



# Cross-Sector Strategies for Creative Rural Development

**NASAA** NATIONAL ASSEMBLY of  
STATE ARTS AGENCIES

Knowledge ▲ Representation ▲ Community

# Introduction

Arts and creativity are valuable to rural communities in addressing multiple goals related to public health, social cohesion and civic engagement. These benefits, as well as the substantial economic value of the arts, help rural communities to thrive and preserve their distinct assets, character and ways of life. In rural and remote regions across the nation, the arts are working in concert with other sectors to strengthen the social fabric of communities, celebrate local culture, and nurture places where people want to live, play, work, worship and raise their families. Integrating arts solutions with rural development can address long-standing rural challenges such as out-migration, economic instability and social isolation. State and jurisdictional arts agencies (SAAs) and regional arts organizations (RAOs) play critical roles in ensuring that rural communities enjoy equitable access to the arts, with benefits for all residents.

Rural development collaborations include many potential partners. At the government level, SAAs have worked with rural development agencies, departments of agriculture, commerce departments, education departments, departments of tourism, and other state and local governing bodies. Such partners can provide SAAs with access to leaders and decision makers in rural networks and can provide expertise on rural strategies. They also may offer funding opportunities for rural development programs that include the arts. In return, SAAs provide arts related knowledge and information about creative strategies, grant funds and technical assistance opportunities that can help agencies from other sectors mobilize creative assets in rural areas. Educational institutions are key connectors to rural communities—with K-12 schools, colleges, universities and libraries often coordinating arts programs and program content.

## Investing in Rural Communities

State arts agencies (SAAs) invest nearly **\$60 million in rural America** through more than **8,100 direct grants** to nearly **2,600 rural communities**.

U.S. rural population .....**14%**

SAA grants to rural areas .....**19%**

Learn more:

[State Arts Agency Grant Making Facts: Rural Communities](#)

## The Arts Ignite Rural Economic Opportunity

In the 26 states with rural populations exceeding 20%, the creative industries added more than **\$139 billion** to gross state product and employed more than **1 million workers**.

Sources:

[Creative Economy State Profiles](#)  
[USDA State Factsheets](#)

While partnerships between SAAs/RAOs and non-arts organizations can take effort to form and crystalize, they ultimately deliver vital resources for many rural communities in need. The following examples demonstrate successful cross-sector strategies led by SAAs/RAOs throughout the country.

## Examples of Rural Development Partnerships

### Georgia

#### State-Municipal Arts Partnerships to Support Rural Communities

By land size, Georgia is the largest state east of the Mississippi, with an even larger cultural hub: Atlanta. "When we look at equity, we really have to look outside Atlanta, and we have to look beyond grants," said Tina Lilly, executive director of the Georgia Council for the Arts. "Many rural communities don't have arts organizations. To help rural communities, we need to think of holistic services."

For several years, the [Georgia Council for the Arts](#) (GCA) has partnered with the [Georgia Municipal Association](#) (GMA), the support organization for local Georgia government. The GMA opens a whole new audience for the Council for the Arts, bringing it access to local officials. GCA presents at GMA conferences and tourism workshops, discussing the value that arts experiences bring to local economies and helping town leaders learn how to obtain funding for arts initiatives.

[More than Murals](#) was an idea planted after a GMA workshop on how the arts can address community-led change. Lilly received a dozen calls from city representatives wanting to follow up. Most people were excited about using the arts to improve their communities but had no idea where to start. With some American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds, GCA created More than Murals, a workshop that would go beyond focusing on mural development to offering broader learning sessions on how to institute citywide art and creativity programs to brand cities and boost local tourism.

The workshop featured, as an exemplar, [Thomasville](#), a community with a committed investment in tourism and the arts. [Thomasville Center for the Arts](#) has been promoting and developing interactive public art experiences within Thomasville for more than a decade. Thomasville typifies the demand for cultural experiences in rural Georgia. Since the enactment of GCA's Creative District Vision Plan in 2014, downtown Thomasville has received over \$15 million in investments from the public and private sectors. More than 40 businesses have opened in the district, creating over 230 jobs, and

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***"Located in a very isolated part of the state, Thomasville is a cultural oasis. People travel for miles to experience its bed and breakfasts, unique shops, restaurants, hunting preserves, the Ritz Amphitheatre, and ongoing public cultural events cultivated through the Center for the Arts."***

— Tina Lilly, Georgia Council for the Arts Executive Director

surrounding neighborhoods have been connected to downtown streets.<sup>1</sup>

Rural Georgia communities were invited to apply to More than Murals. Each applicant had to select a team of three people who would be present at the workshop: a city official who makes decisions, a town representative, and either an artist or an arts organization representative. The workshop was free, and 12 groups were chosen from roughly 50 community applicants.

The Georgia Council for the Arts and Thomasville developed content for the workshop with the aid of consultants. The event featured Thomasville presentations on how public art can improve the cultural vitality of the city and on efforts by the town's planning department to advance new projects. Participants also learned about formulas for creating large-scale public art events. Speakers were invited from cities such as Savannah and Atlanta to present small and large examples of the impacts of creative placemaking.

Workshop participants thus learned about [Thomasville and its successes and challenges](#) in integrating the arts with rural community development. The arts have played a significant part in preserving and communicating Thomasville's history and traditions while empowering local artists and creatives. A cohesive partnership between the City of Thomasville and Thomasville Center for the Arts along with strong support for artists in the area continues to contribute to Thomasville's placemaking. Those who had done the work in Thomasville—e.g., the city manager, the arts council and tourism representatives—were present. Participants split into small groups to identify problems. The goal was to get communities to conceive of issues and then strategize on how to solve them. Each group had a mentor from one of the sponsoring teams. At the end, all participants were surprised with an \$8,000 grant from GCA's state ARPA funds. (GCA had applied for state ARPA funds under a proposal that would provide creative placemaking grants to rural communities.)

In reflecting on the first workshop, GCA staff learned that there was greater need for training on how to harness creative resources for community development. The most critical element identified was the need for up-front cultural assessments of the creative assets and artists available in rural communities. Many communities applying for the More the Murals program stated that they were not aware of an artist among their residents. GCA realized that non-arts leaders need guidance on how to undertake cultural assessments to learn more about creative expertise available locally. For example, an online assessment class prior to the More than Murals workshop

## Cultural Asset Mapping

Cultural asset mapping is "a process of collecting, recording, analyzing, and synthesizing information in order to describe the cultural resources, networks, links, and patterns of usage of a given community or group." (Creative City Network of Canada, 2010)

Resources:

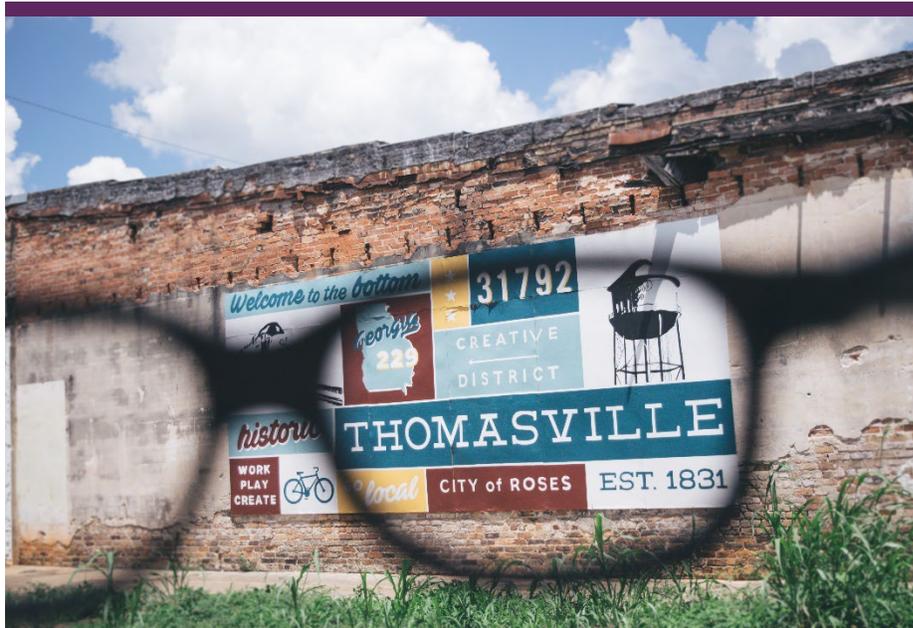
[What Is Cultural Asset Mapping?](#)  
[Participatory Asset Mapping](#)  
[Creative City Network of Canada](#)  
[Cultural Mapping Toolkit](#)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gacities.com/News/Georgias-Cities-Magazine/March-April-2023.aspx>

would have helped communities understand the best person to bring to the table. Another lesson learned was that more time should have been spent on actively working with the communities to envision solutions.

The Georgia Arts Council is resuming more of this work. Rather than jump immediately into another iteration of More than Murals, the teams are strategically processing what worked and what could have been done better. GCA has retained a consulting firm to figure out how best to answer such questions as: How can the program succeed in communities with severely limited staff and budgets? What types of training would be best? Do GCA staff or other consultants need to be sent directly to communities for on-site work?



Welcome sign to The Bottom Creative District in Thomasville. Photo courtesy of the Thomasville Center for the Arts

## Colorado

### Economic Development and Tourism Partnerships to Promote Rural Arts Tourism

Rural community access to the arts is a priority for [Colorado Creative Industries](#) (CCI). Due to a unique tax district (the [Scientific and Cultural Facilities District](#)), the Denver metropolitan region of Colorado has sustainable operational support for arts organizations and can boast a relatively high concentration of free and low-cost programming. Consequently, CCI strives to fill the rural resource gap.

When it comes to rural arts access and creative development, CCI understands that economic growth and sustainability are not only about recruiting businesses to establish and bring jobs. Rural economic resiliency is

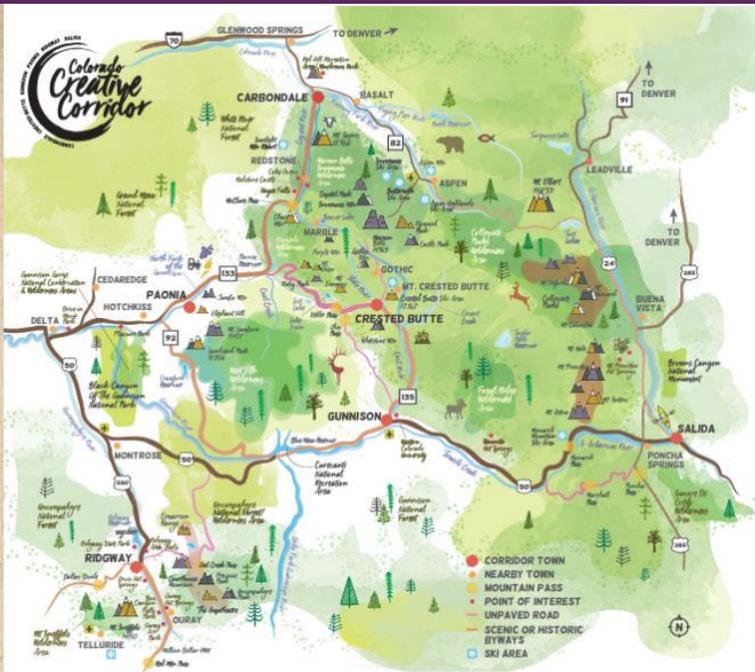
#### State Cultural Districts

States are increasingly taking a role in establishing policies to cultivate community development and revitalization through arts and culture via [state cultural districts](#).

aided by strong local leadership combined with community vision and branding. Rural economies succeed when communities understand themselves—who they are and what they have to offer. Not only does a strong creative identity engender local community pride, it creates a brand that attracts visitors and future residents.

**TOUR THE COLORADO CREATIVE CORRIDOR!**  
6 SMALL MOUNTAIN TOWNS FULL OF BIG CREATIVITY & INSPIRATION

**55,804'** OF ELEVATION  
**23,300** SMILING LOCALS  
**1,400+** CREATIVE BUSINESSES  
**141** RESTAURANTS  
**100+** MUSIC FESTS & CONCERTS  
**65** GALLERIES & MUSEUMS  
**49** PERFORMING ARTS VENUES  
**17** DISTILLERIES & WINERIES  
**15** ALPINE & NORDIC SKI AREAS  
**14** FILM FESTIVALS  
**13** VIEWABLE MOUNTAIN RANGES  
**11** CRAFT BREWERIES  
**10** WILDERNESS AREAS  
**10** ART CENTERS  
**9** IN-TOWN RIVERS  
**9** HOT SPRINGS  
**6** CREATIVE DISTRICTS  
**6** HISTORIC DOWNTOWNS  
**6** SCENIC & HISTORIC BYWAYS  
**5** MOUNTAIN PASSES  
**4** RESERVOIRS  
**1** NATIONAL PARK  
**1** NATIONAL MONUMENT  
**1** NATIONAL RECREATION AREA  
**ENDLESS** HIKING & BIKING TRAILS



**Thank you TO OUR PARTNERS**












The Colorado Creative Corridor route and details. Image courtesy of CCI

CCI's [Colorado Creative Districts](#) program represents just such a community strategy. The program certifies creative communities that contribute to Colorado's economy through culture and the arts.

Certified communities receive training, networking opportunities and resources to strengthen creative capital. So far, there are 30 certified districts, of which 20 are rural. Districts are certified not only on the basis of their arts assets but also on the strength of local leadership and cross-sector work, such as including the district in community plans for infrastructure, housing, zoning and economic development. CCI provides a suite of services to support the districts, including cash awards, technical assistance, networking opportunities, marketing assistance and access to economic data.

As a result of the Colorado Creative Districts' yearly convening, six rural Colorado communities have collaborated on a tourism initiative, the [Colorado Creative Corridor](#). The effort was led by the Carbondale Chamber of Commerce and Carbondale Creative District, which was looking for a novel way to promote the new designation of a certified creative district in Carbondale (population 6,434). The six certified creative districts that then worked on the corridor included Carbondale, Paonia,

Crested Butte, Gunnison, Ridgway and Salida. Because Colorado tourism revolves mainly around outdoor physical activities, alternative tourism products must compete by diversifying opportunities for people of all ages and physical abilities.

## More Arts and Heritage Trail Examples

### [Mississippi Blues Trail](#)

Spanning the land that birthed the blues, the Mississippi Blues Trail runs from city streets to cotton fields, train depots, cemeteries, clubs and churches, telling the stories of blues artists and the places and times in which they lived.

### [The Crooked Road: Virginia's Heritage Music Trail](#)

The Crooked Road is a 333-mile driving trail that connects 10 major and 50 affiliate venues that preserve and promote traditional Appalachian bluegrass and old-time music.

### [New Mexico Arts Trail](#)

New Mexico's Arts Trails program is an economic development initiative designed to feature artists and bring the market to artisans.

The districts partnered with local and regional tourism to create an accessible experience: the Colorado Creative Corridor, a 331-mile driving trail linking six mountain towns. The corridor offers a collective experience of unique event programming and activities alongside mountain-town eclecticism, majestic vistas and authentic Colorado mountain culture.

One popular corridor experience is an opportunity to see how the Grammy awards are made. The town of Ridgway houses the [John Billings studio](#), which manufactures the Grammy award statues. Twenty percent of the Ridgway population is employed in the creative sector—a substantial share, given the town's population of 1,200. Since the Ridgway Creative District was state-certified in 2013, combined sales tax revenues have increased from \$684,383 to \$2,082,986. This growth marks a 206% climb, reflecting gains in cultural tourism and, consequently, in economic prosperity. Funding and development of the Colorado Creative Corridor relied, in part, on an alliance between CCI and the [Colorado Tourism Office](#), both divisions of the Governor's Office of Economic Development and International Trade. Most funding came from the Tourism Office through its Marketing Matching Grant awards, overseen by the Destination Development program, which supports rural tourism. A partnership with the tourism office gives CCI access to a larger budget as well as the office's marketing services. CCI contributes funding, but it benefits the partnership by building networks and serving as a connector for resources and technical support. Most of the work in developing the Creative Corridor was done through the local tourism bureaus of each creative district.

The Creative Corridor has inspired the creation of other tourism projects in Colorado. There are currently at least three similar regional tourism collaborations, including the [NoCo Creative Road Trip](#), an arts excursion along the front porch of the Rockies.

Ridgway and CCI have worked with the community to stand up an affordable housing project for creative workers. In partnership with [Artspace](#), CCI's [Space to Create Colorado](#) program provides 30 units of affordable live-work space. Housing and spaces to create are critical components for preserving and promoting the arts in rural communities. CCI's Space to Create aids communities with developing affordable residential and commercial spaces. Residential live-work space is available for creative workers, as are nonresidential spaces for creative enterprises or community-serving organizations. Space to Create Colorado is the nation's first state-led initiative supporting rural affordable housing for creative-sector workers.

## Idaho

### Partnership with the Department of Education to Help Schools Create Community Spaces

Idaho has prioritized investments in K-12 education in recent years. Some of the state's rural areas, however, still struggle with limited resources. A 2023 [report](#) by the National Rural Education Association found that rural schools in Idaho faced many challenges with facility and infrastructure needs, and that instructional spending for rural Idaho students was the lowest in the nation.

Gov. Brad Little, the state legislature and the Idaho State Board of Education are making concerted efforts to improve the conditions for learning in rural communities—and the arts are a part of that solution.

In 2023, the Idaho general fund had a modest surplus of funds. The governor's office and state legislature directed a portion of them toward rural arts education grants. The [Idaho State Board of Education](#) received the funds but, since it not specialize in arts grant making, asked the [Idaho Commission on the Arts](#) (Arts Idaho) to help. The 2023 [Expanding Arts Access in Rural Public Schools](#) program was a state level partnership designed to fortify arts instruction in schools with fewer than 20 enrolled students per square mile or school districts within counties of less than 25,000 residents. The Idaho State Board of Education convened school superintendents and promoted the program. Arts Idaho paneled the grants, made recommendations and presented them to the board of education for final approval.



Bonnors Ferry Band students. Boundary County School District was a 2023 Expanding Access in Rural Public Schools awardee. Photo courtesy of Arts Idaho

Grants of up to \$15,000 went to rural schools to support courses in the fine arts, performing arts and design. The awards funded the purchase of equipment, supplies and curricular materials that support arts education programs. More than 70 Idaho rural public schools, school districts and charter schools received funding in 2023. Of the schools awarded, 19 received an arts grant for the first time. An insight from the program was the importance of engaging school leadership to prioritize and coordinate the needs of multiple arts specialists. This factor made it imperative to communicate with rural education leaders about the arts' benefits and how the funds could be accessed.

Based on its initial success, the 2023 Expanding Arts Access in Rural Public Schools program continued on a limited basis into 2024, through another \$1 million appropriation. Currently Idaho legislators are working to make the program recur in the future.

By energizing rural arts education programs, the collaboration is [contributing to positive school experiences and creating new career opportunities for students](#). In eastern Idaho, in the South Lemhi County School District, the one-room, one-teacher Tendoy Elementary School purchased musical instruments and a portable stage with steps, backdrop and curtains for students to practice and perform music and theatre. In southern Idaho in Gooding, the Idaho School for the Deaf and the Blind invested in musical instruments and visual arts supplies for weaving, leather crafting and pottery to support the development of intellectual, community, motor and language literacies for residential students. The Murtaugh School District has been previously unable to provide art classes for students, the majority of whom lack access to out-of-school art learning experiences. Grant funds provided teachers with professional development in visual art instruction and with consumables such as paper, paint, brushes and clay.

## Indiana

### Cross-Sector Partnerships and Relationship Building in Rural Community Development

"Rural representation is an integral part of inclusivity, and the arts commission is dedicated to inclusivity," said Paige Sharp, former deputy director of programs for the [Indiana Arts Commission](#) (IAC). Sometimes SAAs find it necessary to enhance and build their networks for reaching rural communities and must seek additional resources to help. For the Indiana Arts Commission, an alliance with the [Indiana Office of Community & Rural Affairs](#) (OCRA) provided such access.

The partnership began when OCRA invited IAC to serve on a grant review team for the [Stellar Pathways Program](#). As the relationship between the two grew, IAC became involved in other OCRA grant programs, bringing arts expertise, connections to the arts community and an emphasis on the arts in rural placemaking. One relevant program was OCRA's [Quick Impact Placebased \(QulP\) Grant](#), designed to fund space enhancements that spark communitywide conversations and arts related creativity. IAC provided arts support, educational content and additional funding.

The QulP program funded the city of [Wolcott](#), a rural place with a population of 1,300 and a struggling economy. Wolcott Main Street partnered with the town of Wolcott, The [Tippecanoe] Arts Federation and Tri-County School Corporation to select two artists to paint murals in the downtown thruway. These pieces would become the first public art in the entire community.

The murals discharged a positive buzz throughout the city of Wolcott. Community members drove out every day to watch the artists work and have lunch with them. The local restaurant, Roots, furnished specialized menus for the artists' dietary needs. A class of 4th graders came to the worksite for a day trip and the artists demonstrated their painting techniques.



Residents of Wolcott view the mural creation and interact with the artists. Photo by Kelley Satoski, courtesy of IAC

Wolcott shows how arts projects animate whole communities. "When you bring arts into the picture, [community] engagement is much more compelling," said Sharp. IAC continued to drive that message in their evolving partnership with OCRA, particularly in the [Hoosiers Enduring Legacy Program](#) (HELP), created to help communities address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Partners included [Ball State Indiana Communities Institute](#), [Indiana University Center for Rural Engagement](#), [Purdue Center for Regional Development](#), and [Ivy Tech Community College](#). Through fiscal recovery funds, the program spurred the use of community engagement, prior planning, asset building and collaboration in preparing communities to create and implement strategic plans.

Through the HELP work, IAC learned that rural communities often need assistance with both helping residents understand the role of arts in community development and engaging them in the process. This insight provided the impetus for the [Creative Convergence](#) collaboration with the Indiana Communities Institute at [Ball State University](#).

An important part of cross-sector work is finding connections and bringing together arts and non-arts groups. Creative Convergence workshops helped train arts organizations and community leaders to communicate with each other about how and why the arts can prove a critical component of community development. Ball State University drafted the training materials and cocreated the courses with IAC. The workshops brought together community leaders, organizational representatives and artists/creatives to better understand how to embed arts and creativity into community and economic planning, how to work effectively across sectors, and how to involve community members. After the workshop, attendants were invited to submit applications for grants.

In one community, the Creative Convergence workshop sparked conversation between an arts group and city officials. Whereas the arts group previously had difficulty reaching city officials, the officials initiated a conversation after the workshop helped them understand how arts can impact community development.

## South Arts

### Cross-Regional Networking to Preserve Rural Cultural Heritage

As nonprofit entities, regional arts organizations can serve as key facilitators and intermediaries for foundations seeking to fund or create specific programs. Because the Appalachian region spans several Southern states, the RAO [South Arts](#) was a logical fit for implementing a foundation's interest in creating a large-scale initiative to advance intergenerational opportunities for teaching, learning, promoting and preserving Appalachian folk arts and culture. Thus, in 2018 South Arts evolved [In These Mountains](#), a multifaceted program to preserve and perpetuate the traditional arts and culture of central Appalachia.

In These Mountains offers a wide variety of programs throughout the Appalachian regions of Kentucky, North Carolina and Tennessee. "When we developed In These Mountains, there were so many different things going on in so many different Appalachian communities," said Teresa Hollingsworth, former director of traditional arts at South Arts. "Instead of focusing on three or four different organizations, we wanted to be able to provide resources that would impact as many communities as possible in central Appalachia."

To establish many programs across several states, multiple partnerships are required. To access local communities and counties and expand existing programs, In These Mountains partners with the [Kentucky Arts Council](#), [North Carolina Arts Council](#) and [Tennessee Arts Commission](#).

Other partners include [Appalshop](#), a nonprofit dedicated to preserving and promoting Appalachian heritage, culture and community; and schools and educational programs including [Junior Appalachian Musicians](#), [Hindman Settlement School](#), [Pine Mountain Settlement School](#), [Berea College](#), [Appalachian State University](#), [East Tennessee State University](#) and [Mars Hill University](#). South Arts has memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with each of these 11 partners. These MOUs help ensure that In These Mountains objectives are well-understood and partnership roles are clearly defined.

Meaningful cultural and community development work does not always occur in and through arts organizations; cross-sector connections may surface on many different fronts. In These Mountains supports over half a dozen different programs, each facilitating grant making for folk arts and education, and funding individual practitioners as well as organizations and networks in geographically, economically and culturally distinct regions. These grants are typically open to a wide range of nonprofit organizations such as community service organizations, libraries, museums, community festival organizations and faith based organizations, to name a few. Support extends beyond preserving performing arts and crafts to preserving, promoting and teaching about food preservation, agriculture and foodways, and traditional medicine.

The combined effort of In These Mountains provides many Appalachians with new opportunities to celebrate and preserve their culture. "Seeing how our In These Mountains programs impact communities helps me to see the meaning in all of the paperwork I do," said Taylor Burden, assistant director, traditional arts, at South Arts. Recently, Burden attended a Music Educator's Summit, where she was inspired by the passionate testimonial of a Tennessean woman. The woman's daughter had been dispirited by a spinal fusion surgery that would limit her physical activities. The daughter expressed interest in learning an instrument, so mother and daughter found refuge in a local Junior Appalachian Music (JAM) chapter. JAM instruction is free for students

## Memorandums of Understanding

State arts agencies have effectively used memorandums of understanding (MOUs) as a mechanism for solidifying cross-sector partnership roles, goals and expectations.

The [State of Texas](#) uses formalized MOUs to coordinate statewide tourism efforts.

Participating agencies include the Texas Commission on the Arts, Office of the Governor's Economic Development and Tourism, Texas Historical Commission, Texas Department of Transportation, and Texas Parks and Wildlife.

and often a critical resource for Appalachian youth receiving free and reduced-price lunches. Parents can attend for \$10. Not only did the daughter learn how to play the ukulele, but her mother was so inspired that she began attending classes and eventually became a teacher for the program. The mother noted that not a single school in the county had a music or arts program, so JAM remained a critical resource for her and her daughter.

## State Arts Agencies as Facilitators of Local Cross-Sector Development

### [Air Collaborative](#)

Air Collaborative helps SAAs catalyze cross-sector collaborations at the local level by using a three-step pathway to build innovation and economic sustainability. In [Ohio](#), Air Collaborative has worked with the Ohio Arts Council to improve connectivity with communities and lay the groundwork for building nimble creative economies.

### [Tennessee's Targeted Arts Development Initiative](#)

A good example of how SAAs target rural and economically distressed counties, the Targeted Arts Development Initiative (TADI) is a strategy to reach counties identified by the Tennessee Arts Commission as under-represented in Arts Commission investments. TADI is designed to build capacity and leadership potential while encouraging applications from the identified counties toward existing Commission grant categories or programs.

### [Iowa's Creative Places Accelerator](#)

Iowa's Creative Places Accelerator helps cross-sector community teams from small to midsize communities grow arts based projects to foster community connectedness, livability and economic development. Projects are focused on creative placemaking (or placekeeping).

### [Art of Community Grants for Rural South Carolina](#)

The South Carolina Arts Commission Art of Community grant program positions the arts to address rural community development challenges. Funds can go to non-arts organizations serving as the lead applicant and are used to support projects throughout rural South Carolina that use the arts to address issues and challenges in rural communities.

## Tips for State Partnerships

- **Create an inviting on-ramp.** Some community leaders have yet to embrace the value of the arts in creative community development. Others are already interested in using the arts in community development but are unsure where to start. In either situation, SAAs and RAOs can serve as educators and facilitators, helping communities realize the possibilities of the arts and learn about funding opportunities.

- **Emphasize asset mapping.** In some situations, training on how to do a cultural assessment is necessary before embarking on creative community development. This capacity allows local government leaders outside the arts sector to begin to connect with arts networks. State arts agencies can provide technical assistance for communities needing to do cultural asset mapping for the first time.
- **Mobilize multiple types of resources.** Cross-sector partners bring a variety of assets and capacities to the table. These may include funding, materials, expertise, or networks of people and organizations who share complementary rural development goals. In many cases, network expansion is one of the most valuable partnership assets for SAAs and RAOs seeking to bond with rural communities. In return, expertise in grant making is often an important function that SAAs and RAOs can contribute to cross-sector collaborations.
- **Embrace reflective practice.** Rather than jumping immediately into another iteration of a program, sometimes it is more effective to take the time to process lessons learned. To support this process, create appropriate mechanisms for all partners to share their experiences and insights with one another. Be sure to include feedback from the rural communities who are the intended beneficiaries of the partnerships.
- **Engage local leaders.** While state level leadership can open important doors for collaboration, strong local level leadership is where new work gains real traction. In rural communities, this likely includes a mixture of elected officials and volunteer civic leaders.
- **Cultivate pride.** Partnerships for rural development can celebrate the distinctive identities, unique characteristics and cherished traditions of rural communities. Taking an asset based (rather than deficit-centered) approach helps to build buy-in and momentum.
- **Use existing gathering spaces.** Civic infrastructure in rural communities—places such as schools, libraries, parks and houses of worship—are key gathering spaces in rural environments. They offer locations to implement arts activities in places where arts organizations may not exist.
- **Facilitate connections.** Because of their unique knowledge of public policy and state, regional, and national systems, SAAs and RAOs can be gateways to networks and funders for rural development.

## Recommended Resources

### [USDA Rural Development](#)

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development Agencies administer over 70 programs and support rural communities with loan and grant investments of over \$30 billion annually. Loans and grants have been used for movie theatres and performing arts centers. USDA Rural Development has a host of resources.

### [Rural prosperity resources for state arts agencies](#)

Explore NASSA's Rural Prosperity web page for resources including a literature review covering creative rural development and an SAA factsheet on rural grant making.

## [Rural Prosperity through the Arts & Creative Sector](#)

Produced by the [National Governor's Association](#) through a collaborative project with the NEA and NASAA, this action guide offers research insights and lessons learned from states that are harnessing the power of the arts to drive rural prosperity.

## [Rural Arts, Design, and Innovation in America](#)

This report published by the NEA stems from a research collaboration with the Economic Research Service at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. It analyzes data from the Rural Establishment Innovation Survey to quantify relationships among arts organizations, design-integrated firms and business innovators in rural settings.

## [Citizens' Institute on Rural Design](#)

The Citizens' Institute on Rural Design (CIRD) is a leadership initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with the Housing Assistance Council. CIRD offers resources to small towns and rural and tribal communities with populations of 50,000 or less. The local design workshop program brings together residents, nonprofit leaders, local organizations and government to address a particular design challenge in the community. The design learning cohort selects communities and their leaders from across the country for peer exchange, design assistance and a curriculum that addresses best practices in the design process.

## [Main Street America](#)

Main Street America leads a collaborative movement with partners and grassroots leaders that advances shared prosperity, creates resilient economies, and improves quality of life through place based economic development and community preservation in downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts across the country.

## [Community Heart & Soul](#)

Community Heart & Soul is a resident-driven process that engages the entire population of a town in identifying what they love most about their community, what future they want for it and how to achieve it. Developed and field tested over a decade in partnership with over 120 small cities and towns across America, Community Heart & Soul is a proven process for engaging a community in shaping its future.

## [Creative Placemaking Technical Assistance Interview with John Davis, Reframing the Impossible into Opportunities: Rural Creative Placemaking](#)

Creative Placemaking Technical Assistance's interview with John Davis, executive director of [Warroad RiverPlace](#) in Warroad, Minnesota (population 1,824), discusses the value of local experience and listening to multiple perspectives when it comes to rural community development. Warroad RiverPlace is the first arts and cultural center in the nation to be accessible by boat, kayak, canoe, ice-skate path, snowmobile and cross-country skis.

### [Rural America Placemaking Toolkit](#)

The Rural America Placemaking Toolkit is a resource to identify placemaking projects that align with a community's capacity.

### [Center for Rural Strategies](#)

The Center for Rural Strategies seeks to improve economic and social conditions for communities in the countryside and around the world through the creative and innovative use of media and communications. The center strives to create better opportunities for small towns and rural communities by building coalitions, developing partnerships, leading public information campaigns, and advancing strategies that strengthen connections between rural and urban places.

### [Art of the Rural](#)

Founded in 2010, Art of the Rural resources artists and culture bearers to build the field, change narratives and bridge divides. Initiatives include [the rural-urban exchange program](#), a nationally celebrated creative leadership program using place based cultural exchange to develop the skills, networks, and capacity of rural and urban leaders to bridge divides and make change.

### [Springboard for the Arts Rural Programs](#)

Springboard for the Arts supports artists with the tools to make a living and a life and to build just and equitable communities. The Rural Program supports rural community leaders and organizations to develop local systems and programs that bring artists into critical conversations, engagement and storytelling about the future of small towns, micropolitan cities, tribal communities and other rural regions.

Related publication: [\*Heartland, Heartwork: A Field Guide to Place and Possibility for Rural Leaders\*](#)

### [National Rural Health Association](#)

The National Rural Health Association is a national nonprofit membership organization that brings together thousands of members across the United States. The association's mission is to provide leadership on rural health issues through advocacy, communications education and research.

### [Rural Assembly](#)

Rural Assembly is a program of the Center for Rural Strategies dedicated to championing a movement that celebrates and empowers rural people and places. The organization's goal is to reshape perceptions, foster healing and forge unity in a divided nation by amplifying rural voices through advocacy, partnerships and gatherings.

### [Rural LISC](#)

Rural LISC supports resilient and inclusive rural communities as great places to live, work and innovate. Rural LISC identifies priorities and opportunities and delivers the most appropriate

support to meet local needs through integrated strategies and programs focused on five pillars of rural community development: creative capital, broadband and infrastructure, workforce development, housing, and disaster solutions.

### [Native American Creative Placemaking](#)

This report prepared by the [Housing Assistance Council](#), a national nonprofit that supports affordable housing efforts throughout rural America, explores native American placemaking projects throughout the United States.

### [Strengthening State Arts Agency Relationships with Native Communities](#)

This NASAA report provides state arts agencies insights on working with Indigenous groups, action steps to cultivate relationships, and examples of successful programs and practices adopted by SAAs to serve Native communities.

## For More Information

For more information on cross-sector strategies for creative rural development, contact NASAA Research Director [Mohja Rhoads](#), who researched and wrote this strategy sampler in 2024.

The National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) is a not-for-profit, nonpartisan organization. In collaboration with the nation's 56 state and jurisdictional arts councils, we advance the arts as a powerful path to economic prosperity, rural resilience, good health, education success and strong communities in which everyone thrives. NASAA serves as a clearinghouse for data and research about public funding for the arts as well as the policies and programs of state arts agencies. For more information about NASAA and the work of state arts agencies, visit [www.nasaa-arts.org](http://www.nasaa-arts.org).



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