes: \$15.71 on food & drink, \$3.93 on retail, \$2.87 on supplies and groceries, \$4.02 on transportation, \$4.52 on clothing and accessories, \$1.52 on childcare, and \$2.95 on overnight lodging.<sup>24</sup> Spending is higher for non-residents. The average local resident spent \$31.38 in the local economy when attending an in-person activity at an arts and culture organization. Non-residents spent \$47.24.<sup>25</sup>

In general, Indiana's creative economy spending by consumers lags the rest of the nation. For instance, per capita personal consumption expenditures for Recreation Services total \$1,363 in Indiana versus \$2,207 nationally—a difference of 38%.<sup>26</sup>

## Why This Matters

The *Arts & Economic Prosperity 6* study reveals both the economic weight of the region's creative assets and the unevenness of their impact. On one hand, Central Indiana's arts and culture is responsible for billions of dollars in economic impact and significant tax revenues. On the other hand, the impact of Indianapolis' arts and culture underperforms its peers in job creation and resident income. Moreover, participation in arts and culture skews toward wealthier households, indicating that access and engagement are not evenly distributed across the region's population. The economic impact of—and public participation in—the valuable arts and culture sector could be even greater with intentional coordination.





# Funding for the Arts

While the creative economy is mostly powered by creative business investments, Central Indiana's creative economy is also supported by a patchwork of local public appropriations, state and federal funds, and philanthropy.

At the city level, Indianapolis' Annual Grants Program—administered by the Indy Arts Council—awarded over \$1.9 million to 101 nonprofit arts and culture organizations in 2025,<sup>27</sup> reflecting modest but steady support spread across a wide range of recipients. Indianapolis requires developers receiving tax increment financing (TIF) incentives to allocate 1% of the TIF amount to public art (either on-site or into a city art fund), a policy that could serve as a regional model.<sup>28</sup> The City also set aside \$500,000 in 2025 to support its cultural districts.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, per capita public spending on arts and culture in Indianapolis is about \$5.68, far below nearby cities like St. Louis and Cincinnati that exceed \$100 per resident.<sup>30</sup>

Across the CIRDA region, some municipalities provide grant funding for the arts. For example, Carmel awarded \$1.24 million across 23 organizations in 2024,<sup>31</sup> and Fishers offers an annual grant program with individual project caps of \$7,500.<sup>32</sup> With limited municipal funding, many organizations throughout the region rely on funding from the Indiana Arts Commission, which in 2025 awarded \$1.09 million across 104 grants throughout all nine counties in the CIRDA region—each of which were less than \$20,000.<sup>33</sup> These local and state grants form an important backbone for operating support and programming, but they rarely meet the scale of need region-wide.



Per capita public spending on arts and culture in Indianapolis is just \$5.68—compared to more than \$100 per resident in peer cities like St. Louis and Cincinnati.

Private philanthropy remains the largest and most flexible source of arts funding in the region. According to the Polis Center and the Arts and Culture Atlas of Indianapolis, philanthropy was responsible for 45% of the revenues (\$131 million) of 77 prominent Indianapolis arts and culture nonprofits in 2023.<sup>34</sup> Earned revenue made up just 28% of their revenues. Lilly Endowment Inc. regularly makes multi-year, multi-million-dollar commitments to arts and culture organizations in Central Indiana, and its support of each county's community foundation adds to the local foundation funding for the arts. Major corporate and family philanthropy complements these foundations. Complete, detailed philanthropic investment data is fragmented and difficult to track—another use case for coordinated regional creative economy infrastructure.

## Why This Matters

The current funding mix largely targets the nonprofit arts sector, while independent creators and businesses have few opportunities for public or charitable funding. This dynamic may contribute to the underwhelming job creation and income multipliers from Central Indiana's arts and culture despite the strong tax impact from nonprofit spending. This CIRDA-led strategy seeks to stand up a regional hub that will be able to better track funding, reduce duplication, and align investments while seeking ways to directly support creative entrepreneurs and businesses.





# Regional and Local Arts & Culture Plans

This is not the first plan related to arts and culture in Central Indiana. Central Indiana’s READI 2.0 submission, Main Street Matters, is a fitting precursor to the strategies described in this plan. One of the core principles of Main Street Matters is that “place must become our strongest asset.” That goal is only possible with deep arts and culture. Main Street Matters emphasizes walkable and interconnected districts, talent, and innovation—themes that all play an important role in the strategies described later in this plan. Their power to link people with arts and culture was a key reason for walkability and connectedness being defining features of the READI 2.0 plan.<sup>35</sup>

Public attention to arts and culture is present at the local level as well. Although further alignment is needed, many of Central Indiana’s municipalities are taking proactive approaches to boosting arts and culture by creating local plans and commissions. Below is a synthesis of key themes, strategies, and points of alignment across many of the arts and culture strategic planning documents from communities across Central Indiana. This analysis helped identify shared priorities that informed the development of regional arts and culture strategies.

1

## EMPHASIS ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE ARTS

Communities throughout the region recognize the importance of arts and culture to economic development. Fishers’ 2019 Arts & Culture Master Plan<sup>36</sup> explicitly links cultural vibrancy with business attraction and neighborhood revitalization. Noblesville’s plan calls for cultural tourism marketing and integrating creative industries into economic development efforts. A key driver of Franklin’s plans is the awareness that arts and culture attract businesses and talent. Plainfield’s master plan recommends requiring real estate developers to thoughtfully integrate art in their projects. Municipal efforts show a growing consensus that arts and culture are not just amenities, but essential economic assets that can shape growth and competitiveness.

2

## COMMITMENT TO PUBLIC ART + PLACEMAKING

Public art initiatives are standard across community plans. Plainfield emphasizes public art as part of downtown activations. Greenfield contemplates a rotating art program, grants for façades and murals, and public art integrated into infrastructure such as utility boxes and bike racks. Westfield proposes art trails and walking tours and installations in community spaces. Fishers and Noblesville prioritize site-specific installations to reflect community identity. These efforts highlight the role of art in catalyzing civic pride, tourism, and social cohesion.

3

## SUPPORT FOR LOCAL ARTISTS AND CREATIVES

Multiple communities seek to directly support artists through funding, space, and visibility. Westfield and Greenfield proposed artist-in-residence programs. Noblesville calls for shared artist studio spaces and mentorship for emerging creatives. Greenfield’s plan envisions integrating artists into city plans, developing housing for creative entrepreneurs with studios and galleries, and connecting them with professional opportunities. Fishers seeks to connect artists with entrepreneurship supports. Communities throughout the region share in their recognition of artists as economic actors needing support just like entrepreneurs more broadly.

4

## YOUTH AND EDUCATION INTEGRATION

Many communities recognize the importance of exposing youth to the arts. Bargersville is driving collaboration with local schools to create arts education initiatives. Noblesville seeks a pipeline of young creative leaders through partnerships with school art departments and youth arts programming. A new high school auditorium is an important part of Greenfield’s plans. Fishers engages K-12 students through S.T.E.A.M. programs in collaboration with external partners. Nearly 100 high school students provided input into Plainfield’s master plan. These commitments show there is some regional momentum for youth investment through arts education—something the region needs to build upon to ensure a growing pool of creative talent.

5

## CULTURAL DISTRICT DESIGNATION AND INVESTMENT

Cultural districts serve as focal points for branding, funding, and programmatic energy. The Franklin Arts District, Carmel Arts & Design District, Noblesville’s Cultural Arts District, and Greenfield’s planned Cultural District all anchor public art, events, and place-based economic development within defined geographies. These areas attract philanthropic and state funding and attention (e.g., Indiana Arts Commission designation), provide identity and cohesion, and support dense cultural programming.

6

## ESTABLISHMENT OF ARTS AND CULTURE COMMISSIONS

Several Central Indiana communities—including Bargersville and Franklin—have formally created or seek to create arts and culture commissions to serve as strategic entities for citywide arts development. These commissions are empowered to guide public art installations, steward grant programs, and make policy recommendations to local governments. A Bargersville ordinance gives the commission duties such as expanding public art and cultivating artistic opportunities in partnership with private and nonprofit entities. These structures institutionalize arts support and create channels for artist and community input.

7

## NEED FOR COORDINATION AND SHARED RESOURCES

Many plans identify fragmented efforts and siloed programming as barriers to growth. Greenfield’s planning has highlighted the need for coordination around marketing and calendars. Plainfield suggests intentional coordination for public art with design review and economic development processes. Noblesville Creates has taken an increased role in regional planning efforts extending well beyond the city boundaries. However, while there are many municipal plans currently in development or implementation that seek to engage with and benefit all community members, there has been very little focus on coordinating efforts beyond municipal or county lines. That makes this regional plan all the more important.

## Why This Matters

Taken together, the local plans reveal a strong foundation and a significant level of attention on the arts and creativity across Central Indiana. Communities are making progress on their own—whether by investing in cultural districts, expanding public art, or building stronger ties among artists and local economies—but these efforts remain largely siloed. Without a regional framework, opportunities to align investments and share in amplifying impact are being missed. CIRDA’s regional strategy needs to connect these local initiatives, providing the coordination, shared infrastructure, and collective vision that are necessary for elevating the regional creative economy. By doing so, Central Indiana can build on the patchwork of municipal efforts to develop a more unified cultural landscape that drives both economic prosperity and a stronger regional identity.



# Regional Population Sentiments

To better understand residents’ interaction with, and hopes for, the region’s creative economy, we conducted a survey of the population across all counties in the CIRDA region. We received responses from 570 individuals representing all counties and 36 municipalities in the Central Indiana region.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CREATIVE ECONOMY

Central Indiana residents see the importance of a strong creative economy. When asked how important a vibrant creative economy is to their community’s ability to thrive, 84% of residents indicated they see the creative economy as a necessity. (See top chart on the following page.)

Talent retention emerged as a particularly important theme in survey results. Of the students and retirees who participated in the survey, 55% said a strong creative economy is an important or major factor in their decision to stay in Indiana. The strength of the creative economy is an especially important factor to the younger generation, with 91% of students indicating a strong creative economy is a factor in whether they stay in Indiana. This highlights the creative economy’s strategic importance in stemming “brain drain” and ensuring that young talent views Central Indiana as a place where they can build creative and professional lives.

CONNECTING WITH THE CREATIVE ECONOMY

Survey respondents identified several barriers that prevent them from accessing creative opportunities in Central Indiana. The biggest challenge by far is information access, with 73% of respondents citing a lack of awareness of events and opportunities—the only response featured by a majority of respondents. Other commonly identified barriers were cost (42%) and interfering obligations (41%). The least common responses of the 11 options were transportation (7%) and safety concerns (4%), showing actual resident sentiment may not always align with public narratives related to safety.

These findings are supported by respondents’ strategic thinking. A majority (52%) suggested better promotion of local creative opportunities as one of the top three strategies for connecting people and communities to arts, culture, and the creative economy. The only other strategy identified by more than one-third of respondents was stronger partnerships between businesses and artists (37%).

SUPPORT FOR CREATIVE BUSINESSES

When asked what types of programs would be most impactful in supporting creative businesses, respondents ranked funding for creative entrepreneurs, affordable studio space, and public patronage of the arts as the best supports. The 238 respondents in creative industries ranked patronage of the arts, entrepreneurship and business development training, and networking opportunities with professionals in other industries significantly higher than the average respondent. (See bottom chart on the following page.)

These responses align with the challenges facing creatives. Respondents in creative industries overwhelmingly identified lack of funding as the biggest challenge facing creative professionals. Also ranked high were difficulty marketing and promoting creative work, low consumer demand, and isolation from other industries.

CREATIVE ECONOMY PROJECTS

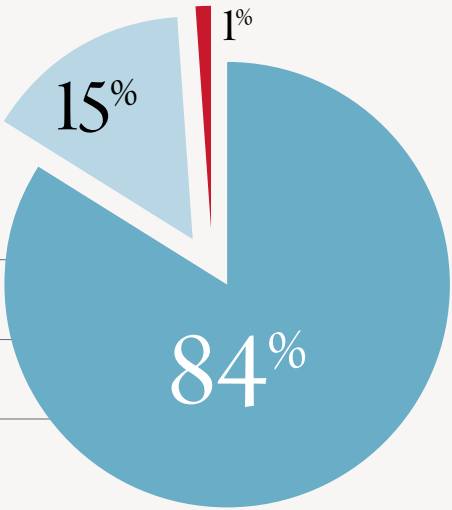
Survey participants were asked what types of creative economy projects they most would like to see funded. Their responses show the value residents place on the region’s built environment, with activation of spaces and development of arts districts or creative hubs as the top responses. (See middle chart on the following page.)

OTHER INSIGHTS

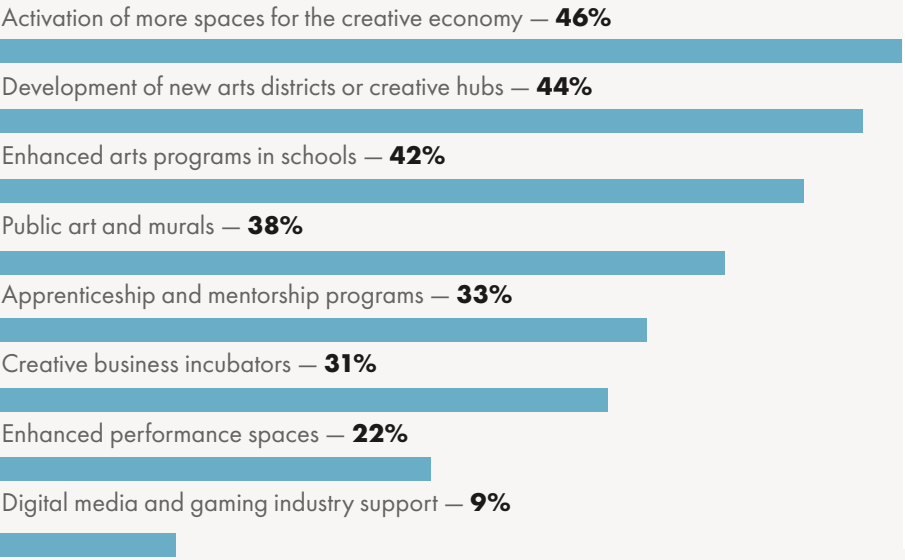
Survey respondents highlighted a clear desire for stronger connections between the creative economy and other community assets. Businesses and retail hubs were cited most frequently as sectors that should engage more with the creative economy, while respondents under age 25 pointed to K–12 schools as their top priority for deeper involvement. Nearly nine in ten respondents (89%) believe there should be more public funding for arts and culture, compared to just 1% who disagreed and 10% who were unsure. Open-ended comments reinforced the themes described above, emphasizing the need for greater visibility, stronger ties to Indiana’s innovation eco-system, and better coordination among the creative sector. Additional details and insights from the survey responses are featured in **Appendix 4.**

## Importance of the Creative Economy

- 84% A necessity
- 15% Nice to have
- 1% Not important

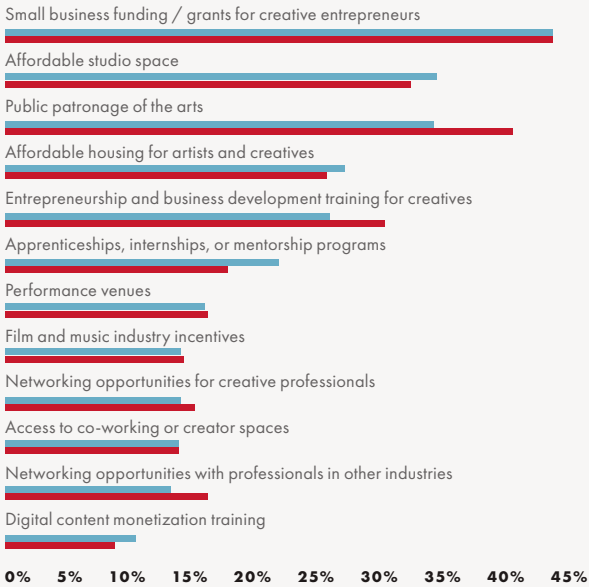


## Respondents Want Funding for These Creative Economy Projects:



## Most Impactful Programs for Supporting Local Creative Businesses

- ALL RESPONDENTS
- RESPONDENTS IN CREATIVE INDUSTRIES



## Why This Matters

These survey findings demonstrate that residents not only value arts and culture but see them as essential to the region’s competitiveness, quality of life, and long-term growth. The strong connection between a vibrant creative economy and talent retention—especially among students—shows that this work is not just about cultural amenities but about Central Indiana’s ability to keep and attract its future workforce. The consistent calls for better promotion, stronger business partnerships, and increased public funding make clear that residents expect more coordinated, visible, and sustained leadership. These insights reinforce the importance of CIRDA’s vision to seamlessly weave arts and culture throughout the region’s identity by aligning local efforts, closing gaps in awareness and access, and investing in the infrastructure and networks that will leverage the creative economy as a regional driver of prosperity.





# Strengths, Weaknesses, and Opportunities

Assessing Central Indiana's creative economy currently is essential for charting where it should go next. Identifying the region's strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities allows CIRDA and its partners to build on what is working, address gaps, and seize emerging possibilities for growth. The following analysis synthesizes extensive research, stakeholder interviews, and community engagement conducted across Central Indiana to identify key factors shaping the region's creative economy. These findings highlight both the assets that can be leveraged and the barriers that must be addressed to build a more connected, visible, and resilient cultural ecosystem. Together, they form much of the foundation for the strategic priorities and actions outlined in this plan.



# STRENGTHS



From Fragmentation to Cohesion  
Leveraging Central Indiana's Strengths to Grow its



## STRENGTHS

The Advisory Committee devoted considerable attention to identifying and understanding Central Indiana's creative economy assets. Through Committee discussions and visits to different groups and communities, it became evident that there are a myriad of established arts institutions, groups, alliances, and commissions throughout the CIRDA region. Additionally, CIRDA's member communities often oversee or operate local arts programs, initiatives, and forums. With hundreds of arts and culture-related nonprofits, thousands of creative businesses and entrepreneurs, and countless other contributors to the creative economy, developing a truly complete picture of the region's many creative economy strengths is impractical. Drawing on the Committee's discussions and input from stakeholders, this section includes discussion on many of the region's thematic strengths and highlights examples of institutions and assets that contribute in different ways. While many of these strengths and assets add a great foundation, they are not being leveraged to their fullest potential—a key thesis we address in our strategies.



# Local Arts Champions

The region benefits from a network of creative ecosystem builders and champions for the creative economy.

Central Indiana's cultural vitality is fueled by a dynamic roster of organizations that connect artists, consumers, and opportunities. This starts with the community-supported organizations elevating the creative economy at the local level. Leaders among these include **Noblesville Creates**, which champions artistic programming, public art, classes, and community engagement in Hamilton County, and the **Indy Arts Council**, which continues to drive advocacy and funding for dozens of cultural organizations annually. The **Indianapolis Consortium of Arts Administrators** represents and supports the leaders of dozens of arts organizations across shared priorities.

A host of local cultural organizations and arts councils such as **Hancock County Arts** and **Martinsville Arts Council** operate with limited funding and personnel support but nonetheless play important roles in their communities by supporting artists and promoting arts-related opportunities. Main Street organizations like the **Heart of Lebanon** activate alleys, lead public art installations, plan events, and play instrumental roles in creatively revitalizing local communities.

A few local organizations are especially pivotal galvanizers of the region's creative community. The **Harrison Center** offers studio space for nearly 40 artists, residencies, galleries, and frequent community programming and activations. **Big Car Collaborative** uses art and design to strengthen communities—implementing public art, curated exhibitions, and cultural events rooted in neighborhood identity. Its **Tube Factory artspace** is a cross between an art museum and a community center, and its planned contemporary art

museum on the same Garfield Park campus will further cement it as a creative community anchor. **Arts for Lawrence** activates the creative spirit through its stewardship of the Theater at the Fort and the Fort Ben Cultural Campus, offering performances, camps, and exhibitions with strong local engagement.

With a larger footprint that transcends the region, **GANGGANG** is a standout cultural development agency that has reached tens of thousands of people through events like *BUTTER Fine Art Fair* and *I Made Rock 'N' Roll Festival*. **Pattern** elevates creative commerce and storytelling via platforms like the *Indiana Creative Economy Summit*, helping centralize the role of arts and creativity in economic growth. Another cross-sector leader with a home in Indianapolis is **Indiana Humanities**, which deepens cultural literacy through statewide exhibits, events and showcases such as the Indiana Authors Awards, and initiatives that draw humanities into community life throughout the state.

Additionally, the Creative Economy Leadership Alliance (CELA) recently launched to address the challenges facing Indiana's creative industries with a goal of leading statewide advocacy, coordinating de-siloing across arts, culture, and commercial creative sectors, and building the policy foundation for a creative economy. Its emergence signals growing statewide recognition that Indiana must treat the creative economy as an economic development priority.

These community organizations have a significant impact on the region's creative economy—an impact that can be better realized through the type of coordination that a regional body can champion.



# Top Museums

The Indianapolis area has many nationally recognized cultural institutions.

Central Indiana is home to several flagship museums that anchor the region's cultural identity and attract visitors from across the country. **Newfields**—home to the Indianapolis Museum of Art—offers an art collection with over 50,000 works, along with dynamic programming like Winterlights and the Virginia B. Fairbanks Art & Nature Park that link art to community life. The **Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art** is a nationally recognized institution sharing the stories and art of Native people and the American West while fostering creativity. The **Indiana State Museum** showcases the state's history, culture, and natural sciences through exhibitions and immersive experiences that connect residents and visitors with Indiana's heritage. The **Children's Museum of Indianapolis**—the largest children's museum in the world—brings arts, science, and culture together to inspire the next generation of creators. **Conner Prairie** is a nationally acclaimed living history museum in Hamilton County that blends interactive history, outdoor experiences, and innovative programming, making it a cultural asset that preserves Indiana's heritage while engaging audiences in creative learning.

There are dozens of other museums throughout the region, from the stimulating **Indianapolis Motor Speedway Museum** to smaller local museums like **Johnson County Museum of History** or the **Anderson Museum of Art**.

These institutions support the region's cultural profile and the local creative economy by serving as major employers, providing work for the industries that support them, convening educational programs, and catalyzing tourism. These attractions provide a cultural fabric that the region must build upon to strengthen Central Indiana's brand as a cultural destination, enrich the quality of life for residents, and provide platforms where artists, educators, and innovators can engage with broad audiences.

# Producers of Creative Professionals

Central Indiana has an array of universities, schools, and organizations that develop the creative workforce.

Central Indiana's post-secondary ecosystem includes many institutions that can play an important role in the regional creative economy. Indiana University Indianapolis' **Herron School of Art and Design** offers rigorous programs in fields ranging from painting and sculpture to visual communication design and art therapy, with the school's **Basile Center for Art, Design, and Public Life** fostering community engagement and civic arts leadership. **Anderson University** offers programs in creative fields such as **Cinema Media Arts and Music Business**. The **Creative School at DePauw University** is one of just three schools at DePauw, showing the university's commitment to creativity. **Purdue Polytechnic Institute** fuses engineering with study areas such as animation, video game design, architecture, and themed entertainment. **Butler University, Marian University, University of Indianapolis, Franklin College, and Ivy Tech Community College** all offer degree programs in various artistic fields. These institutions recognize the

value in producing skilled alumni capable of filling jobs in creative industries as well as equipping graduates with creative thinking skills that can drive success throughout all sectors.

While higher education is the clearest component of the creative talent pipeline, Central Indiana also cultivates creativity at other stages. **Herron High School** stands out among K-12 institutions for its arts identity and high-quality academic outcomes as the top public high school in Indianapolis, offering a classical curriculum with strong emphasis on creativity. Other community organizations develop creative talent outside the education system. The **Indianapolis Art Center** and **Fishers Art Center** offer hands-on exposure to the arts through robust youth camps, public classes, and community facilities.

Educational and cultural institutions like these mean that Central Indiana produces talent at a level that can grow the creative economy. The challenge, as we have seen from the survey results and research, lies in retaining these creative professionals and growing the creative



# Sports and Civic Leadership

Central Indiana has excelled at building infrastructure around regional priorities—particularly related to sports.

Central Indiana has developed a national reputation for its ability to mobilize civic leadership and align institutions around big regional priorities. Perhaps most visibly, Indianapolis has leveraged its strong tradition of public-private collaboration to become a premier host city for major sporting events. From the Super Bowl and All-Star games to events like the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA's) March Madness and the Olympic Swim Trials, the city has repeatedly demonstrated its capacity to convene business leaders, government officials, philanthropies, and volunteers in pursuit of shared goals. World-class events and offerings have generated both economic impact and civic pride.

Central Indiana's sports identity is woven deeply into the cultural and economic fabric of the region. The area is home to a remarkable array of professional and amateur teams, including the **Indianapolis Colts**, **Indiana Pacers**, **Indiana Fever**, **Indy Eleven**, **Indianapolis Indians**, **Indy Fuel**, and more. These teams give the region a year-round calendar of high-level sporting events that foster civic pride and regional visibility.

Also valuable are the region's world-class **stadiums and venues** that have helped position Central Indiana as a national leader in sports tourism and event hosting. Meanwhile, the presence of the **NCAA** and other amateur sports governing bodies add legitimacy to the region's claim to be the "Amateur Sports Capital of the World." **Grand Park** in Westfield has become one of the nation's premier youth sports complexes, attracting millions of visitors to Central Indiana.

Supporting the full sports ecosystem, the **Indiana Sports Corp** has mastered the art of partnerships and has helped build the region's sports identity into what it is today.

That same spirit of collaboration extends beyond sports. The region's business and civic leaders have a history of creating permanent civic infrastructure to address long-term priorities, such as the nonprofit economic development organization **Central Indiana Corporate Partnership** and the **Capital Improvement Board** that owns and operates various facilities in downtown Indianapolis. This collaborative and entrepreneurial spirit is also evident in annual events like the **RALLY** global cross-sector innovation conference with themes such as "Creative Convergence." These efforts illustrate how the Indianapolis region systematically builds institutions and coalitions that can steward the region's progress.

This culture of civic leadership—anchored in cross-sector collaboration and a willingness to think big—has enabled Central Indiana to punch above its weight nationally, whether in economic development, addressing community priorities, or building brands around growing strengths such as sports. Now the key will be harnessing this strength to mobilize partners and address a new priority: developing a creative economy that rivals the nation's best.



# Cultural Hubs

The region has various creative economy hubs that add density and serve creatives and the public alike.

Central Indiana's creative economy is perhaps most visible in its vibrant cultural hubs—districts and spaces where artists, entrepreneurs, and the public come together. In Indianapolis, the historic **Stutz Building** and the **Factory Arts District** have transformed two former auto factories into a thriving complex of creative businesses, while **10 East Arts** is growing a cultural district on the east side of Indianapolis and the **Tube Factory** campus is transforming the Garfield Park community to the south of downtown. **Fountain Square** and its **Murphy Arts Center** represent one of the state's most dynamic cultural districts, featuring live music venues, independent theaters, and street art

that have fueled the city's indie arts scene for decades. Other cultural hubs across Central Indiana extend this ecosystem. The **Fort Ben Cultural District** has created a focal point for the Lawrence community around arts and culture. The **Carmel Arts & Design District** is a well-known hub that blends galleries, public art, specialty shops, and events like the Carmel International Arts Festival, making it both a magnet for visitors and a platform for local creatives. Collectively, these hubs act as gathering places and incubators for creative ventures—another important set of ingredients in the effort to amplify economic development efforts through arts and culture.



# Philanthropy

Central Indiana is a global philanthropic leader, and the region's foundations provide important arts funding.

Philanthropy has long served as a cornerstone of Indianapolis' civic and cultural identity. **Lilly Endowment Inc.** is one of the largest private foundations in the world, and it has made significant investments in the arts across Central Indiana. The **Christel DeHaan Family Foundation**, **Allen Whitehill Clowes Charitable Foundation**, **Glick Philanthropies**, and the **Central Indiana Community Foundation (CICF)** have all built lasting legacies by backing arts organizations and placemaking initiatives such as the Indianapolis Cultural Trail. Every county in the region also has well-resourced **community foundations** that invest in their local communities.

Indianapolis is also home to the **Lilly Family School of Philanthropy** at Indiana University, the nation's premier institution dedicated to the study and teaching of philanthropy. The school trains nonprofit leaders, advances philanthropy scholarship, and equips communities across the country and world with research-driven strategies for giving and social impact.

While Indianapolis' philanthropy ecosystem is world-class, it has often focused on driving individual projects and supporting individual organizations. Lilly Endowment's READI 2.0 funding designated for arts and culture provides an important opportunity for the region to look more strategically and collaboratively at how philanthropic capital can be deployed. Done well, impact will be far larger than any one initiative, project, or organization.



## Arts Venues

The Indianapolis area has many nationally recognized cultural institutions.

Central Indiana is fortunate to host a rich array of performing arts venues and cultural spaces that serve the region's creative ecosystem, from a collection of small and intimate venues to large concert halls and stages such as the **Hilbert Circle Theatre**, the Murat, **Everwise Amphitheater**, **Palladium at the Center for the Performing Arts**, **Ruoff Music Center**, and **Fishers Event Center**. Community venues abound throughout the region, from the **H.J. Ricks Center for the Arts** in Greenfield to the historic **Artcraft Theatre** in Franklin and the **Plainfield Performing Arts Center** in Plainfield. Hundreds of other stages are offered at breweries and restaurants, universities (e.g., **Clowes Memorial Hall**), parks and community amphitheaters, schools, standalone concert venues, and more. These facilities provide gathering points for audiences and platforms for performers, from theater and music to comedy. Many of these venues have deep roots in their communities, hosting ongoing subscription series, youth programming, touring acts, music festivals, and locally produced works. Their presence not only supports the region's creative professionals, but also drives related economic activity—restaurants, parking, retail, rehearsal spaces, and hospitality all benefit. Together, these physical assets contribute to the region's cultural reputation and form a foundation upon which CIRDA can build region-wide programming, coordination, and visibility.



## Trails, Parks, and Community Amenities

Central Indiana's quality of life is enriched by trails, parks, and community assets.

The trail system is one of Central Indiana's most visible amenities. The nationally acclaimed **Indianapolis Cultural Trail** connects neighborhoods, cultural districts, and major downtown destinations through a vibrant network of bike- and pedestrian-friendly pathways, doubling as a linear park and public art gallery. **The Monon Trail**, stretching north from downtown Indianapolis to Sheridan through Broad Ripple, Carmel, and Westfield, has become an economic and cultural spine of the region. Meanwhile, the **White River Greenway** and connected riverfront trails showcase the region's natural assets and potential for a more robust White River corridor as both an ecological and cultural amenity. Furthermore, the trail system is benefiting from new regional momentum as trail champions across municipal lines have been formalizing a coalition to elevate the region's brand through trails.

The region also boasts significant parks such as White River State Park, Fort Harrison State Park, Eagle Creek Park, and Riverside Park, as well as a host of popular parks in surrounding counties. New investments in riverfront development and green infrastructure continue to enhance accessibility and sustainability.

Central Indiana is also home to the nation's top-ranked airport and one of the largest privately funded zoos in the country. Cultural and lifestyle amenities—including charming Main Streets in each of the counties surrounding Indianapolis, a diverse food scene, historic neighborhoods, and thriving farmers markets—further bolster Central Indiana's appeal as a place where creativity, community, and commerce intersect. These assets and strengths can work together to ensure their impact is greater than the sum of their parts.



# National Arts Nonprofits

Many of the nation's national music nonprofits choose to reside in Indianapolis.

Central Indiana also distinguishes itself as home to nationally recognized arts and culture organizations whose headquarters anchor major parts of the country's creative landscape. The **Drum Corps International (DCI)** headquarters in Indianapolis positions the city as the global hub of competitive marching music, drawing performers and fans from across the United States each summer for the DCI World Championships at Lucas Oil Stadium. Similarly, the **American Pianists Association**, based in Indianapolis, is one of the nation's premier music organizations, elevating emerging world-class pianists through its prestigious competitions and fellowships. The region also hosts the headquarters for **Music for All** and its **Bands of America** brand headquarters, an organization and program that stage some of the country's largest high school marching band competitions and music education events. These institutions extend Central Indiana's reach far beyond its geographic borders and represent additional assets that can be further leveraged.



# Unique Identifiers

Central Indiana has distinctive differentiators upon which brands can be built.

At the heart of downtown Indianapolis, **Monument Circle** welcomes visitors and residents alike to the region, serving as a more visible "front door" to the region than what exists in most other cities and states. The **Indianapolis Motor Speedway**, the largest sports venue in the world, remains a global icon and the reason for the region's identity as the "Racing Capital of the World." Even the roads tell a story, from the **Crossroads of America** brand to the **hundreds of roundabouts** in Hamilton County, which signal that the community is both thoughtful and creative. Together, these landmarks—both grand and subtle—give Central Indiana a memorable sense of place to build upon, rooted in design innovation, history, and community creativity.

# Creative Icons

Many globally recognized creative economy leaders have strong ties to Indianapolis.

Central Indiana may not have the creative density of Nashville or Los Angeles, but its creative economy is lifted by the cultural impact of nationally recognized figures who have built influential careers while maintaining deep connections to the region. Few embody this better than **David Letterman**, the Ball State University alumnus who redefined late-night television during his decades-long career on *Late Night* and *The Late Show*. **Pat McAfee**—former Indianapolis Colts punter turned sports entertainer—has leveraged his Indianapolis roots as he has built *The Pat McAfee Show*, one of the most popular and influential sports talk shows in the nation.

The region has also produced leading voices in literature and storytelling. **John Green**, author of bestselling novels like *The Fault in Our Stars* has achieved global literary acclaim while proudly living in Indianapolis. **Ashley Flowers**, founder and host of the globally top-ranked *Crime Junkie* podcast and CEO of Audiochuck, built her media empire in Indianapolis. Each of these celebrities, and others across different creative fields, demonstrates how Central Indiana can be a launchpad for media innovation and a home base for growing creative ventures toward global influence.





# Creative Industry Momentum

Central Indiana is fortunate to have momentum behind several of its creative industries.

## *Film: A Growing Cultural and Economic Force*

Central Indiana is steadily developing into more of a regional hub for independent film. The **Heartland International Film Festival**, founded in Indianapolis in 1991, has grown into one of the largest film festivals in the Midwest, attracting filmmakers and audiences from across the world. Heartland also runs the **Indy Shorts International Film Festival**, which has become a qualifying event for the Academy Awards, further elevating Indianapolis' global profile. This momentum is reinforced by Ball State University's well-regarded film program, which consistently produces skilled young filmmakers entering the industry, and by Indiana's cinematic heritage shaped by classics like **Hoosiers** and **Rudy**, written by Angelo Pizzo, whose work helped put the state on the map. **Film Indy**, housed under Visit Indy, rounds out this landscape by providing location services, industry support, and a recognizable point of contact for productions considering the region. Organizations like **Indiana Filmmakers Network** and **Indiana Film Journalists Association** contribute to the professional development of local creatives and help cultivate a film-friendly ecosystem. Local production companies, animators, and a deep roster of documentary filmmakers are capable of generating homegrown content that connects to national audiences.

## *Music: A Rich and Diverse Scene*

Music is another defining strength of Central Indiana's creative economy. Indianapolis has long been associated with jazz greats like Wes Montgomery, and today the city's contemporary scene is growing through diverse platforms. **Chreece**, an annual hip-hop festival, has become one of the Midwest's most celebrated showcases of hip-hop culture, spotlighting local and national talent. **HI-FI Indy** in Fountain Square serves as a premier small venue that anchors a network of independent venues across the region, and **Forty5 Presents** is a concert promotion company that has leveraged **The Vogue Theatre** and **Rock the Ruins** to develop a thriving music subculture. Important

institutions like the **Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra**, **Indianapolis Opera**, and the **Indianapolis Jazz Foundation** continue to advance performance traditions, while **Classical Music Indy** expands access through radio and community programming. As stakeholders pointed out, Central Indiana does not seek the same music reputation as Nashville, but it could become the gateway to Nashville. From grassroots festivals and local venues to major institutions, this ecosystem creates a multi-genre musical landscape that fuels cultural vibrancy and economic impact.

## *Publishing and Literature: An Underrecognized Strength with a National Footprint*

Publishing also plays an important role in Central Indiana's creative economy, with both legacy firms and newer platforms headquartered in the region. **Pearson Education**, a global leader in educational publishing, maintains a significant Indianapolis presence, employing hundreds of professionals in editorial, design, and digital learning professions. The city is also home to **AuthorHouse**, one of the largest self-publishing companies in the U.S., which provides platforms for thousands of writers to distribute their work globally. Indianapolis has also been home to imprints like **iUniverse** and **Xlibris**—which pioneered print-on-demand and hybrid publishing models—and specialty publishers and distributors such as **Dog Ear Publishing** and **Cardinal Publishers Group**. Together, these entities have made Indianapolis into a quasi-national hub for self-publishing and author services. Also, the **Indiana Writers Center** develops writers through workshops, anthologies, and publishing collaborations, directly contributing to the literary pipeline. **The Kurt Vonnegut Museum & Library** not only preserves the legacy of one of Indiana's most famous authors but also runs writing workshops, publishing programs, and youth literary initiatives. This blend of multinational publishers, self-publishing innovators, and literary non-profits gives Central Indiana a foothold in the national publishing ecosystem.





## WEAKNESSES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Taken together, the strengths described above illustrate that Central Indiana already possesses many of the building blocks of a thriving creative economy. However, several weaknesses are holding it back and limiting its growth. These challenges present opportunities for unlocking potential growth and inform the strategies described in this plan. A few key examples include the following:





# Lack of Coordination and Representation

Central Indiana produces a remarkable amount of creative work, but the region has never had unified leadership to develop it as an economic engine.

For decades, advocacy clustered around nonprofit arts and culture, leaving the commercial creative sectors — music, film, design, publishing, fashion, digital media — without representation, strategy, or a seat at the economic development table. Until Pattern Inc and entities like the Indiana Arts Commission, GANGGANG, and a small number of peer organizations began raising the alarm, the region lacked any champion making the case that arts, culture, and creative industries together form a measurable, investable creative economy. As a result, the system has not been coordinated, and opportunities to grow jobs, retain talent, and attract companies have slipped through the cracks.

Other industries in Indiana have long benefited from dedicated intermediaries like Indiana Sports Corp, BioCrossroads, Conexus, TechPoint, and AgriNovus. No parallel structure exists for the creative economy.

Without one, the region struggles to address issues that limit growth:

- Incomplete and inconsistent data on the true size and impact of creative industries;
- Little coordinated messaging to help municipalities understand the economic value of creative industries;
- Few formal pathways for mentoring, professional development, or crossover between creatives and entrepreneurs;
- Limited financial tools and support systems for creative businesses and workers;
- A shortage of affordable studio, rehearsal, production, and exhibition space.

Addressing these issues on a regional basis requires a mechanism for continued, regional collaboration—a group that includes appointees from local government, local arts and culture organizations, higher education institutions and the private sector.

# Undervalued Creative Economy

Public awareness of, and appreciation for, the creative economy in Central Indiana is too low.

Regions with thriving creative economies see high demand for performance tickets and creative products and services, as well as public leaders who court creative sector leaders. Public appreciation of the creative economy and its economic and social value is relatively low in Central Indiana compared to other metropolitan areas. This is illustrated by residents spending less on creative products and services, relatively low public investment in arts and culture, and the significantly lower wages for creatives than their counterparts in other cities.

Because Central Indiana's creative economy is undervalued, it is also underfunded. There are limitations on the disposable incomes of Central Indiana households.<sup>37</sup> Forty-two percent of survey respondents reported cost being one of the biggest barriers to their participation in the creative economy. The region is also challenged by low levels of public funding for arts and culture compared to national and regional peers. The narrative of the starving artist is perhaps even more apt in Central Indiana than other places, where a survey of 148 artists

found that their median annual income from arts-related activities was less than \$9,000 and a median household income \$18,000 below Indianapolis' average of \$66,447.<sup>38</sup> While creative jobs in different industries frequently offer higher pay than other jobs within those industries,<sup>39</sup> pay in these jobs in Central Indiana is often significantly less than similar jobs elsewhere in the United States.

Also, persistent underinvestment in the arts may result in talent drain to neighboring states. Almost nine out of ten Central Indiana residents believe there should be more public funding for arts and culture. The Indianapolis region provides less public funding for the arts than peer markets,<sup>40</sup> and there is intensifying economic competition from other regions with strong arts funding. This undervaluation is compounded by the fact that much of Central Indiana's existing creative spending does not stay in the region, further limiting the resources available to creatives and cultural institutions.



# Education Policies that Undersell the Arts

The erosion of public school arts education programs reduces the pipeline of future creatives.

Central Indiana faces a growing threat to its future creative workforce due to diminishing support for arts education within public schools. As Indiana executes on a reimagined diploma framework emphasizing experiential learning and workforce alignment, participation in dedicated arts coursework including visual arts, theatre, music, and dance is becoming less commonplace. Without robust, consistent arts requirements, fewer students accrue the credits and enriched learning experiences that spark creative thinking, build design literacy, and encourage engagement with creative industries.

Despite this retreat in formal arts education requirements, there are some encouraging initiatives. Programs like Arts for Learning Indiana sustain access and fill gaps in school-based arts instruction by providing residencies, workshops, and performances delivered by teaching artists to nearly 40,000 youth annually.<sup>41</sup> Still, these programs are neither widespread nor embedded in every district. Across Central Indiana, inconsistencies in funding, staffing, and curricular priority continue to limit arts education's reach, risking the long-term vitality of the region's workforce.

# Gaps in Support Infrastructure for Creatives

Independent creatives struggle to navigate the marketplace.

While Central Indiana has strong institutions and major organizations advancing the arts, many independent creatives struggle to access the tools and networks needed to sustain and grow their work. Artists, musicians, writers, and designers often report difficulty navigating the business side of their careers, from managing contracts and intellectual property to learning basic entrepreneurship and financial planning skills. The region's support services for creative entrepreneurs remain fragmented, leaving individuals isolated from the networks and mentorship that could help them expand their businesses or connect to broader markets. This lack of infrastructure contributes to gaps in sustainability for independent creatives and limits the overall potential of the region's creative economy.

# Creative Revenue Leakage and Market Imbalance

A significant share of cultural and entertainment spending leaves the region instead of circulating within it.

Central Indiana's entertainment dollars increasingly flow to large, vertically integrated out-of-state promoters and event operators. Major concerts and touring productions capture substantial household spending, but because these companies control production, ticketing, and staffing, much of the revenue leaves the region.<sup>42</sup> Dollars that could support local venues, promoters, artists, and creative workers instead exit the ecosystem after a single transaction, weakening the stability of homegrown cultural infrastructure.

A related concern expressed anecdotally by agencies, creatives, and freelancers is that out-of-state creative firms are often hired by Indiana-based organizations for branding, marketing, and design work. While national partnerships can be beneficial for local creative economic growth, better data is needed to quantify how much potential revenue, job growth, and exposure for Indiana creatives is being lost to outside markets.



# Underutilized Assets

Central Indiana is hindered by the underutilization of its existing assets.

Central Indiana is home to a range of physical and cultural assets that remain significantly underutilized by the creative economy. While the region boasts iconic venues and thriving districts, many everyday spaces and pieces of infrastructure sit dormant with limited creative activation. The downtown canal, for instance, is widely recognized but lacks the kind of imaginative programming or design interventions that could make it a true cultural centerpiece. Hundreds of thousands of square feet of Monument Circle real estate sit empty. The region boasts an array of terrific outdoor amphitheaters and similar forums, which are mostly vacant throughout each year.<sup>43</sup> IU Health's People Mover—an abandoned elevated rail system that runs through highly visible areas of Indianapolis—lies dormant despite potential for creative repurposing. Even the network of overhead walkways connecting downtown Indianapolis buildings or utilitarian parking garages offer visible reminders of the underemphasis on creative placemaking, and missed chances to contribute to a vibrant street-level identity. Vacant buildings such as the historic Old City Hall, empty storefronts, and underused storefront windows or lobbies further underscore how much physical capacity lies fallow at the heart of the region.

These gaps, however, represent one of the greatest opportunities for Central Indiana's creative economy. Artist-led interventions can merge redevelopment and reactivation with cultural expression. Mundane infrastructure can be transformed through interactive installation art and performance, making everyday experiences more engaging while supporting local artists. Large-scale projects like the reimagining of the I-65/70 interchange present a once-in-a-generation chance to embed creative design into major civic infrastructure. Meanwhile, vacant assets can be redeveloped or reprogrammed with cultural offerings, creative business incubators, or gallery and maker spaces that attract both residents and visitors. Strategic activation of these dormant assets has the potential to generate new revenue streams, attract tourism, and support an expanded base of creative workers.



# Creative Economy Deserts

Creative establishments are largely absent from the most visible areas.

Despite its growing creative ecosystem, the Mile Square in downtown Indianapolis lacks a critical mass of creative retail and entertainment venues like independent bookstores, record shops, and live music spaces. This creates a visibility gap that diminishes the city center's cultural vibrancy and makes it harder for visitors and residents to experience and support the creative economy through everyday transactions. A flourishing creative ecosystem often relies on foot traffic, retail visibility, and accessible places to discover local art, music, or literature—amenities that are currently sparse in the urban core. While downtown edges like Broad Ripple—notably home to multiple music venues, vinyl shops, and bookstores—serve as bright spots, many towns beyond Marion County lack those creative retail anchors altogether. This means many of the region's residents must travel longer distances to access creative establishments. These deserts persist despite evidence that residents want more creative retail and experiences. For instance, when asked via survey what projects they would most like to see funded, respondents most frequently cited activation of more spaces for the creative economy and development of new arts districts or creative hubs.

Addressing creative economy deserts will require the region to prioritize policies and incentives that attract and sustain creative retail and entertainment establishments in high-visibility locations. Coordinated marketing efforts are also needed to help drive demand and highlight the cultural and economic value of these businesses. By deliberately seeding creative establishments in the urban core and local main streets, Central Indiana can expand everyday access to its creative economy and elevate the region's cultural identity.



# Loss of Former Assets

The threat of lost creative assets is already being realized.

Central Indiana's creative economy bears the imprint of once-vibrant organizations and cultural institutions that no longer exist. Their closures represent a weakness in the regional ecosystem—losses that diminished cultural variety, erased platforms for artists, and left gaps in programming and visibility. Indianapolis, and its Indiana Avenue corridor, used to be one of the nation's premier jazz destinations. Decades earlier, the city was home to many of the leaders in Indiana's "Golden Age of Painting." More recently, the concept of cultural districts was championed by former Indianapolis mayors through a now-defunct Cultural District Commission. Indianapolis Contemporary (formerly iMOCA) was an anchor for contemporary art until financial challenges and the COVID-19 pandemic forced its closure in 2020. Other losses, such as the Art Institute of Indianapolis, cut off pathways for students pursuing creative degrees when it shuttered in 2018,<sup>44</sup> while the 2016 disbanding of the nation's oldest male choir—Indianapolis Maennerchor—ended a 160-year musical tradition.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps even more troubling are the closures of the numerous creative businesses, bookstores, theaters, and culinary destinations whose departures impact neighborhoods throughout the region. Together, these stories illustrate fragility in sustaining arts organizations when financial, demographic, or structural challenges mount.

Importantly, these losses also present fertile ground for new opportunities. Past institutions highlight possibilities for revival. INDY Renaissance, once Indiana's largest and longest-running Black arts organization, represents both a cautionary tale and an inspiration as it paved the way for initiatives like GANGGANG to expand upon its foundation. Indiana Avenue, long a cradle of jazz and Black culture, is itself a reminder of how geography and history can be reactivated as living cultural infrastructure. Positive developments are on the horizon. Big Car Collaborative has taken up the charge of contemporary art and plans to launch the Contemporary Art Museum of Indianapolis (CAMi) in 2026. Indianapolis is even launching a new effort to reimagine and expand cultural districts through a \$500,000 pilot program.<sup>46</sup> Vacant galleries, shuttered theaters, and heritage venues still hold potential to be reinvented as local economic drivers. By treating these former assets as not just losses but as cultural legacies to be reborn, Central Indiana can reclaim its heritage while shaping a more resilient and inclusive creative economy for the future.

Taken together, the strengths and weaknesses of Central Indiana's creative economy reveal both a solid foundation and significant gaps that must be addressed. On one hand, the region boasts world-class cultural institutions, nationally recognized philanthropic leadership, vibrant community hubs, and a legacy of civic collaboration that has powered progress in other sectors. On the other hand, the absence of coordinated regional leadership and creative economy infrastructure, the underutilization of assets, and a lack of intentional policies supporting the creative economy all limit the sector's ability to reach its full potential.

Our strategic plan draws on these insights to chart a path forward. Central Indiana will connect the creative economy to existing areas of strength such as sports and trails, cultivate talent and entrepreneurship in creative sectors like film and music, promote stronger local policies, and develop a hub that can promote and amplify support for the region's many creative assets. By taking these steps, the region will move from fragmentation to cohesion and become a nationally recognized hub of creativity.







# Lessons from Other Markets

Many regions have seen successful creative economic growth, and Central Indiana stakeholders recognize the importance of using insights from other civic laboratories as the foundation for the region's future plans. Below is information on some of the other metropolitan areas and organizations that have helped shape the path forward for the Central Indiana region.

CIRDA is not positioning these as strict peer or benchmark cities, but rather as sources of inspiration for how regions have successfully leveraged their distinctive strengths to elevate their creative economies. These cities exemplify how a clear vision, cross-sector collaboration, and targeted investments in arts and culture can drive broader economic and community growth—approaches that Central Indiana can adapt to its own context. Moreover, these cities represent places Indianapolis leaders have studied firsthand through initiatives such as the Indy Chamber's Leadership Exchange, underscoring their relevance as models for translating creativity into economic competitiveness.

## **INSIGHTS FROM NASHVILLE, DETROIT, AND BOSTON**

Before Nashville, Detroit, and Boston built globally recognized creative economies, each had very different reputations, economic bases, and challenges. Urban economic development analyses show these cities' targeted policies around arts, culture, and creative industries reshaped their identities and competitiveness. Below is a synthesis of background studies, economic data, and lessons relevant to applying these trajectories to places like Central Indiana.



# Lessons *from* Nashville

Until the late 20th century, Nashville was largely seen as a regional hub for a few industries such as healthcare, with modest recognition beyond country music and little reputation as a major innovation or livability center. In 2003, 150 business and civic leaders convened and aligned on building the city's brand around music, leveraging a similar strategy as Indianapolis' sports strategy from several decades prior.<sup>47</sup> Nashville's transformation into "Music City USA" demonstrates how a creative identity can be fully integrated into a region's economic development strategy. This approach has driven growth across tourism, entrepreneurship, higher education, technology, and corporate recruitment, positioning creativity as a central economic driver rather than merely a cultural asset.

## APPROACH TO ASSETS

Nashville's approach to its creative assets has been both comprehensive and strategic. Rather than viewing arts and culture as ancillary amenities, the region positions its creative assets—especially music—as core to its economic infrastructure. The Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce's core strategy formally recognizes creative sectors such as music and entertainment alongside healthcare, advanced manufacturing, and corporate services as target industries for economic development.<sup>48</sup> The music industry is supported not only through traditional means like venue development and public funding, but also through data-informed education programs, sector-specific business incentives, and regional branding. The elevation of creative industries ensures they receive the same level of strategic focus in workforce planning and economic investment.

While Nashville does not rely on a single, formal umbrella organization, its creative economy is coordinated through a distributed model of public-private coalitions. The Nashville Chamber, the Music City Music Council, the Mayor's Office, and other institutions have served as interconnected hubs of creative governance with leaders collaboratively supporting each other's organizations. For instance, the former mayor of Nashville created the Music City Music Council in 2009 and was so invested in its mission that he co-chaired it alongside a music industry executive and chamber board member. The Council had several quick wins, including an economic impact analysis,

the launch of a concert series, expansion of K-12 music curriculum in public schools, and the attraction of music businesses to Nashville.<sup>49</sup> Strategic alignment, shared vision, and cross-sector collaboration among civic leaders are powerful forces for creative economy development.

## STORYTELLING

Nashville has masterfully told its story through consistent branding as "Music City," a narrative that is reinforced at every level of civic life, —from tourism campaigns to school curricula to business recruitment. This identity has been amplified through investment in cultural infrastructure, such as Ryman Auditorium, the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, and creative housing developments like the Ryman Lofts—most of which are privately funded, with some help from housing tax credits and city grants. The result is a city whose creative identity is both visible and economically effective: it attracts top talent, drives tourism, and signals to businesses and residents alike that creativity is central to the region's value proposition.

## SAMPLE PROGRAM

Nashville's Music Makes Us<sup>50</sup> program integrates high-quality music education into K-12 schools, strengthening the long-term talent pipeline for the creative sector. The program is a partnership between Metro Nashville Public Schools, the Mayor's Office, and local music industry leaders.

## IMPACT

This coordinated and multi-sector governance model has delivered transformative results, contributing to a concentration of music industry participants that is 30 times greater than the national average.<sup>51</sup> Nashville's music industry grew 43% over seven years, compared with just 9.2% nationally.<sup>52</sup> Nashville's music industry alone has a \$15.6 billion regional economic impact and supports 80,757 jobs. These outcomes show how strategic focus on creative industries, supported by consistent public and private resources, can establish a globally recognized creative identity and stimulate sustained economic growth.

Nashville's  
music industry  
has a \$15.6 billion  
regional economic  
impact and  
supports more  
than 80,700 jobs.



# Lessons *from* Detroit

Detroit, America's "Motor City," has been stigmatized by decline. By the early 2000s, Detroit was synonymous with deindustrialization, population loss, vacancy, and struggles with public services. Arts, culture, and the creative economy have helped stabilize neighborhoods and drive design and innovation. Detroit provides helpful lessons for manufacturing-intensive Midwestern cities seeking creative rebirth.

## APPROACH TO ASSETS

Detroit treats arts and design not only as cultural enrichment but also as tools for economic development, real estate revitalization, and workforce development. The city embeds creative infrastructure into broader urban planning, such as leveraging underutilized spaces as venues for public art, performances, and micro-businesses, or providing funding for public-facing creative uses in new real estate projects.

Detroit is globally recognized for industrial design, a legacy that underpins a robust design sector that as of the last decade employs over 45,000 people and generates \$2.5 billion in wages.<sup>54</sup> The city's UNESCO City of Design status<sup>55</sup> enables platforms like Detroit Month of Design<sup>56</sup> to celebrate design innovation and engage the community across architecture, fashion, graphic arts, and more. The College for Creative Studies anchors the creative sector, and its Design Core Detroit<sup>57</sup> program offers business acceleration, collaborative workspace, and programs like Creative Ventures for entrepreneurs in creative industries. These initiatives are building critical creative density—bridging design hubs, creatives, institutions, and businesses—and fortifying Detroit as a global hub for creative innovation.

Placemaking through art, galleries, and cultural venues (e.g., Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD), The Belt street-art alley, the revitalized Shinola brand, and boutique hotels) has revitalized neighborhoods and attracted investment. Projects like Dreamtroit, a \$30 million repurposing of a historic auto plant into affordable housing and creative workspaces, is embedding creative infrastructure within redevelopment efforts. Kunsthalle Detroit, an institution spotlighting contemporary light art, brings international art discourse and exhibitions to the city. Additionally, the Detroit Regional Chamber

and civic leaders are driving efforts to build an innovation corridor from Detroit to Ann Arbor that is anchored by linking the area's creative strengths with the broader tech, advanced mobility, and AI sectors<sup>58</sup>.

Detroit's creative economy thrives by weaving together:

- A deep design heritage recognized globally,
- Academic and accelerator platforms nurturing creative talent,
- Neighborhood-scale arts initiatives that restore community and cultural identity,
- Adaptive reuse of historic spaces driving inclusive growth, and
- Regional innovation alliances expanding creative industries into future-facing sectors.

## MODEL FOR UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

Detroit's creative economy is supported by a set of aligned organizations, with CultureSource serving as a regional backbone and supporter of arts entities, while Design Core Detroit provides specialized support for the design sector. Design Core was responsible for leading Detroit's designation as a UNESCO City of Design, a title earned through its work on design-based entrepreneurship, ecosystem building, and economic development. These organizations work closely with city government, foundations, universities, and the private sector, creating a decentralized yet coordinated model for regional creative economy leadership. CultureSource and its work is described more fully in the following section.

## STORYTELLING

Detroit positions creativity as central to its identity as a city of innovation, resilience, and equity. Its branding is less about a tagline and more about civic institutions' recognizing the power of its creative economy and elevating it in their storytelling<sup>59</sup>, as well as placemaking strategies that spotlight design and culture. Public messaging highlights creativity as a core asset for community transformation, workforce development, and community revitalization. Strategic documents and public campaigns underscore how arts and culture can reclaim spaces, foster neighborhood pride, and generate high-wage jobs in fields such as architecture, digital fabrication, and industrial design. In this way, Detroit tells a narrative of creative resurgence grounded in policy and infrastructure.

Detroit's design sector employs more than 45,000 people and generates \$2.5 billion in wages.



# Lessons *from* Boston

Boston has a longstanding reputation for its history, universities, and biotech sector. It had world-class cultural assets long before the importance of the creative economy was widely recognized. However, arts and creative industries were valued primarily for cultural enrichment rather than innovation capacity.

## APPROACH TO ASSETS

Boston approaches the creative economy as a critical driver of both cultural vibrancy and economic competitiveness. The City of Boston's Mayor's Office of Arts & Culture and civic institutions integrate arts, culture, and creativity into regional strategies for workforce development, tourism, and innovation. Through its *Boston Creates* cultural plan,<sup>60</sup> the City committed to creating more artist workspaces, expanding cultural participation in neighborhoods, and aligning arts education with career pathways in fields like media and design. It also required 1% of the capital project borrowing budget be used to fund public art. Together, these approaches illustrate how Boston now treats arts and culture not as an add-on, but as a driver of its economic and civic agenda. In doing so, Boston ensures that creative institutions are not peripheral but are fully integrated into the city's economic, planning, and community strategies. The city is a primary driver in Massachusetts' creative sector contributing \$30 billion annually to the state's economy.

Boston leverages world-class art and cultural institutions (e.g., Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, the Institute of Contemporary Art) alongside grassroots arts hubs like the Dorchester Art Project cooperative and Urbano Project to ensure accessibility of creative opportunities. The city's robust higher education ecosystem—including Berklee College of Music, Massachusetts College of Art and Design, and the Boston Theater District's Emerson College—serves as both a training ground and innovation pipeline for the arts, creative media, and design industries.

Public art and placemaking are central strategies, from the Rose Kennedy Greenway's rotating art installations to neighborhood-based cultural planning. Boston has also embraced creative industries as part of its tech and innovation identity, fostering intersections among industries like design, gaming, music technology, and life sciences. Initiatives like the *Boston Creates* cultural plan<sup>61</sup> emphasize the multi-sector approach leveraging art and creativity to elevate the region's innovation economy.

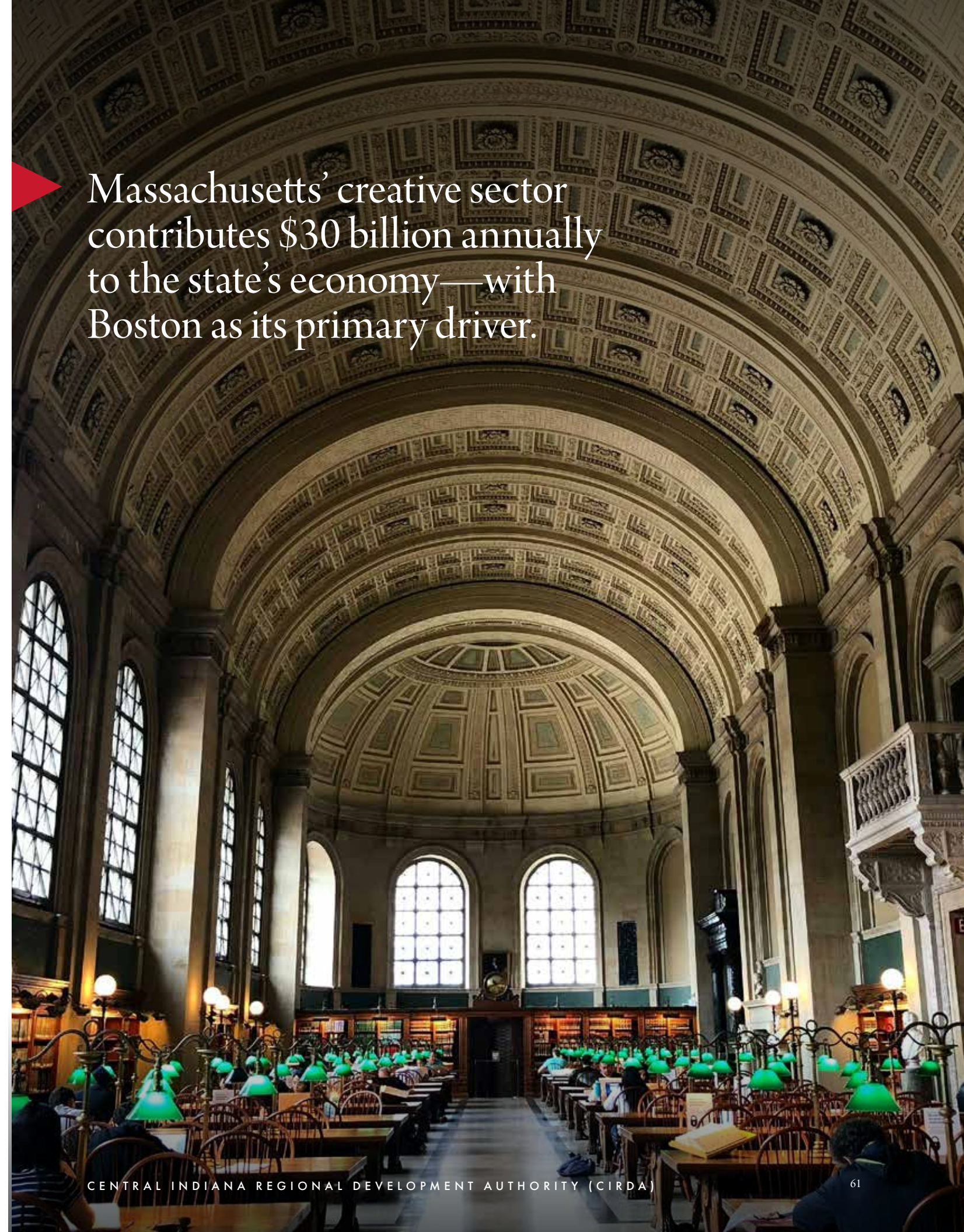
## MODEL FOR UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

The Greater Boston Creative Economy Network is led by the City of Boston and a coalition of artists called the Massachusetts Artists Leaders Coalition (MALC).<sup>62</sup> The Creative Economy Network serves as a hub linking design, media, and cultural groups with workforce and economic development programs. At the local community level, the Network is designed so each municipality in the region maintains responsibility for how best to organize their creative economies, and city representatives meet regularly to coordinate efforts. At the regional level, the City of Boston and MALC work with the region's businesses and nonprofits. By coordinating through the Creative Economy Network, participating cities and stakeholders learn from each other, create effective policy, and work regionally. Academic institutions play a role in this network, offering incubator spaces, entrepreneurship programs, and research support that benefits the creative economy. This work connects creative professionals with business resources, policy advocacy, and market development opportunities.

## STORYTELLING

Boston brands itself as a global hub of culture, innovation, and history, weaving the creative economy into narratives about education, technology, and livability. "Boston Creates" explicitly frames arts and culture as part of the city's DNA and essential to its economic vitality. Campaigns emphasize both Boston's historic cultural assets—such as its leadership in classical music, fine arts, and literary heritage—and its contemporary creative strengths in design, film, music technology, and interactive media. Storytelling is reinforced through public art installations, cultural festivals, and destination marketing. The narrative centers on creativity as a shared civic resource that attracts talent, drives tourism, and strengthens Boston's competitive edge in the global economy.

Massachusetts' creative sector contributes \$30 billion annually to the state's economy—with Boston as its primary driver.





# Organizational Structure Models

Given Central Indiana's pressing need for a programmatic hub to elevate the region's creative economy assets, understanding different organizational infrastructure models was an important part of this planning process. There are many examples of organizations that have been effective at boosting their city's or region's creative economies. Below are a few examples from which CIRDA can draw best practices for creating a body for regional collaboration.

## Creative Arkansas Community Hub & Exchange (Northwest Arkansas)

### DESCRIPTION

Creative Arkansas Community Hub & Exchange<sup>63</sup> (CACHE) is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) intermediary arts organization that facilitates a stronger creative ecosystem across Northwest Arkansas. The organization has about a dozen staff and consultants that empower and connect creatives, organizations, and the region's communities. The board of directors is comprised of artists, nonprofit leaders, educators, and civic representatives throughout Northwest Arkansas.

CACHE is an affiliate of the Northwest Arkansas Council, a regional economic development organization with similarities to the Central Indiana Corporate Partnership. As a recognized backbone institution for creative growth, CACHE offers various programs such as:

- Monthly convenings called "Table Talks."
- Year of Learning and Outreach (YOLO), a free professional development series that connects creatives and arts organizations to resources, learning, and community.
- The Creative Exchange Fund, which financially supports dozens of artists and creatives each year and provides them with space and other resources.
- The Medium, a dedicated, 25,000-square-foot downtown venue and hub that provides flexible space for creatives and connects them with the public.

### FOCUS

CACHE works to boost the creative economy from various angles, such as:

- **Research & Data Storytelling:** CACHE maps and analyzes the evolving creative ecosystem through platforms like The Medium and published studies.
- **Capacity Building & Resource Support:** It offers grant-writing assistance, exhibition space, artist residencies, and professional development opportunities.
- **Convening:** The organization hosts curated convenings to foster connections among artists, funders, and the civic and corporate sectors.
- **Public Platforms & Access:** CACHE facilitates creative visibility via event and exhibition programming and maintains the Northwest Arkansas Creative Calendar.

### IMPACT

With CACHE's support, the Northwest Arkansas arts sector's economic contributions grew 77% in just seven years.<sup>64</sup> CACHE has enabled better collaboration between schools and arts organizations by partnering with the Walton Arts Center to launch the artlook platform, which provides a directory of programs and school contacts. A 2024 CACHE report revealed that 73% of surveyed music professionals plan to stay in the region long-term.<sup>65</sup> CACHE plays a central role in the ecosystem's vitality.

## Arts & Culture Alliance of Greater Knoxville (Knoxville, TN)

### DESCRIPTION

The Arts & Culture Alliance of Greater Knoxville<sup>66</sup> exists to support, connect, and advocate for the Knoxville region's cultural institutions, artists, and creative professionals, contributing to the region's quality of life and community development. The organization is structured as an independent 501(c)(3), guided by a volunteer board representing the arts, civic, and government sectors. With lean staffing (just 3 full-time employees) and an annual budget of about \$2 million,<sup>67</sup> the organization draws strength from partnering with local government and regional arts entities. The Alliance receives public funding from city and county governments, particularly for efforts tied to economic development and cultural tourism, and also receives philanthropic support and membership dues from organizations and individuals.

### FOCUS

The Alliance advocates for arts visibility and investment in East Tennessee, producing cultural sector research and planning tools. It serves as a hub for convening artists, nonprofits, and creative businesses. The organization promotes events and cultural engagement opportunities while also offering workshops, professional development, and sector-specific programming of its own. One of its hallmark programs is Penny4Arts, which provides schoolchildren in the region with access to cultural events for one penny when accompanied by a paying adult.

### IMPACT

The Alliance has helped elevate the visibility of the arts as a key driver of economic development, civic pride, and urban revitalization in Knoxville. Knoxville has nearly tripled the economic impact from arts and culture spending since 2000.<sup>68</sup>

Central Indiana needs to draw from the best lessons of other regions in charting its own creative future. The experiences of other cities and their organizations show that when regions intentionally align creativity with economic strategy, they can deepen the power of their identities while improving economic prosperity. For Central Indiana, the path forward is not to replicate these models but to adapt their most effective principles to the region's unique assets. These cities demonstrate what is possible when creativity is elevated and supported by strong infrastructure and cross-sector collaboration.

## CultureSource (Detroit, Michigan)

### DESCRIPTION

CultureSource is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization that serves as a backbone institution for the Detroit region's cultural sector. It operates with a staff of approximately 13 complemented by contracted consultants, and it is governed by a board that includes representatives from large institutions, philanthropic foundations, universities, and grassroots organizations. CultureSource has over 220 member organizations ranging from large performing arts institutions to small community-based nonprofits.<sup>69</sup> Its budget was \$5.2 million in 2024, with major funding coming from national and regional foundations (e.g., Kresge Foundation, Ford Foundation, Erb Family Foundation), the Michigan Arts and Culture Council, and earned income from memberships, projects, and events.

### FOCUS

CultureSource focuses on advocacy, research and insights, capacity building, and sector convening. It aims to strengthen visibility for the cultural sector and support member organizations through services like professional development, leadership training, funding access, and regional collaboration. The organization hosts regular strategy sessions to promote shared action among arts stakeholders and provides tools to foster innovation and resilience within the creative ecosystem.

### IMPACT

CultureSource has elevated the cohesion and sophistication of the Detroit region's arts and culture infrastructure. It acts as both a convener and intermediary, bridging gaps between funders, public officials, and creative practitioners. By focusing on systems change and field-level development, CultureSource has informed state and local arts policy and enabled organizations to respond more effectively to sector-wide challenges such as COVID-19 recovery and shifting audience dynamics.





# Activating the Solution

Central Indiana's creative economy is at an inflection point. The region has many building blocks for a thriving creative economy, but these assets remain underleveraged—largely because there is no coordinated structure to connect them and no shared vision to elevate their role in driving regional prosperity.

To become a nationally recognized hub of creativity within the next decade, Central Indiana must not only elevate creativity as a defining regional strength but also retain more of the creative economic activity already happening here. Doing so requires a comprehensive approach comprised of five primary strategies:

Together, these actions will transform fragmented assets and initiatives into a cohesive regional engine for economic growth and impact. The result will be a stronger regional identity, a more competitive economy, and a higher quality of life for all who call Central Indiana home.

1

**Continued Collaboration:  
Establish Regional  
Infrastructure to Align  
Efforts and Resources**

2

**Leverage Sports  
as a Platform for Arts,  
Culture, and Creativity**

3

**Connect Arts and Culture  
with Trails, Parks, and  
the Built Environment**

4

**Develop Programming  
to Boost Talent and Grow  
the Creative Economy**

5

**Increase Public  
Sector Support for  
the Creative Economy**



# 1

## ACTIVATING THE SOLUTION

# Establish a Regional Hub to Align Efforts and Resources

Effective implementation of the strategies described in this plan is only possible with a strong organizational infrastructure and the governance to lead it. Without a dedicated coordinating body, efforts to strengthen the arts and culture ecosystem will continue to be fragmented, thereby lessening the impact and likelihood for growth. Bringing the region's creative economy together and strengthening connections to the public will require the creation of a hub with (1) programmatic, (2) physical, and (3) digital components.

A

## Build an Effective Programmatic Hub that Leverages and Amplifies Existing Champions

One of the clearest themes in this planning effort is that the region needs organizational infrastructure to unite the many existing arts and culture efforts within a shared vision, giving the creative economy a seat at the table in economic development. As CIRDA represents 32 municipalities throughout Central Indiana, it is uniquely positioned to house this infrastructure and serve as a long-term steward of the creative economy agenda. By convening municipalities, anchor institutions, creatives, philanthropy, and the private sector, CIRDA can create the infrastructure needed to understand regional requirements and coordinate resources, communicate and promote the region's offerings, and implement strategies aligned with a regional vision. Effective organizational infrastructure will require the appropriate governance, staff, and funding.

**GOVERNANCE.** CIRDA will establish a formal subcommittee—the Regional Creative Economy Committee (RCEC)—to provide the governance backbone needed to coordinate and align regional creative economy efforts. The planning process and discussions with the Advisory Committee clarified that implementation requires a regional body focused on alignment, connection, and informed decision-making, rather than CIRDA directly administering every program.

Modeled on the success of CIRDA's White River Vision Plan Technical Committee, the RCEC should function as a cross-sector coordinating group comprised of 11 members representing three regional arts and culture organizations, four CIRDA member communities, two private companies, and two higher education institutions. This composition ensures broad regional representation and allows CIRDA to connect creative economy priorities with public initiatives and investment strategies.

The RCEC's role will continue beyond the launch of this plan. As a long-term coordinating body, it will guide regional priorities across the five strategies, support communications and shared messaging, provide input on policy opportunities in collaboration with statewide partners, and help evaluate projects for regional alignment and funding consideration. The RCEC will not implement all programs directly; instead, it will serve as the connective structure that ensures efforts across communities, institutions, and sectors remain aligned, sequenced, and mutually reinforcing.

**STAFF.** To support the RCEC's work, CIRDA should add a Creative Economy Coordinator whose job is to keep regional efforts aligned, organized, and moving. This position would serve as the primary staff liaison to the RCEC, focusing on project management, communications, stakeholder engagement, basic data coordination, and contracting with outside partners for specialized work. The role is not intended to replace or duplicate the work of existing arts organizations, or municipal programs. Instead, the coordinator becomes the connective tissue that helps CIRDA and the RCEC translate regional goals into sequenced, collaborative action.

Over time, and only if clearly needed, the staffing function could be expanded to explore fractional administrative support or shared services for smaller creative organizations. This would require separate funding and should be developed with partners rather than housed entirely within CIRDA.

**FUNDING.** While funding is required to support a Creative Economy Coordinator, the larger financial need is not staffing. What Central Indiana truly requires is the ability to contract with the organizations already doing this work on the ground.

Most of the strategies in this plan—industry convenings, creative entrepreneurship support, sector-specific showcases, talent pathways, digital infrastructure, and public storytelling—are not functions CIRDA should recreate internally. They are best delivered by established partners such as Noblesville Creates, Big Car Collaborative, GANGGANG, Pattern Inc, Arts for Lawrence, university arts programs, and other local organizations with existing capacity and trust in the community.

For CIRDA, stable funding ensures:

- the Coordinator can manage contracts, timelines, reporting, and cross-county alignment
- partner organizations can be resourced to execute the actual programming
- the region benefits from expertise already in place, rather than building new systems from scratch

The RCEC's early work should focus on securing a predictable funding model that supports both the coordinator role and a flexible pool for partner contracts. There are a few promising funding approaches that peer regions and arts ecosystems have successfully used and that CIRDA could adapt. One model is to draw on state or philanthropic grants earmarked for creative economy or cultural planning as seed support during the initial years, including funds through the READI program. Another pathway is to leverage a small portion of local innkeeper's tax revenues for support, although these funds can only be used for tourism development and promotion.<sup>70</sup> The region collected over \$80 million in innkeeper's tax in 2024, with \$78.4 million from Indianapolis and \$4.2 from the other counties in the CIRDA territory.<sup>71</sup>



Additionally, some regions have structured pooled public-private matching funds, where municipalities, corporations, and foundations each commit a portion, enabling sustained staffing and project budgets.

Investing in coordination and partnerships, rather than new internal programs, keeps CIRDA focused on its strengths and allows Central Indiana's creative sector to grow through the organizations that already know the landscape.

B

## Establish Physical Hubs for Arts and Culture

Central Indiana's creative economy needs clear physical hubs, visible and accessible places that serve as the heart of the region's cultural ecosystem. Such hubs would give residents, visitors, and investors a tangible entry point into the arts and culture landscape, anchoring the region's creative identity while amplifying creative activity across the CIRDA region. A flagship creative hub could unify many of the region's cultural efforts, make the creative economy more navigable to the public, and signal that creativity is central to Central Indiana's future prosperity.

The CIRDA region already contains a rich mix of organizations and facilities that contribute to the creative ecosystem. Hunden Partners, in collaboration with the Indy Arts Council and others, identified significant gaps in the built environment that limit the creative sector's ability to grow. Chief among these is the need for a central arts and culture hub with space for performances, rehearsals, education, incubation, offices, and collaboration. Such a space could host exhibitions, performances, workshops, and entrepreneurial activity, becoming a year-round center for creative exchange. More than a building, it would function as a regional gathering place where artists, educators, entrepreneurs, industry leaders, and the public intersect daily. It would strengthen collaboration with regional anchors such as the Indy Arts Council and elevate the work of partners championing creativity across the region.

Hunden's analysis looked to the Momentary<sup>72</sup> (a 63,000-square-foot former cheese factory) in Bentonville as a potential model. While its adaptive reuse and bold contemporary programming offer valuable lessons, the Momentary is also situated within a tourism-heavy, philanthropically driven ecosystem that differs from Central Indiana's market realities. A direct replication may not reflect the region's economic context. Instead, the Momentary should be viewed as one example of what a creative hub can be and not a template that must be copied.

**REDEVELOPMENT.** There are many possible approaches CIRDA will need to explore closely in creating a physical epicenter for arts and culture. Redeveloping older sites and spaces offers a compelling opportunity for Central Indiana to leverage arts and culture for breathing new life into significant locations. One prominent example is the redevelopment of Indianapolis's Old City Hall, which has long stood vacant. The project would bring a 21c Museum Hotel—a national model for combining hospitality with contemporary art—while also adding opportunities for creative activation on the building's upper floors. Other cities such as Cincinnati have shown that 21c's model of using art to drive commerce leads to increases in visitors and revenue for surrounding areas.<sup>73</sup>

**MONUMENT CIRCLE**, with the addition of distinctive attractions that draw people in throughout the day and across seasons, can be the Indianapolis area's iconic and visible destination. The proposed renovations to Hilbert Circle Theatre—which would better connect the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra with the public and reimagine the venue as a more welcoming, multifunctional gathering place—are an important step toward revitalizing the Circle's cultural appeal. To fully realize its potential, additional unique draws are needed. With several underutilized rooftop terraces and hundreds of thousands of vacant square footage directly on Monument Circle (including at the street level), there are limit-

less possibilities for revitalizing Monument Circle and turning it into the creative hub envisioned by the Hunden Partners project. Creative entrepreneurs can activate spaces, cultural anchors can fill vacant buildings, rooftops can be creatively utilized, and interactive artistic installations can attract new visitors. By layering new elements around the Circle's historic centerpiece, the Soldiers and Sailors Monument, the Circle could evolve into a truly magnetic hub that brings creative energy to the heart of the region.

### OTHER CAPITAL PROJECTS TO SUPPORT A HUB.

Effective hubs require spokes. Other redevelopment opportunities exist across the region that can raise the hub's profile, from continuing to reimagine former industrial spaces like the Factory Arts District (formerly Circle City Industrial Complex) or the dormant IU Health People Mover to rehabilitating old theaters or vacant storefronts in cities and towns throughout the region. Indiana Avenue could also be well served by an intentional redevelopment effort with a goal of bringing back some of the cultural vibrancy it used to have as a thriving jazz district. By aligning redevelopment with creative uses, the RCEC can help preserve historic assets and strengthen city or neighborhood identities.

Advisory Committee discussions emphasized the importance of building on the region's existing creative and cultural infrastructure rather than pursuing entirely new, standalone projects. Strategic capital investments should fit within the broader context of the existing physical infrastructure that already exists—either to fill gaps in the ecosystem in support of the hub or to enhance, expand, or better connect assets already in place. This is intended to ensure new investments strengthen and supplement proven assets.

CIRDA and the RCEC will create a pathway for regional stakeholders to submit possible capital projects for review. The RCEC will adopt a transparent, criteria-based process for evaluating these projects, ensuring that funding decisions are strategic, cost-effective, and fair. Projects will be assessed against a rubric that prioritizes factors such as regional impact and return on investment, potential to drive long-term economic growth, alignment with existing assets, and demonstrated community demand. The RCEC will also weigh readiness, feasibility, and the potential to leverage additional public, private, or philanthropic investment. To maintain alignment with broader State priorities, the RCEC will draw from guidance issued by the State of Indiana for READI and other funding streams, ensuring consistency while tailoring decisions to the unique strengths of Central Indiana. Essentially, CIRDA will back projects that are achievable, catalytic, and responsive to regional needs, while also positioning the region to compete effectively for state and national resources.

C

## Create a Digital Front Door to Publicly Share Information on Arts and Culture

For Central Indiana's creative economy to thrive, it must be easy for people to connect with it. While the region boasts an array of organizations, events, and creative spaces, survey results show Central Indiana residents are frequently unaware of offerings that may interest them. The clearest solution to this is to market the creative economy as a unified regional strength and to create a digital presence that welcomes residents, visitors, businesses, and creatives alike. A centralized platform for information, marketing, and data sharing will make it easier for the public to discover cultural opportunities, for organizations to coordinate programming, and for civic leaders to measure and champion the creative sector's impact.



Central Indiana should develop a coordinated platform for creative economy messaging so it is not hidden in silos but elevated as a celebrated driver of regional vitality. This digital hub should amplify CIRDA's vision for the region's creative economy and should feature elements to promote, connect, and educate.

**PROMOTION.** To start, the RCEC should guide and oversee the development of a highly visible and accessible web presence that serves as a "front door" to the region's creative economy. The RCEC would help define goals, standards, and partnerships, while CIRDA contracts with regional organizations or vendors to execute the work. This platform should connect people to local and regional arts organizations, venues, and events, drawing from resources such as Do317.com and the Indy Arts Council's listings and highlighting offerings across the full CIRDA region.

**CONNECT.** The RCEC should advise on the creation and maintenance of a regional creative economy database—a shared resource that helps organizations, businesses, artists, and creative workers find one another. The RCEC's role would be to establish the framework and governance for such a tool, while the operational responsibility (updating data, hosting digital communities, maintaining shared ticketing/marketing systems, and implementing tools like a real-time venue availability calendar) would be carried out by contracted partners with the appropriate technical capacity.

**EDUCATE.** The digital hub must include an easily consumable data dashboard highlighting indicators such as economic impact, visitor data, audience demographics, and public investment. Here again, the RCEC's role is to determine what data matters, ensure consistency across the region, and advise on benchmarks. CIRDA would then contract with data specialists or research partners to design, build, and maintain the dashboard.

## ACTIONS AND TIMELINE

Below is the timeline by which CIRDA will take early actions needed for implementing the organizational infrastructure strategy:

**Q1 2026:** CIRDA will finalize the 11-member RCEC and convene its first meeting. In addition to committee membership, CIRDA will define appointing authorities and terms.

**Q2 2026:** The RCEC will adopt a clear mission and governance model that guides its advisory role, ensuring transparency, accountability, and continuity. These will be memorialized in the RCEC's organizational documents.

**Q3 2026:** The RCEC will recommend an optimal staffing strategy for implementation. Rather than building a large internal team, CIRDA will identify external partners to execute digital projects, data collection, marketing, and other technical needs. Staff capacity, where needed, will include a coordinating role within CIRDA to manage contracts and ensure alignment.

During 2026, the RCEC will also help shape criteria for evaluating capital project proposals and will guide CIRDA's prioritization process related to creative economy goals. Contracted firms or consultants will handle technical scoring, feasibility assessments, and public engagement.

Initial components of the digital hub will launch in late 2026, with expansion in 2027. These components include (1) a combined creative economy calendar drawing on existing regional resources and (2) a data dashboard with key indicators.



## Why This Matters

Creating the organizational backbone is not just a structural step; it is a prerequisite for the rest of the strategies in this plan. Without a dedicated coordinating entity to align efforts and ensure regional consistency, Central Indiana's creative economy will continue to develop unevenly and struggle to compete with peer metros. Regions that have successfully scaled their creative sectors—including those highlighted in earlier case studies—have done so through clear governance, stable funding, and structures that coordinate work across governments, institutions, and industries. With a shared framework and strategic oversight in place, the region can unlock new funding streams, pursue multi-year cultural investments, strengthen its position at state and federal tables, and support visible, marquee projects that elevate Central Indiana's national reputation as a creative hub.

By embedding the RCEC within CIRDA, Central Indiana gains a platform with the legal authority and institutional standing to guide strategy, convene partners, and ensure alignment across municipalities. CIRDA's status as a regional governmental entity enables it to secure and steward public and philanthropic funding, form public-private partnerships, and facilitate coordination with local officials. Rather than directly building or operating programs, the RCEC provides the structure for CIRDA to contract with external partners—creative organizations, universities, technical vendors, and statewide entities—to execute the work efficiently and at scale.

Establishing this infrastructure is not only necessary for long-term sustainability, but also critical for signaling the region's commitment to growing its creative economy in a coordinated and strategic manner. A clear governance structure gives creatives, businesses, schools, nonprofits, and civic groups a recognizable point of entry into the regional system, strengthening participation and reducing fragmentation. The structure created by the RCEC will enable the remaining strategies in this plan. Ultimately, the heightened visibility and connectedness will help cultivate a robust creative economy that produces broader economic prosperity throughout the region.

The development of a physical hub will further reinforce CIRDA's role as a regional convener, while amplifying the visibility of partner organizations such as the Indy Arts Council and other key cultural anchors. Capital projects tied to this strategy can become visible manifestations of the region's creative economy aspirations, elevate community identity, attract investment, and strengthen regional pride.

Creating a digital "front door" to the creative economy will expand audiences and address one of the most commonly cited barriers to participation in Central Indiana: lack of awareness. A coordinated platform—developed through partnerships and supported by RCEC's governance—will allow regional leaders to measure progress, demonstrate return on investment, and advocate more effectively for sustained support. By elevating and unifying how the region presents its creative assets, Central Indiana will position itself as a place where creative opportunities are easy to find, widely celebrated, and central to the region's economic future.



## 2

### ACTIVATING THE SOLUTION

# Leverage Sports as a Platform for Arts, Culture, and Creativity

Few regions in the nation have the combination of sports identity, athletic infrastructure, and event-hosting capacity that Central Indiana possesses. With a half dozen stadiums and arenas that serve as homes for professional sports teams, the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, Westfield's Grand Park, and the area's reputation as an amateur sports hub, the region's facilities attract millions of visitors annually. However, sports and arts are often programmed and marketed in isolation, missing opportunities to enhance each other's reach and impact. Integrating the creative economy into the region's sports identity can drive new audiences for local artists, foster cultural tourism, and amplify the storytelling that defines Central Indiana's brand. To realize this potential, CIRDA should advance a coordinated strategy that positions the arts as both a complement to and catalyst for the sports economy. The following subsections outline key approaches for doing so.

#### A

## Develop a More Formal Framework for Embedding the Arts into Major Sporting Events

Central Indiana has made real strides in weaving arts and culture into major sporting events. NBA and WNBA All-Star programming, NCAA tournaments, and the Olympic Swim Trials all showed a sincere effort to create festival-like experiences where local creative talent plays a visible role. Partners like Indiana Sports Corp, Visit Indy, and local arts organizations are actively experimenting with new models, and the region is beginning to embrace a more holistic vision of what sports and culture can look like together.

Even with that progress, investment in the creative components of these events still has room to grow. Too often, artists and creative entrepreneurs contribute to moments that draw national attention, yet the compensation, lead time, and ongoing opportunities don't match the value they generate. For Central Indiana to fully leverage the cultural power of sports, creative work must be treated as an essential element of these events, not just an enhancement.

There is also a larger question about balance. Big events bring visitors, revenue, and visibility, but a world-class creative economy can't be built on tourism alone. Residents need year-round access to meaningful creative opportunities, and creative workers need steady local

demand—not just temporary boosts tied to major sporting moments. A stronger partnership between sports and culture should ultimately serve the people who live here, deepen pride of place, and build a foundation that lasts long after the crowds go home.

Central Indiana also has the unusual advantage of a highly coordinated sports ecosystem and a growing creative sector, yet no American city has fully developed a formal, repeatable framework that meaningfully integrates local arts and culture into its sports economy. Other regions have experimented with pieces of this idea—commissioning artists for major events, embedding cultural programming into fan experiences, or creating temporary artist-sports partnerships—but none have built a model that consistently pays artists well, elevates local talent, and strengthens the everyday cultural life of residents beyond a single event cycle. This gap presents a practical opportunity for Central Indiana. The region already excels at producing complex, high-visibility events and has the organizational infrastructure to test a more intentional approach. With thoughtful design, Central Indiana can develop a framework that not only enhances visitor experiences but also drives long-term benefits for local creatives and residents, ensuring the arts are not a last-minute addition but a core part of how major events are imagined, funded, and executed.

A more intentional, better-resourced framework would allow sports organizations and creatives to build long-term relationships, produce higher-quality work, and create cultural experiences that resonate with both visitors and residents. This shift would make Indianapolis not only a great host city, but a genuinely creative city.

#### B

## Build Partnerships with Professional Teams and Venues

Professional sports franchises are among the most visible cultural brands in the region. Major league teams connect with national audiences and have passionate fan bases, and minor league teams have regional followings and offer community engagement platforms that could be expanded to feature the creative economy.

CIRDA should collaborate with professional teams, the Indiana Sports Corp, and local cultural institutions to coordinate initiatives such as game-day cultural spotlights, where local artists perform or exhibit work during halftime, throughout concourses, or in tailgate zones. Central Indiana should also seek to increase the amount of team-commissioned public art, from murals to statues and sculptures, that celebrates local identity and embeds more creative value in Indiana's sports assets. Sports teams can also play a major role in showcasing Indiana's artistic talent through creative collaborations around merchandising, design, and other team needs.

Professional sports facilities in Indianapolis, Fishers, and Noblesville serve as physical landmarks in the regional landscape. With intentional coordination, these spaces can also double as cultural anchors that reinforce creative vibrancy. CIRDA should work with the Capital Improvement Board and venue operators to explore permanent public art installations, rotating seasonal exhibits curated by local museums and arts organizations, and other opportunities for better connecting the creative economy with sports and venues. This integrated approach would help major sporting organizations become a platform for promoting the region's creative assets while also driving more public engagement with sports.





## Activate Youth and Amateur Sports as Cultural Gateways

The region's vast youth and amateur sports infrastructure represents a major platform with potential for deeper creative engagement. The region is home to the headquarters of an impressive group of amateur governing bodies that includes the NCAA, USA Track & Field, and USA Gymnastics. Additionally, Westfield has been billed as the "youth sports capital of the U.S.," with more than five million visitors to Grand Park annually, surpassing every other youth sports complex.<sup>74</sup> However, too few of these visitors are directed toward local cultural experiences or introduced to the creative identity of Central Indiana.

CIRDA should collaborate with local youth and amateur sports organizations to elevate connections with arts and culture. This could include arts and culture areas at sports complexes, where families can engage with local artists, try creative activities, and enjoy rotating exhibits. Central Indiana can also better capitalize on out-of-state youth sports visitors by promoting dynamic arts and culture itineraries that can guide families looking to maximize their time between games. The region should also seek opportunities to join sports with arts and culture through community investment, grant programs, and neighborhood revitalization efforts.

Sports tourism should be treated as a cultural tourism pipeline, exposing visiting families to the region's creative ecosystem and deepening local engagement at the intersection of athletics and art.

## ACTIONS AND TIMELINE

To transform the intersection of sports and culture from occasional collaborations into a defining feature of Central Indiana's identity, CIRDA's role should remain focused on convening the right partners and helping align efforts already underway. In 2026, CIRDA and the RCEC should prioritize intentional engagement with organizations and venues tied to the region's sports economy, helping identify where deeper cultural integration is most feasible. As patterns and opportunities become clearer, CIRDA can support the formation of a coalition of sports, cultural, and civic partners by the end of 2026, without serving as the coalition's operator. This group would carry forward the design and implementation of new models while CIRDA maintains a coordinating and supportive role.

By 2027, the coalition—not CIRDA—should aim to test new approaches, such as programming a major cultural integration within a sporting event, establishing collaboration agreements with at least three sports franchises to elevate local creatives, and piloting arts-focused initiatives in partnership with youth sports organizations, including at Grand Park. The RCEC's responsibility is to ensure the right stakeholders are at the table, help connect these efforts to regional priorities, and support evaluation and learning. Insights from these pilots should guide the coalition's development of a cultural integration framework by the end of 2027, outlining how arts and culture can be embedded into sporting events, venue planning, and marketing in ways that are sustainable, community-centered, and beneficial to local creatives.



## Why This Matters

Sports already define much of Central Indiana's brand and economic engine. When linked more strategically to the arts, that influence multiplies. Increased integration of creative programming, storytelling, and placemaking into the sports ecosystem can attract new audiences, strengthen community identity, and provide sustainable opportunities for artists and entrepreneurs. Fusing sports and culture will amplify tourism impact, extend visitor stays, and diversify local economies. CIRDA's leadership in aligning sports and culture can redefine what it means to be a "sports capital"—not just a place that hosts events, but a region that turns every event into a cultural experience that celebrates its identity.



3

ACTIVATING THE SOLUTION

# Connect Arts and Culture with Trails, Parks, and the Built Environment

Central Indiana's creative economy can be amplified not only through its institutions and programs, but also through its physical landscape. The region's trails, parks, and public spaces form a vast canvas for creativity—spaces where art can be experienced by everyone. By intentionally linking the creative economy to outdoor and built environments, CIRDA can spark daily encounters with art, enhance community pride, and strengthen the connection between culture, nature, and economic vitality. This will ensure creativity is not confined to studios and stages but woven into the very design and rhythm of Central Indiana's cities, towns, and landscapes.

Because of growing regional alignment and momentum around Central Indiana's trails, these multimodal connectors perhaps offer the clearest asset for the region to leverage in developing its arts and culture strategy. Outdoor environments can become living and interactive galleries that build the region's cultural brand. Below are the steps CIRDA should take to get the most out of its existing physical infrastructure and natural resources.

A

## Leverage Trails to Develop a Creative Corridor

Central Indiana's trail network is one of the region's strongest quality-of-life assets, and it has untapped potential as a driver of the creative economy. The Indianapolis Cultural Trail, the Monon, the Nickel Plate, and emerging regional corridors already move people between neighborhoods, parks, and activity centers. With the right strategy, these same paths can become cultural connectors that help residents and visitors encounter creative work in their everyday movement through the region.

The Cultural Trail is the clearest example. It links downtown cultural districts with major innovation hubs like Bottleworks, 16 Tech, and the Walker Theatre corridor. But the trail's influence could extend further if more creative destinations just off the path—places like the Stutz or the Factory Arts District—were better integrated through signage, programming, or future expansions. This model doesn't need to stay downtown. The broader network can play a similar role regionwide, especially with the Indianapolis Metropolitan Planning Organization's current Central Indiana Trail-Oriented Development Study<sup>75</sup> laying the groundwork for policies that support creative businesses and public-facing cultural uses along trail corridors. That study offers a natural framework for considering zoning, activation, and the kinds of ground-floor spaces—studios, micro-galleries, maker spaces—that thrive with steady foot and bike traffic.

Outside Indianapolis, trails like the Monon, Nickel Plate, and B&O can knit together places where creative identity is already emerging such as the Carmel Arts and Design District, Noblesville's Innovation Mile, Franklin's Innovation Park, and Broad Ripple's music and retail ecosystem. With coordinated branding, shared digital tools, and simple connective infrastructure, the region could elevate these areas as a network of "Creative Corridors." This could include mapped cultural stops, consistent wayfinding, trail-friendly pop-up retail, and temporary or rotating art installations that move throughout the region. The Pacers Bikeshare system, which stakeholders highlighted as a cultural connector in its own right, could also be expanded to help bridge gaps and bring more communities into this network.

Regional trail organizations are already collaborating through a new Strategic Advisory Group, and a shared web presence is underway. CIRDA should support these efforts by helping align the trails strategy with Main Street Matters and positioning the network as an outdoor cultural platform—not just a recreational amenity. A digital passport program could encourage exploration, reward visits to creative businesses, and drive economic activity while making the network more discoverable.

If Central Indiana treats its trails as cultural infrastructure and not just mobility infrastructure, the region can better connect people to art, places, and the creative workers who shape the identity of their communities. Stronger visibility and activation along trail corridors will also help attract and retain talent, reinforce the region's brand, and expand the everyday reach of the creative economy.





B

## Transform Parks into Cultural Campuses

Central Indiana's parks are a defining strength of the region. Indianapolis is home to several outdoor anchors including Fort Harrison State Park and Eagle Creek Park, while the surrounding counties feature important attractions of their own, like North Salem's McCloud Nature Park and Falls Park in Pendleton. Many Central Indiana parks offer amphitheaters and spaces with cultural potential that are underleveraged. With strategic programming and activations that build on CIRDA's Main Street Matters plan to develop premium outdoor recreation amenities, these gathering places can become cultural destinations that boost the region's creative economy.

CIRDA, in collaboration with local parks and recreation departments and tourism bureaus, should develop a series of creative arts and culture programming initiatives that activate spaces with strong cultural potential at Central Indiana's parks. This could include a rotating performing arts series at parks in each county, stationary and traveling public art commissions and installations that connect with the trails program, and forums for selling the work of local creatives. CIRDA can also partner with creative organizations to pilot artist residencies in parks, where artists use natural settings as inspiration for workshops, performances, and temporary installations.

The White River connects communities throughout Central Indiana from Anderson to Martinsville, and it can serve as a rallying point for the connection between creativity and the outdoors. White River State Park is at the epicenter of this, and its public art and amphitheater that can seat 6,000 shows the power of arts and outdoor connections for attracting visitors. CIRDA already has organizational infrastructure tied to better leveraging the White River through its White River Vision Plan

Technical Committee. Seeking ways to boost arts and culture at or near the White River's shore should be added to this committee's priorities.

Related to its parks, Indianapolis has an impressive tradition of commemorative architecture, with the second-highest number of war memorials in the United States, surpassed only by Washington, D.C.<sup>76</sup> While these memorials stand as powerful symbols of civic pride and history, the city lacks a single, contemporary landmark that captures the full breadth of its modern identity as a hub of creativity, innovation, and cultural vibrancy. Many peer cities have distinctive, highly visible icons that serve as instantly recognizable symbols woven into the city's brand, such as Chicago's "Bean," St. Louis's Gateway Arch, and Seattle's Space Needle. Cultivating a major, visible beacon through a bold new physical structure or by uniting existing assets into a cohesive, memorable experience could help Indianapolis stand out. Monumental Gestures, the city's growing initiative promoting large-scale public art installation, has already taken up this charge and gained significant momentum worth leveraging. In elevating parks as cultural gateways, CIRDA should explore ways to build upon this effort already underway to give the region a living landmark that reflects its dynamic identity over time.

A multi-county effort to animate parks and plazas with live performances, installations, and creative experiences should be undertaken in connection with trails efforts. By integrating arts programming into existing park assets—from the White River State Park to smaller town green spaces—CIRDA can expand access to the creative economy, strengthen community identity, and enhance tourism by turning outdoor recreation areas into destinations for culture as well as leisure.







## Integrate Art into Everyday Infrastructure

The built environment offers countless touchpoints for creative integration, whether connected to crosswalks, underpasses, bus shelters, bridges, or utility boxes. CIRDA should champion a creative infrastructure initiative encouraging municipalities to commission artists for functional design elements that also showcase the region's culture.

While many forms of everyday art exist across major cities, the Advisory Committee narrowed in on crosswalks and intersections as offering the best scalable canvas for embedding creativity in the built environment across both large cities and small towns. CIRDA could launch a Creative Crossings initiative that helps municipalities commission artists to design painted or textured crosswalks in prominent pedestrian areas close to downtown squares, trails, parks, or cultural venues. Each community could use its designs to reflect local heritage or cultural identity while adopting a shared regional brand element (such as a recurring motif, logo, or color palette) that signals connection to Central Indiana's broader creative ecosystem. The region should draw inspiration from successful programs elsewhere, such as Louisville's Community Crosswalks program<sup>77</sup> or Bloomberg Philanthropies' Asphalt Art Initiative that has funded street art in dozens of cities around the country.<sup>78</sup>

CIRDA could facilitate community design competitions and connect communities with technical guidance or pre-qualified local artists. This support would encourage public participation and give emerging creatives paid opportunities to showcase their work. The concept aligns with local public safety goals, as it increases pedestrian visibility while boosting foot traffic to local businesses. Street art has been found to reduce the number of crashes involving pedestrians by 50%.<sup>79</sup> By integrating art into infrastructure that every resident interacts with daily, CIRDA can simultaneously beautify communities, support artists, and create a sense of shared regional identity.



## ACTIONS AND TIMELINE

To transform Central Indiana's outdoor resources and built environment into a living platform for creativity, CIRDA must harness support for a coordinated regional initiative that intentionally links parks, trails, and infrastructure under a shared creative identity. In 2026, CIRDA and the RCEC should prioritize the establishment of cross-sector partnerships with the region's trail organizations, municipal parks departments, tourism bureaus, and others to align and develop plans for branding and activation. These early efforts should focus on projects that demonstrate visible, public impact while advancing long-term strategies.

**TRAILS:** In 2026, the RCEC should work with the trail network's Strategic Advisory Group to support the formalization of the branding for a creative corridor and facilitate the design of shared trail signage elements that highlight nearby cultural destinations. By the end of 2026, a digital map and mobile app prototype linking art, cultural venues, and innovation hubs across trail systems should be complete. Simultaneously, regional stakeholders should develop plans for bikeshare expansion that can connect trails across municipal boundaries. The first phase of branded signage, creative trail stops, expanded bikeshare locations, and "passport" incentives for exploration should launch in spring 2027, creating the first visible manifestation of Central Indiana's regional Creative Corridor.

**PARKS:** In 2026, the RCEC should convene parks and recreation stakeholders to develop coordinated creative programming at parks throughout the region. A series of co-branded events, performances, or activations should be launched by early 2027. Also in 2027, the region should roll out a shared public art program that will rotate interactive public art at high-traffic locations along trails and parks throughout the region.

**INFRASTRUCTURE:** The RCEC should pilot the launch of the "Creative Crossings" program in 2026 as a regionally branded initiative encouraging municipalities to install artist-designed crosswalks and intersection art in high-visibility pedestrian zones.

## Why This Matters

Integrating arts and culture into the region's trails, parks, and built environments will transform everyday spaces into touchpoints for creative engagement. These are highly visible and public assets, which are important to leverage in support of CIRDA's vision to be recognized as a national hub of creativity in 10 years. Placemaking attracts creatives. This work will expand access to cultural experiences, enhance the visual identity of communities, and attract both visitors and talent. Just as the Cultural Trail became a defining emblem of Indianapolis's innovation and design ethos, a region-wide approach to creative placemaking can position Central Indiana as a national model for how art, nature, and urban life can intersect to drive economic vitality.



# 4

## ACTIVATING THE SOLUTION

# Develop Programming to Boost Talent and Grow the Creative Economy

To realize the full impact of arts and culture, the region needs to proactively catalyze growth in its creative economy. Communities that intentionally invest in creativity consistently experience higher levels of innovation, entrepreneurship, and talent retention. For Central Indiana, intentional efforts to boost the creative economy are essential for unlocking new avenues of economic competitiveness and resilience. This will require deliberate action in three areas of emphasis: (1) strengthening the pipeline of skilled creators, (2) developing key creative sectors through industry connections and strategic programming, and (3) linking innovation and entrepreneurship with creativity.

A

## Strengthen the Pipeline of Skilled Creators

Central Indiana's creative economy will only thrive if there is a strong pipeline of skilled creatives entering the sector. While the region already boasts a wealth of creative energy in its high schools, universities, and entrepreneurial community, there is a gap in how these individuals are identified, nurtured, and connected to career opportunities. To address this, CIRDA and other regional stakeholders should intentionally cultivate a network of talent at the K-12, higher education, and young professional levels.

**HIGH SCHOOL CREATIVES:** Central Indiana needs a forum for recognizing talented high school student creatives—young artists, designers, musicians, writers, media producers, and more—and connecting them with Indiana's industries that can benefit from their services now and in the future. To give creative high school students valuable experience and a clearer sense of the pathways available to them in the creative economy, the region needs to develop a High School Creatives program to provide them with mentorships, hands-on projects in creative industries, and exposure to industry leaders.

The State's redesigned high school diploma offers additional opportunities for Central Indiana to cultivate future talent. The new diploma requires 12 credits of personalized electives in addition to other coursework, and students can add the Employment Honors Seal and the Employment Honors Plus Seal to show employment readiness.<sup>80</sup> Students can use these seals and their work-based learning requirements to align their elective coursework with their career goals. Central Indiana should develop and promote seal-eligible pathways focused on creative industries such as film and music. This could involve programs and partnerships to develop students' skills in areas like sound engineering, live production, design technology, and even arts entrepreneurship. This will complement and add to Central Indiana's national leadership in youth apprenticeships, and will enable more high school students to graduate with both creative competencies and clearer pathways to employment, internships, and postsecondary advancement.

CIRDA should collaborate with high schools, Ivy Tech, talent organizations, and creative industry partners throughout the 2026–27 school year to identify aligned partners and design the program framework. This groundwork would enable a pilot to launch in at least three high schools at the start of the 2027–28 school year, delivered by participating schools and industry partners with CIRDA serving as a coordinating backbone.

**HIGHER EDUCATION:** Central Indiana's universities are a vital part of the creative talent pipeline, producing graduates across a wide range of disciplines. Yet many of these programs operate in silos, limiting their collective impact. CIRDA can play a coordinating role by convening regular gatherings of university arts, culture, and creative-economy programs to strengthen communication and alignment. Such coordination could help catalyze joint showcases, collaborative research, and shared internship or apprenticeship pathways. It would also create opportunities for students to engage directly with

industry challenges, giving employers a voice in shaping skills while providing students with real-world experience. These connections can improve graduate retention and more seamlessly integrate emerging talent into Central Indiana's creative workforce.

**YOUNG CREATIVE PROFESSIONALS:** To ensure creative careers are both visible and attainable, Central Indiana will need to actively promote opportunities in the sector through multiple channels. One high-impact way to do this would be through the creation of a competitive fellows program that places emerging creatives in paid roles with local organizations, catalyzing their careers while also meeting immediate industry needs. The region should further explore the feasibility of and demand for such a fellowship program.

Additionally, a centralized, easily accessible platform for sharing open positions, internships, and freelance jobs in creative fields will further reduce barriers to entry and keep creative workers in the region by driving awareness of opportunities. An effort like this should leverage existing platforms offered by Central Indiana's workforce leaders such as Ascend Indiana and the Institute for Workforce Excellence. Together, these initiatives can form the basis of a coordinated system for attracting, preparing, and retaining the next generation of creative professionals in Central Indiana.



B

## Develop Key Creative Sectors Through Industry Connections and Strategic Programming

A thriving creative economy requires its core industries to be intentionally connected, visible, and supported through coordinated programming. Many creatives in Central Indiana still work in relative isolation, without the networks or market pathways that could help them stabilize and grow their businesses. To address this, CIRDA should focus on convening connections across industries and linking creative professionals with the region's business, education, and public sectors. Stronger cross-sector relationships will unlock partnerships, propel innovation, and expand market opportunities.

The region should begin by establishing industry-specific Creative Economy Working Groups in key fields such as film and media production, music, publishing and writing, and podcasting or digital content creation. These working groups would not replace existing networks; instead, they would knit them together by identifying industry needs, highlighting opportunities for workforce and business development, and creating shared agendas for growth, marketing, and advocacy.

These working groups can also help coordinate and elevate industry showcases—whether hosted by CIRDA partners, sector organizations, or cultural venues—to highlight emerging creative sectors, attract regional audiences and investors, and strengthen Central Indiana's visibility as a hub for creative enterprise.



C

## Link Innovation and Entrepreneurship with Creativity

Entrepreneurship, innovation, and creativity are interdependent forces that fuel each other. Creativity sparks new ideas; innovation turns those ideas into practical solutions; and entrepreneurship brings them to market, generating value that inspires the next wave of creative thinking. When these forces are intentionally linked, they create a creativity flywheel that attracts talent and accelerates economic growth.<sup>81</sup> The same ingenuity that drives the region's advancements in life sciences or technology can also amplify the impact of artists, designers, storytellers, and makers. By intentionally connecting the creative sector with the broader innovation sectors, Central Indiana can accelerate new ideas, products, and experiences that blend art, technology, and commerce.

**TRAINING:** A strong first step is to expand entrepreneurship training tailored specifically for creatives. Many independent creators and small creative business owners lack access to the kinds of business supports that help them scale sustainably. CIRDA can work with the Central Indiana Small Business Development Center and regional entrepreneurship ecosystem builders to ensure that artists and creatives are better connected to tailored resources in areas such as business planning, intellectual property management, and digital marketing. By coordinating and amplifying these offerings—rather than creating new programs—CIRDA can help equip creative entrepreneurs not only to produce but to compete, strengthening business foundations and improving talent retention across the region.

**CREATIVE BUSINESS FUNDING:** Using resources obtained through public policy efforts (see Strategy 5), the region should allocate money to a Creative Business Fund designed to spur cultural and economic activity. The fund could provide direct grants or low-interest loans to creative entrepreneurs, helping them with critical needs such as securing retail or studio space, investing in equipment, or expanding production capacity. By tailoring financial support specifically for creatives, the program would address one of the most frequently cited barriers in the region: lack of capital.

This regional fund should be used to support startup and early-stage creative economy companies. Eligible uses of grant funds may include, but are not limited to:

- Lease or renovation of retail space for creative content sales.
- Development of creative intellectual property.
- Acquisition or enhancement of production facilities, such as sound studios or art galleries.
- Business infrastructure costs directly tied to creative output.

CIRDA and participating communities would develop and publish grant program guidelines, establish criteria for creative economy business designation, review grant applications, award grants, and report to participating redevelopment commissions on program outcomes. Modeled after similar approaches in other places—such as Denver's Scientific and Cultural Facilities District—this would help Central Indiana attract, retain, and scale creative businesses, while also ensuring equitable distribution of resources across communities.



**INNOVATE + CREATE:** Physical infrastructure such as trails can help bridge distances between cultural and innovation centers, but equally important are the programs and events that make these connections tangible and compelling. The Indianapolis area already has successful models to draw from, such as *Devour Indy*, which unites dozens of restaurants under a shared brand and coordinated promotion to drive engagement. A similar approach could be applied to the creative economy: an annual or seasonal Creative Indy or Innovate + Create program that ties together events, exhibitions, performances, and maker experiences across multiple districts and innovation hubs under a single, highly visible campaign. Participants could collect badges or earn rewards by visiting both cultural spaces and entrepreneurial centers, encouraging cross-pollination of audiences and ideas.

Programming could also include a themed, multi-site festival that intentionally spans cultural hubs and innovation corridors. A flagship event like this could feature live performances, public art activations, tech demonstrations, and innovation showcases spread across districts in Central Indiana. Each participating location could host complementary programming that highlights its unique identity while reinforcing the shared regional narrative of creativity and innovation.

## ACTIONS AND TIMELINE

As CIRDA continues to engage partners on these concepts, implementation should be sequenced and coordinated across the region. In 2026, the focus should be on convening, coordination, and design. CIRDA and the RCEC should establish initial Creative Economy Working Groups for two or more key industries and formalize partnerships for high school creative programming and expanded creative entrepreneurship support. Much of this work will involve identifying the right delivery partners and designing frameworks that schools, ecosystem builders, and creative organizations can implement.

In 2027, the region should move from planning to activation. The Creative Business Fund—developed with philanthropic, public, and private support—should launch in early 2027, providing the first round of grants or low-interest loans to creative entrepreneurs and small businesses. The High School Creatives pilot should begin at the start of the 2027–28 school year, delivered by participating schools and industry partners with the RCEC serving as a coordinating backbone. The inaugural Innovate + Create campaign should also debut that year, using partnerships across cities, districts, cultural organizations, and innovation hubs to elevate the region's creative sector through a visible, multi-site celebration.

By 2028, the focus should shift toward scaling and sustainability. The RCEC should work with partners to refine and expand the most impactful initiatives based on early data and feedback. Additional creative sectors should be added to the working group structure as capacity grows, and the Creative Business Fund should pursue multi-year funding commitments to ensure long-term continuity and broader regional reach.



## Why This Matters

Regions that invest in creativity consistently see higher rates of innovation, entrepreneurship, and growth. By developing a strong creative workforce, nurturing key industries, and linking creativity with entrepreneurship and innovation, the creative economy will be elevated as a driver of regional development efforts. When creativity is viewed as a central pillar of economic development the result is a region that is more dynamic, more connected, more resilient, and better recognized nationally as a creative hub.



5

## ACTIVATING THE SOLUTION

# Increase Public Sector Support for the Creative Economy

Central Indiana cannot build a thriving creative economy without deliberate engagement from the public sector. While grassroots energy and nonprofit leadership are indispensable, sustainable growth will require policies and partnerships that embed arts and culture into the core of regional development. Other regions that have successfully elevated their creative economies such as Denver and Nashville have done so not by relying solely on creative organizations, but by aligning public resources with arts and cultural strategies.

There is perhaps no better example of this than Denver's Scientific and Cultural Facilities District (SCFD). The SCFD received one penny for every \$10 collected in sales and use tax throughout a seven-county region, then distributes more than \$80 million annually to over 300 arts and culture organizations.<sup>82</sup>

With inspiration from the SCFD, CIRDA should actively pursue a similar bold regional funding mechanism as a signature component of its public policy agenda. Central Indiana is uniquely positioned to take such action given its proven track record of aligning cross-sector partners around ambitious regional initiatives in sports, conventions, and economic development. Just as the region has built lasting institutions and funding structures to support world-class sporting infrastructure and mega-events,

CIRDA can help mobilize that same collaborative muscle to establish a sustained, multi-county funding framework for arts and culture. Pursuing this kind of regional funding district, with its durable revenue stream, would be a major catalyst for the creative ecosystem that would build the region's national reputation for creativity.

At the local level, municipal governments and corporate and civic institutions must also recognize a shared responsibility for growing the creative economy. This requires intentional policy action and structured engagement with the private sector. Public policy can expand mechanisms for funding the arts, incentivize development of creative spaces, and integrate cultural considerations into land-use, zoning, and infrastructure planning. CIRDA can collaborate with local leaders and statewide partners to advance policy recommendations that strengthen arts, culture, and the creative economy. Each CIRDA member community should adopt at least one new policy that (a) increases local mechanisms for public arts funding, (b) integrates arts and culture into land-use planning and zoning ordinances, (c) incentivizes development of affordable creative space, and/or (d) positions arts and culture as core components of economic development strategies. These policies can institutionalize support for the creative economy, expand the region's resource base, and ensure that creativity is embedded in the everyday fabric of Central Indiana's growth. Below are policy pathways that municipalities may implement in pursuit of these goals:

A

## Municipal TIF Proceeds.

At the municipal level, one promising action would be for redevelopment commissions to designate a portion of their existing tax increment financing (TIF) proceeds for creative economy purposes. This would mean redirecting a percentage of the TIF funds that municipalities already collect, some of which may sit unspent because of limitations on their use. By adopting a policy to earmark a percentage of local TIF proceeds, municipalities could generate a meaningful, consistent funding stream that supports arts, culture, and creative businesses. Economic enhancement districts can be established and leveraged for a similar purpose. Set-asides from tools like these could be routed through CIRDA or nonprofit intermediaries such as community development corporations or specialized arts-focused nonprofits. These intermediaries could then administer grant programs or investments that reach creative entrepreneurs, venues, or cultural organizations in ways that are legally compliant and responsive to community needs.

Such an approach gives cities and towns a practical mechanism to back their own creative economies, leveraging a funding source they already control. Moreover, it allows each community to tailor its investments—some might prioritize public art installations, others creative business incubation, and others programming for downtown creative revitalization.

B

## TIF Pooling.

At the regional level, CIRDA communities could consider taking this a step further by pooling portions of their set-aside funds into a shared regional fund. Through a joint resolution, redevelopment commissions

could agree to allocate a portion of their local TIF proceeds into a coordinated fund aligned with Strategy 4C and administered by the RCEC on behalf of the region or the communities served by the fund. Like Denver's SCFD, this could be a catalytic regional resource and a boon to the creative ecosystem. The regional fund concept aligns with CIRDA's broader mandate: coordinating across municipal lines to achieve impact that no one town or city can realize alone. A regional pool would provide the scale needed to fund high-visibility initiatives and programmatic infrastructure.

C

## Economic Development Income Tax.

Some areas fund their municipal arts programs through Economic Development Income Tax (EDIT) dollars. For instance, Plainfield's EDIT dollars contribute more than \$1 million to sustain an art program, theater, and more. Other municipalities in the CIRDA region could follow this model to capture sustainable, long-term funding.

D

## Percent for Art.

Another helpful public policy tool for embedding arts and culture into development is the percent-for-art ordinance, which requires or enables developers (or public construction projects) to allocate a small percentage of construction costs to public art. These programs, like Boston's, typically set aside 1% of eligible project budgets to fund onsite or nearby artwork, infrastructure, or artist commissions. Indianapolis has a version of this ordinance on its books, requiring developers that benefit from city tax incentives to devote 1% of those incentives to either advance public art or be contributed to an arts fund that supports public art and cultural uses.<sup>83</sup>



When structured well, a percent-for-art program helps guarantee a stable, built-in revenue stream for public art and creative infrastructure. Because the funding comes as part of development (rather than as an additional tax), it can scale with growth and leverage private investment rather than compete with it.

E

### Planning and Zoning.

Local CIRDA communities can hardwire creativity into their long-term development strategies by integrating arts and culture into land-use planning and zoning ordinances. By embedding requirements for cultural components within zoning codes, municipalities can ensure new development projects contribute not just to physical growth, but also to cultural vibrancy. For example, zoning ordinances can require or incentivize developers to include public art, creative workspace, or cultural venues as part of mixed-use projects. Building density is important for creative economies to thrive, including in rural areas. Creative-use overlays, density bonuses, or expedited permitting for projects that incorporate arts and culture components are all tools CIRDA communities could consider as incentives.

These zoning and planning tools would provide a consistent mechanism for expanding access to creative spaces and increasing the visibility of arts and culture in everyday life. Beyond enriching neighborhoods aesthetically, these policies help attract businesses, support tourism, and raise property values, creating a positive economic ripple effect. Embedding cultural requirements in zoning not only supports artists and cultural organizations but also signals to developers, residents, and visitors that creativity is a central part of the region's identity and growth strategy.

F

### Creative Education.

Like Nashville, CIRDA can play a role in reversing the erosion of K–12 arts education by championing policies that encourage classroom access to the arts and connect creative learning to career pathways. In light of Indiana's redesigned diploma framework—which no longer requires stand-alone arts coursework<sup>84</sup>—CIRDA communities can work with school districts and career and technical education providers to develop creative pathways aligned with Strategy 4A and ensure arts remain integrated into the curriculum.

G

### Artist Spaces and Residencies.

Central Indiana municipalities can take inspiration from Boston's programs to subsidize artist spaces and host annual cohorts of artists in residence who work on civic projects and integrate creative thinking into local government.<sup>85</sup> Municipalities could also make in-kind contributions of space by donating, or offering at reduced rates, vacant properties and underutilized facilities they already control. Many communities own storefronts, civic buildings, or office space that currently generate little value while sitting empty. By converting these into galleries, studios, rehearsal spaces, or incubators for creative businesses, cities can directly address the shortage of affordable venues that emerged as one of the region's creative economy barriers. Communities can also provide temporary homes for artist residencies and cultural nonprofits—positioning creatives to have visible platforms and contribute to the area's vitality. This is especially helpful for revitalizing dormant areas with cultural activity and foot traffic.

### ACTIONS AND TIMELINE

CIRDA communities need to intentionally explore which public policy options best fit their needs, and they may choose an option not featured on this menu of possibilities. By the third quarter of 2026, all CIRDA member communities should have identified and voted to approve one new policy it will implement to better support or grow the creative economy.

### Why This Matters

Without embedding arts and culture into the policies, budgets, and land-use decisions of municipalities, the creative economy will remain an afterthought rather than a consistent feature of community development. Establishing public policy mechanisms provides a foundation for arts investment that is not dependent on short-term philanthropy or project-specific fundraising. These tools tie the growth of arts and culture directly to the region's physical and economic development, ensuring that as Central Indiana grows, its cultural assets grow alongside it. Together, these actions will help close the gap between Central Indiana and peer regions. More importantly, they will create visible, lasting change—new public art, creative businesses, cultural districts, and artists embedded in the community.





# Conclusion

Central Indiana possesses a strong foundation of creative and supportive assets, including a deep sports identity, a world-class trail system, a strong base of creatives, and a civic foundation that punches above its weight. At the same time, these assets are unevenly supported, not fully connected, and often underleveraged relative to their potential. A stronger creative economy will require not only investment but also alignment—across counties, across disciplines, and across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors.

Central Indiana's challenges represent opportunities for CIRDA and its partners to create new models of collaboration, leverage past work and existing strengths, and better infuse arts and culture into regional priorities like sports, trails, and innovation. By connecting creatives to the civic and corporate fabric of the region and amplifying their visibility, Central Indiana can position creativity as a core driver of economic growth and community vitality.

Moving forward, success will depend on building a sustainable ecosystem where creative talent can thrive and have a bigger role in regional decision-making. With intentionality and investment, Central Indiana has the opportunity not just to catch up to competing regions but to establish itself as a national leader in creative economy innovation.





APPENDIX 1

# CIRDA Arts and Culture Advisory Committee

Below is a list of the members of CIRDA's Arts and Culture Advisory Committee, each of whom played an important role in supporting the development of this strategic plan.

1.

**Mayor Sue Finkam**  
City of Carmel (Chair)
2.

**Ailithir McGill**  
Executive Director,  
Noblesville Creates
3.

**Alyssa Woolard**  
Director of Economic  
Development,  
Town of Plainfield
4.

**Christopher McConnell**  
Director of Parks and  
Recreation, City of Westfield
5.

**Dana Monson**  
Community Development  
Specialist, City of Franklin
6.

**Dax Norton**  
Town Manager,  
Town of Bargersville
7.

**Mayor Deborah Whitfield**  
City of Lawrence

8.

**Jenna Wertman**  
Planning Director,  
City of Greenfield
9.

**Joanie Fitzwater**  
former Planning Director,  
City of Greenfield  
(retired June 2025)
10.

**Joe Pellman**  
Vice President of Talent  
and Image, Indy Chamber
11.

**Mark Williams**  
President + Executive Director,  
Indy Art Center and  
Fishers Art Center
12.

**Nick Weber**  
Chief of Staff, City of Carmel
13.

**Susie Qualls**  
Council Member,  
Town of Bargersville

The Advisory Committee was supported by the individuals below, who developed this strategic plan with input from the Advisory Committee and dozens of stakeholders throughout Central Indiana.

1.

Jennifer Messer, Executive Director, CIRDA
2.

Tim George, CEO, Pathemy Strategies
3.

Polina Oshero, Executive Director, Pattern



APPENDIX 2

# Creative Industries

Below is a listing of various creative industries in the Indianapolis MSA, ranked by their concentration of employees relative to the national average for that industry in 2023. Note that federal government databases suppress data for certain industries as well as for self-employed individuals, so data for some creative industries is unavailable and not included in the below listings. Also, while the Indianapolis MSA is a great proxy for the CIRDA region, the geographic boundaries do not perfectly overlap as the MSA includes Boone, Brown, Hamilton, Hancock, Hendricks, Johnson, Madison, Marion, Morgan, Putnam, and Shelby Counties, while CIRDA’s region excludes Brown and Shelby Counties.

Industry Subsector	# Employees in the MSA	Location Quotient (1 = Average Concentration)	# Establishments in the MSA	Pay Per Employee in the MSA
ALL OTHER PUBLISHERS	213	5.05	4	\$63,418
COMMERCIAL SCREEN PRINTING	2,298	4.80	49	\$46,114
HISTORICAL SITES	370	4.76	6	\$35,389
USED MERCHANDISE STORES	3,095	2.05	156	\$20,657
GRAPHIC DESIGN SERVICES	617	1.85	127	\$65,036
CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAUS	100	1.66	9	\$96,510
COSMETOLOGY AND BARBER SCHOOLS	198	1.57	16	\$38,328
MUSICAL GROUPS AND ARTISTS	393	1.44	28	\$37,201
BOOK PUBLISHERS	625	1.41	12	\$43,469
COMMERCIAL PHOTOGRAPHY	128	1.40	32	\$34,484
COMPUTER SYSTEMS DESIGN SERVICES	7,237	1.39	369	\$81,736
COMMERCIAL PRINTING (EXCEPT SCREEN AND BOOKS)	2,518	1.33	95	\$54,864
MUSEUMS	805	1.30	23	\$50,168
PUBLIC RELATIONS AGENCIES	519	1.27	53	\$139,669
FLORISTS	454	1.21	61	\$21,593
MUSICAL INSTRUMENT AND SUPPLIES STORES	221	1.16	16	\$40,683
DIRECT MAIL ADVERTISING	235	1.14	10	\$35,711
NEWSPAPER PUBLISHERS	693	1.12	31	\$53,691
ARCHITECTURAL SERVICES	1,434	1.12	112	\$84,783
FULL-SERVICE RESTAURANTS	40,114	1.10	1,613	\$24,905
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURAL SERVICES	216	1.10	33	\$78,597
MOTION PICTURE THEATERS (EXCEPT DRIVE-INS)	900	1.09	28	\$15,796

CUSTOM COMPUTER PROGRAMMING SERVICES	7,370	1.07	416	\$82,232
FINE ARTS SCHOOLS	925	1.07	100	\$18,012
SOFTWARE PUBLISHERS	7,146	1.04	87	\$200,557
BEAUTY SALONS	2,608	0.98	508	\$33,083
DISTILLERIES	172	0.97	10	\$27,506
SEWING, NEEDLEWORK, AND PIECE GOODS STORES	224	0.96	19	\$14,366
OPTICAL GOODS STORES	505	0.93	68	\$32,192
SUPPORT ACTIVITIES FOR PRINTING	103	0.92	8	\$43,864
RADIO STATIONS	358	0.89	11	\$55,179
INTERIOR DESIGN SERVICES	330	0.88	96	\$60,788
BREWERIES	579	0.87	35	\$28,482
MARKETING CONSULTING SERVICES	1,840	0.86	374	\$72,893
THEATER COMPANIES AND DINNER THEATERS	378	0.81	16	\$29,976
DRIVE-IN MOTION PICTURE THEATERS	4	0.76	3	\$114,500
PROMOTERS OF PERFORMING ARTS, SPORTS, & EVENTS W/O FACILITIES	177	0.66	47	\$69,130
BOOK STORES	209	0.63	35	\$21,325
RETAIL BAKERIES	360	0.61	43	\$23,172
PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIOS, PORTRAIT	153	0.60	56	\$33,843
RADIO NETWORKS	44	0.60	7	\$84,455
INDUSTRIAL DESIGN SERVICES	58	0.60	5	\$117,414
TELEVISION BROADCASTING	527	0.55	7	\$81,287
ADVERTISING AGENCIES	727	0.54	86	\$77,065
INDEPENDENT ARTISTS, WRITERS, AND PERFORMERS	228	0.52	119	\$68,895
OTHER SPECIALIZED DESIGN SERVICES	37	0.48	14	\$48,108
DANCE COMPANIES	34	0.44	5	\$30,559
ART DEALERS	51	0.44	17	\$36,118
INTERNET PUBLISHING AND BROADCASTING AND WEB SEARCH PORTALS	1,018	0.41	43	\$105,650
SOUND RECORDING STUDIOS	15	0.34	10	\$44,133
PROMOTERS OF PERFORMING ARTS, SPORTS, & EVENTS W/ FACILITIES	324	0.33	21	\$32,367
TELEPRODUCTION AND OTHER POSTPRODUCTION SERVICES	50	0.33	19	\$213,600
DRAFTING SERVICES	20	0.29	12	\$72,700
PERIODICAL PUBLISHERS	114	0.26	14	\$71,395
MUSICAL INSTRUMENT MANUFACTURING	19	0.24	4	\$34,053
CUT AND SEW APPAREL CONTRACTORS	36	0.23	4	\$16,778
MOTION PICTURE AND VIDEO PRODUCTION	197	0.18	77	\$92,147
RECORD PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION	12	0.15	3	\$59,083
MEDIA REPRESENTATIVES	17	0.11	6	\$53,765
OTHER PRESSED AND BLOWN GLASS AND GLASSWARE MANUFACTURING	4	0.05	3	\$95,000
MEDIA BUYING AGENCIES	5	0.04	3	\$94,800
LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES	5	0.03	3	\$130,000



APPENDIX 3

# Creative Occupations

Below is a listing of the creative occupations in the Indianapolis MSA, in order of the total number of employees in that occupation as of 2023. Note that federal government databases suppress data for certain occupations as well as for self-employed individuals, so data for some occupations is unavailable and not included in the below listings. Also, while the Indianapolis MSA is a great proxy for the CIRDA region, the geographic boundaries do not perfectly overlap as the MSA includes Boone, Brown, Hamilton, Hancock, Hendricks, Johnson, Madison, Marion, Morgan, Putnam, and Shelby Counties, while CIRDA's region excludes Brown and Shelby Counties.

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Number of Employees in the MSA</i>	<i>Location Quotient</i>	<i>Mean Annual Wage</i>
SOFTWARE DEVELOPERS	6,900	0.58	\$114,070
MARKET RESEARCH ANALYSTS AND MARKETING SPECIALISTS	6,420	1.06	\$75,820
BARTENDERS	3,780	0.74	\$26,190
RECREATION WORKERS	2,130	1.06	\$32,550
MARKETING MANAGERS	1,840	0.70	\$135,930
PRINTING PRESS OPERATORS	1,720	1.59	\$45,250
PUBLIC RELATIONS SPECIALISTS	1,640	0.83	\$64,330
ARCHITECTURAL AND ENGINEERING MANAGERS	1,590	1.07	\$151,430
GRAPHIC DESIGNERS	1,570	1.03	\$53,180
COMPUTER PROGRAMMERS	1,280	1.49	\$103,990
BAKERS	1,210	0.77	\$36,470
MERCHANDISE DISPLAYERS AND WINDOW TRIMMERS	1,180	0.94	\$38,800
AUDIO AND VIDEO TECHNICIANS	960	2.01	\$53,270
PRODUCERS AND DIRECTORS	720	0.66	\$58,460
USHERS, LOBBY ATTENDANTS, AND TICKET TAKERS	690	0.82	\$25,150
ARCHITECTURAL AND CIVIL DRAFTERS	670	0.85	\$63,770
SEWING MACHINE OPERATORS	640	0.77	\$36,810
LIBRARIANS AND MEDIA COLLECTIONS SPECIALISTS	640	0.67	\$57,310
INTERPRETERS AND TRANSLATORS	630	1.72	\$49,240
ARCHITECTS, EXCEPT LANDSCAPE AND NAVAL	590	0.75	\$92,030
PRINT BINDING AND FINISHING WORKERS	520	1.87	\$38,830
INTERIOR DESIGNERS	510	1.06	\$61,970
ADVERTISING SALES AGENTS	490	0.63	\$66,350
ART, DRAMA, AND MUSIC TEACHERS, POSTSECONDARY	470	0.65	\$100,030

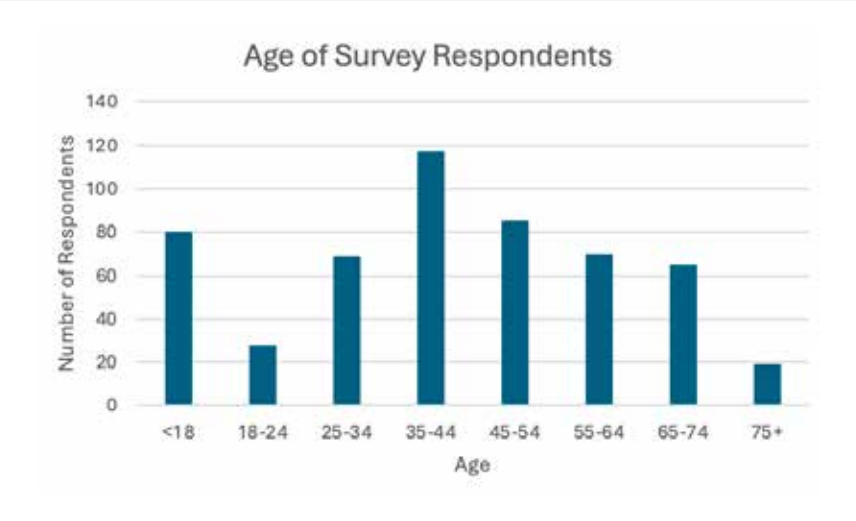
WEB AND DIGITAL INTERFACE DESIGNERS	470	0.60	\$73,060
ACTORS	450	1.01	UNDISCLOSED
EDITORS	450	0.66	\$64,830
TOUR AND TRAVEL GUIDES	390	1.17	\$29,900
CHEFS AND HEAD COOKS	390	0.32	\$58,890
TECHNICAL WRITERS	380	1.12	\$78,950
TRAVEL AGENTS	370	0.89	\$49,970
BROADCAST TECHNICIANS	350	1.85	\$57,240
WEB DEVELOPERS	350	0.57	\$68,800
NEWS ANALYSTS, REPORTERS, AND JOURNALISTS	330	1.02	\$66,100
BROADCAST ANNOUNCERS AND RADIO DISC JOCKEYS	320	1.79	\$65,060
DATABASE ARCHITECTS	320	0.74	\$109,930
PHOTOGRAPHERS	300	0.77	\$47,390
WRITERS AND AUTHORS	280	0.79	\$81,690
LIBRARY TECHNICIANS	270	0.50	\$36,410
FLORAL DESIGNERS	230	0.75	\$34,920
PUBLIC RELATIONS MANAGERS	230	0.44	\$119,880
URBAN AND REGIONAL PLANNERS	210	0.69	\$70,340
BARBERS	200	1.76	\$45,150
COMMERCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL DESIGNERS	180	0.82	UNDISCLOSED
AUDIOVISUAL EQUIPMENT INSTALLERS AND REPAIRERS	170	0.95	\$45,230
MUSICIANS AND SINGERS	170	0.67	UNDISCLOSED
ART DIRECTORS	170	0.48	\$84,920
JEWELERS AND PRECIOUS STONE AND METAL WORKERS	150	0.85	\$57,520
DANCERS	140	1.73	UNDISCLOSED
FILM AND VIDEO EDITORS	130	0.64	\$59,910
ENTERTAINMENT AND RECREATION MANAGERS, EXCEPT GAMBLING	110	0.50	\$82,990
DEMONSTRATORS AND PRODUCT PROMOTERS	110	0.29	\$32,750
CAMERA AND PHOTOGRAPHIC EQUIPMENT REPAIRERS	100	5.41	\$35,950
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS	100	0.69	\$63,630
MUSEUM TECHNICIANS AND CONSERVATORS	90	1.04	\$49,150
TAILORS, DRESSMAKERS, AND CUSTOM SEWERS	80	0.79	\$39,210
ADVERTISING AND PROMOTIONS MANAGERS	80	0.57	\$115,700
PHOTOGRAPHIC PROCESS WORKERS AND PROCESSING MACHINE OPERATORS	60	1.55	\$38,240
ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND ARCHEOLOGISTS	60	1.16	\$65,690
CURATORS	60	0.63	\$65,340
CAMERA OPERATORS, TELEVISION, VIDEO, AND FILM	50	0.31	\$40,540
ARCHIVISTS	40	0.70	\$58,770
DISC JOCKEYS, EXCEPT RADIO	40	0.70	UNDISCLOSED
HISTORIANS	30	1.46	\$68,110
SET AND EXHIBIT DESIGNERS	30	0.48	\$59,460
SOUND ENGINEERING TECHNICIANS	30	0.30	\$54,930



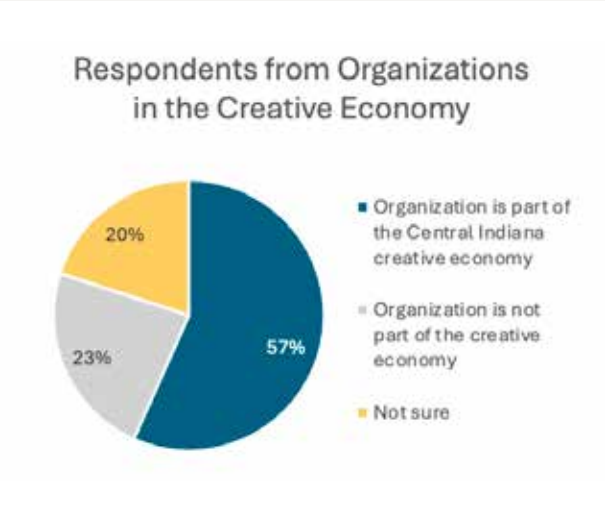
APPENDIX 4

# Creative Economy Survey Insights

Below is information collected from the 570 individuals who participated in a survey on Central Indiana’s creative economy. Note that some questions throughout the survey were not answered by all respondents; therefore, the number of total responses will not always add up to 570.



The pie chart shows the percent of respondents who consider their organizations part of Central Indiana’s creative economy. Of the 238 respondents from organizations in the creative economy, 50% report that their organization earns revenue from client services or commissions. Other top revenue sources include philanthropy (37%), product sales (32%), ticketed performances or events (31%), and government support (29%).



TALENT RETENTION

The 95 students and retirees who participated in the survey were asked whether the strength of the creative economy factors into their decision to stay in the region. Of these, 55% said a strong creative economy is an important or major factor in their decision to stay in Indiana. Another 24% said it matters but is not a top priority, and 21% said it has little to no influence on their decision to stay.

The strength of the creative economy is a more important factor to the student population, as **91% of students said a strong creative economy is a factor in whether they stay in Indiana, versus just 68% of retirees.**

SUPPORT FOR CREATIVES

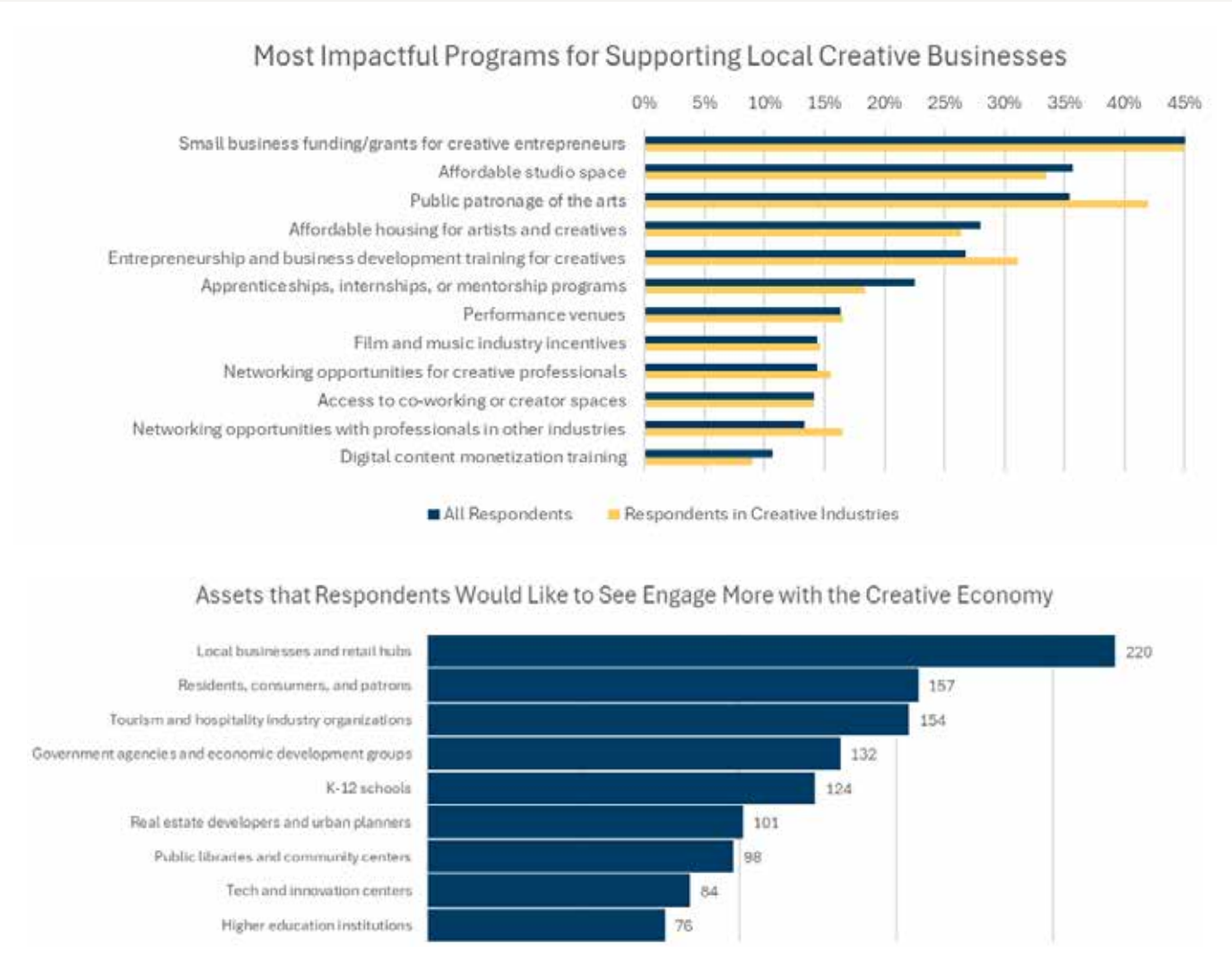
When asked what types of programs would be most impactful in supporting creative businesses, respondents selected the items listed in the chart below:

- Other responses in the “Other” open-ended field included:
- Better employment opportunities for part-time creatives
  - Rehearsal spaces
  - State and local investment in economic development through the creative sector
  - Education for local government officials to understand the impact of the creative economy
  - Direct support for artist-led projects

ENGAGING WITH THE CREATIVE ECONOMY

Respondents want to see more engagement with the creative economy by local businesses, residents and consumers, and tourism. K-12 schools were the leading selection among respondents under the age of 25.

- Other responses individuals shared in the “Other” open-ended field included:
- Residents with disabilities or who care for people with disabilities
  - Trails and public transit
  - Hospitals and wellness centers
  - Parks
  - Private philanthropy





CREATIVE ECONOMY PROJECTS

Respondents indicated they would like to see the below types of projects funded:

- Activation of more spaces for the creative economy (190 out of 414 responses)
- Development of new arts districts or creative hubs (183)
- Enhanced arts programs in schools (173)
- Public art and murals (156)
- Apprenticeship and mentorship programs (137)
- Creative business incubators (128)
- Enhanced performance spaces (93)
- Digital media and gaming industry support (37)
- Other responses included in the open-ended field included:
  - Regional promotion
  - Funding for filmmakers
  - Programs to make the public more design literate
  - Better civic design
  - Support events like PorchFest
  - Photography and videography incubators
  - Creative co-ops
  - Shared spaces for tools and resources
  - Natural beauty in places like Grand Park
  - University engagements; preparation and learning for their next chapter
  - A book festival
  - Larger space for Hancock County arts with classrooms and ample parking/central location
  - Professionalization of visual arts industry & infrastructure
  - Direct artist support for unrestricted project development
  - Mini courses to introduce creative hobbies to retirees
  - More funding for existing arts districts or creative hubs (not new ones)

CHALLENGES FACING

CREATIVE PROFESSIONALS

Among the respondents whose organizations are part of the creative economy, below are the biggest challenges they see facing creative professionals in Central Indiana:

- Lack of funding or financial support (137 out of 207 responses)
- Difficulty marketing and promoting creative work (81)
- Low consumer demand for creative products/services (73)
- Isolation from other industries (70)
- Limited access to creative workspace (61)
- Lack of collaboration or networking opportunities (55)
- Limited professional development and training (53)
- Other responses included in the open-ended field include:
  - Lack of matchmakers to connect creatives to opportunities and other sectors
  - Public sector leaders misidentifying arts and culture as a threat to their cultural and political goals
  - Persistent devaluing of the sector and its economic potential
  - Low consumer value placed on local creative products and services
  - Lack of dedicated, sophisticated storytelling platforms to professionalize and reframe context for local artists
  - Visibility
  - Lack of broad awareness and overall promotion of the value of a creative economy
  - Lack of government support for the arts
  - Lack of support for galleries
  - Lack of public buy-in and support
  - Lack of collaboration and connectedness among behind-the-scenes supporters
  - Lack of public sector responsiveness and supporting infrastructure (e.g. dysfunctional websites, inability to take advantage of film credits).

LEARNING ABOUT

CREATIVE OPPORTUNITIES

Below are the ways respondents usually find out about arts and cultural events or creative opportunities:

- Social media (348 out of 398 responses)
- Word of mouth (241)
- Organization websites (118)
- Community newsletters (100)
- Professional networks (85)
- Local television or shows (64)
- Public advertisements (63)
- Other responses included: Schools, Chamber/Aspire/Arts Council calendars, internet searching, e-newsletters, Do317.com, Art Guild

BARRIERS TO CREATIVE ECONOMY PARTICIPATION

Below are the responses when asked about the biggest barriers to accessing creative opportunities in Central Indiana:

- Lack of awareness of events/opportunities (286 out of 393 responses)
- Cost (165)
- Interfering obligations (162)
- Inconvenient timing (88)
- Not interested in the available offerings (73)
- Lack of diverse or culturally relevant offerings (60)
- Physical distance (57)
- Childcare needs or family responsibilities (46)
- Don't feel creatively confident or skilled enough (43)
- Other transportation or accessibility challenges (27)
- Safety concerns in venues or neighborhoods (17)
- Other responses included:
  - Creatives need to combine forces in an organized way, maybe with a collective signup/directory plus visiting artist masterclasses and networking events.
  - High real estate costs
  - Lack of information provided by daily local public media such as local television news and local daily newspaper
  - A lack of established networking within Indianapolis for information sharing (other than Indianapolis Arts Council)
  - Offerings often seem redundant (e.g., First Fridays, Farmers Markets, Makers Markets).
  - Some artists don't know they need to continue working on their craft, and may not know how to develop it.
  - Opportunities are often siloed rather than inclusive or expansive.

- There are few events in the winter. Some creatives participate in festivals and markets, creating a gap in the colder months and no real opportunity to establish roots.
- Venue spaces are overpriced or lack creative aesthetics, as they are usually tailored for "traditional" corporate events.
- Parking
- Events often are not kid-friendly.
- Juried applications for artists to participate can be overly laborious.

CONNECTING PEOPLE TO THE CREATIVE ECONOMY

Below are the strategies respondents said would better connect people and communities to arts, culture, and the creative economy:

- Better promotion of local creative opportunities (202 out of 388 responses)
- Stronger partnerships between businesses and artists (142)
- Increased government investment in the arts (128)
- Integration of arts and culture into urban planning and neighborhood development (126)
- Public-private partnerships to fund creative infrastructure (118)
- More accessible funding opportunities for independent creatives and entrepreneurs (85)
- More centralized locations for creative offerings (70)
- More inclusive and culturally diverse events (60)
- Creation of online marketplaces or directories for local creatives (43)
- More partnerships between higher education institutions and creative entrepreneurs (41)
- Expanded affordable transportation options to creative events (25)
- Other responses included:
  - More matchmakers who can drive connections
  - Handicap accessibility
  - More investment in the south side of Indianapolis
  - More public education about the benefits of the arts on quality of life
  - Better integration with spaces that people visit and enjoy
  - More opportunities for arts collaboration with—and support by—major Indianapolis sports organizations and family entertainment venues (e.g., the Zoo, Children's Museum, Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, Conner Prairie, etc.)



IDEAS FROM SURVEY RESPONDENTS FOR  
STRENGTHENING THE CREATIVE ECONOMY:

Seventy-eight respondents shared open-ended responses when asked for their ideas for strengthening the creative economy. Key themes expressed include creative reuse of existing buildings and infrastructure, increasing the visibility of the creative economy, and connecting the creative economy to Indiana’s innovation ecosystem. Several responses are included below that are representative of feedback received. These have been slightly edited for clarity and to highlight themes.

- I think a lot could be done to make it more visible. Sharing the names and stories of the people who make the art and designs that we encounter regularly. There’s a lot of talk about the next generation wanting to me YouTubers when they grow up. How can we add a bit more glamour to offline work, giving creative professionals more recognition, especially those who don’t naturally enjoy or excel self-promotion?
- There are artists but I don’t feel we are organized as a collective community.
- There could be more collaboration. I get that everyone wants to be the star but how do we connect if we want to be background support.
- I would love to see businesses across Indiana be a sponsor of some kind of creative work. They could house events or display work in their offices. I think there’s a lot of potential on the canal. Inviting more artists to sell things there on the weekends, more concerts and musicians playing around the canal for people to enjoy.
- Collaboration among creatives and united efforts with clear visions would be helpful. Creatives need a central voice/summit/organization that can represent the collective group—individual leaders need to come together and share their collective knowledge through a united platform. We are too divided and many of us are trying to do what others are doing instead of collaborating with others and sharing a greater vision.
- Artists need community and some economic stability to do their best work. Also vital is direct connections with audience humans.

- Strategically, I think Indiana does need the ability to understand the impact and scope of its creative infrastructure and economy. I think AI will mean that creative skills will be more important in the future, so education needs to pivot to critical thinking and creativity. As an artist and a creative entrepreneur, I need traffic, space, and networks. I’m shocked that so many local corporations don’t bother to buy art locally. Would love to see towns provide financial incentives to create locally-owned or run galleries. In general, creating a state that is small business friendly is core.
- Creativity should be fostered as a skill just as math, reading, or science are. Creative and critical thinking skills are important to problem solving in general, and are necessary for the creation of stories, films and artwork. Ideally, creativity should be available for as many people as possible and at all stages of life. K-12 Arts education, community center arts classes, music education and more would help with connecting people to opportunities to find their creative side.
- I think the business sector has yet to fully recognize its role in supporting the creative economy. Investing in creativity isn’t just philanthropy for the public good, it’s smart strategy to attract top talent, engage more consumers and drive long-term economic growth. It’s a win-win.
- Connect creatives to the broader innovation ecosystem; Bring more visibility to the creative economy by making it a focal point of city development (aka, Monument Circle); develop more unique creative experiences that don’t exist anywhere else.

CREATIVE ECONOMY ASSETS

Survey respondents were asked to share what creative assets they felt have the biggest impact on the local or regional creative economy. Below is the full list of creative spaces, organizations, funding mechanisms, or programs shared by Central Indiana residents and stakeholders who participated in the creative economy survey. The number of times each asset was referenced in survey responses is included in parentheses.

Public Areas, Main Streets, Creative Districts,  
and Community Organizations

- Alexandria Main Street (1)
- Carmel Arts & Design District (2)
- Depot Street Park, Greenfield (4)
- Discover Downtown Franklin (2)
- Factory Arts District—formerly Circle City Industrial Complex, Indianapolis (5)
- Fort Ben Cultural Campus (1)
- Fountain Square Cultural District (2)
- Greenfield Main Street (1)
- Greenfield Parks Department (1)
- Greenfield Senior Center (1)
- Indianapolis Cultural Trail (1)
- Indianapolis Zoo (1)
- Mass Ave Cultural District (1)
- Midtown Plaza—Carmel (2)
- The Murphy Arts Center—Fountain Square, Indianapolis (2)
- The Stutz Building (6)

Creative Spaces and Providers  
of Creative Opportunities for the Public

- Carmel Clay Public Library (1)
- Creative Arts and Event Center—Greenfield (1)
- Creative Pathways (1)
- Fishers Parks’ Maker Playground (1)
- Greenfield Senior Center (1)
- Hancock County Public Library (1)
- Spark on the Circle (1)
- Westfield Washington Public Library (1)

Main Street Businesses

- The Gilded Nest—Greenfield (1)
- The Mad Potter Pottery—Greenfield (1)
- Organic Robot Designs—Greenfield (1)
- The Wandering Peacock—Westfield (1)
- Wilkerson Dance Studio—Greenfield (1)
- Wild Geese Bookshop—Franklin (1)

Accelerators, Incubators, and Residencies

- St’ArtUp 317 (2)
- B-SIDE Creative Campus—Brookside, Indianapolis (1)

Funding

- Allen Whitehill Clowes Charitable Foundation (3)
- Carmel Arts Grant (1)
- Central Indiana Community Foundation (4)
- CICF Creative Risk Fund (1)
- Christel DeHaan Family Foundation (1)
- Community Foundation of Hancock County (2)
- Creative Renewal Fellowship—a program of the Indy Arts Council with Lilly Endowment funding (1)
- Glick Philanthropies (1)
- Lilly Endowment Inc. (3)
- MIBOR Community Impact initiative (1)

Private Sector Companies  
and Non-Artistic Sector Champions

- Eli Lilly and Company (2)
- Eskenazi Health, and the Eskenazi Health Art Collection (1)
- Hancock Health (1)
- High Alpha (1)
- NineStar Connect (1)



**Museums, Galleries, and Collections**

- Anderson Museum of Art (2)
- The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis (1)
- Indiana Music History Museum (1)
- James Whitcomb Riley Boyhood Home and Museum (1)
- Newfields (6)
- Storage Space Indy (1)
- Will Vawter Juried Art Exhibition (1)
- Music
- Anderson Symphony Orchestra (1)
- Brandywine Wind (1)
- Gaither Music Group (1)
- Hancock County Children’s Choir (2)

**Creative Ecosystem Builders and Community Champions**

- Arts Council of Indianapolis (19)
- A Town Center, Anderson (1)
- Big Car Collaborative—Garfield Park, Indianapolis (5)
- Franklin Heritage (1)
- Franklin Public Arts Advisory Commission (1)
- GANGGANG (9)
- Hancock County Arts (2)
- The Harrison Center (9)
- Hendricks Live! (1)
- Hoosier Women Forward (1)
- Indiana Arts Commission (9)
- Indiana Musicpedia (1)
- Indianapolis Art Center (2)
- Pattern (10)
- Tube Factory Artspace (1)
- Visit Indy (1)

**Film**

- Heartland International Film Festival (3)
- Historic Artcraft Theatre (1)
- Hoodox (1)
- Indy Film Fest (1)
- Kan-Kan Cinema and Brasserie (1)
- Red Nose Studio (1)

**Music**

- Anderson Symphony Orchestra (1)
- Brandywine Wind (1)
- Gaither Music Group (1)
- Hancock County Children’s Choir (1)

**Education and Youth**

- Butler University (1)
- Greenfield High School (1)
- Herron High School—Indianapolis (1)
- Herron School of Art + Design—Indianapolis (2)
- Hoosier Kids Theatre—Greenfield (1)
- libada Dance Company—Indianapolis (1)
- Kids Play, Inc. and CrazyLake Acting Company—Greenfield (1)
- Nameless Creek Youth Camp (1)

**Economic Development**

- Aspire Economic Development + Chamber Alliance (1)
- Indiana Economic Development Corporation and its READI program (3)
- Indy Chamber (1)

**Programming and Campaigns**

- Create What You Crave (1)
- Creative Economy Summit (1)
- Creative Mornings Indianapolis (1)
- Festival Country Indiana (1)
- First Fridays (2)
- Indianapolis Fringe Festival (1)
- Indy Design Week (1)
- Pennsy Trail Art Fair & Music Festival—Greenfield (1)
- The Penrod Arts Fair—Indianapolis (1)
- Riley Festival—Greenfield (2)

**Performing Arts and Venues**

- H.J. Ricks Centre for the Arts—Greenfield (5)
- The Palladium at the Center for the Performing Arts—Carmel (1)
- Phoenix Theatre Cultural Centre (1)
- Ricks-Weil Theatre Company (1)

**Outside Region**

- The Hundredth Hill Artist Retreat (1)
- Main Street USA (1)
- National Endowment for the Arts (1)
- National Endowment for the Humanities (1)



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