

Updates

East Central Indiana

Planning for a Vibrant Arts & Culture Future

Progress Update – July 9, 2025

Now that we have passed the project mid-point for Forge ECI's (formerly ECRIP) READI planning process, it is time to update the region on how things are going.

Highlight Reel

Compiling themes and goals from across all eight counties, the following have emerged (not prioritized or finalized). These five will continue to evolve through the remainder of the summer. However, we consider them to provide a top-line structure for the plan.

1. Vibrant Downtowns as Cultural & Economic Hubs

(in 7 of 8 county summaries)

Counties envision their downtowns as revitalized, walkable, mixed-use centers filled with arts, entertainment, food, creative retail, and public art—blending historic preservation with contemporary energy to attract residents, tourists, and businesses.

2. Youth Engagement & Arts Education

(in 6 of 8 county summaries)

Empowering young people through creative programming, leadership roles, and accessible arts education is a shared strategy to build future talent, increase retention, and embed youth in community life and cultural identity.

3. Connected Corridors, Infrastructure & Access

(in 6 of 8 county summaries)

Physical and cultural connectivity – trails, public art, transportation improvements, and regional assets – is used to unify communities, increase access, and promote exploration, wellness, and place-based tourism.

4. Cross-Sector Collaboration & Coordinated Leadership

(in 6 of 8 county summaries)

Unified leadership (often through arts councils or networks), cross-sector planning, and shared communications platforms help maximize resources, strengthen partnerships, and sustain arts and cultural development across communities.

5. Creative Economy & Artist Support

(in 5 of 8 county summaries)

Many counties prioritize growing the creative economy by supporting artists and makers through affordable studio space, business incubators, grants, shared equipment, and expanded markets—positioning the arts as a serious driver of entrepreneurship and economic development.

TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES ART

celebrating the power of arts and culture in community

By the Numbers

Community Engagement

In total, over 300 individuals have registered, participated in, or provided information to the project thus far.

- Kickoff Webinar 99 individuals participated and 10 have viewed the recording
- Community Input 165 participated across the region, 56% coming from the Creative Sector
- Other 48+ have reached out in other ways to ask a question or suggest an asset
- [Website](#) 195 visitors, 549 sessions, and 1,748 page views (project-specific pages)

Cultural Asset Inventories

We have inventoried your assets* with help from the region—in [Felt.com](#) and spreadsheets—including:

- Arts & Creative Sector 484 artists, organizations, groups, businesses, and arts in non-arts spaces
- Pieces of Public Art 518 209 murals, 101 sculptures, 80 utility wraps, 116 barn quilts, 12 'other'
- Related Civic Assets 280 parks, trails, schools, universities, and centers
- Events & Traditions 165 annual festivals, recurring series, and regular events (markets)
- History & Heritage 129 sites, buildings, cemeteries, districts, and historic attractions
- Support Organizations 70 boosters, Main Streets, Chambers, tourism, and local funders
- Misc. Amenities 60 community attractions, craft product producers, and various other
- Relevant Plan/Sources 58 strategic, comprehensive, downtown, parks and recreation, etc.

* Individuals can still send us addition/corrections using the [Google Form](#) or [website contact form](#).

Along the way we expanded project planning contacts from <500 to >1,000 – including >30% arts and culture.

Recent Activity

Since Visioning we've:

- Recapped each session, discussing themes with Forge ECI and project steering committee members;
- Continued asset and strategy research;
- Updated the website so that each county now has a:
 - o [Workbook \(spreadsheets\)](#) with 1) a list of all their assets, 2) a summary by category, 3) a list of the plans/sources that apply to their county, and 4) their participation to date
 - o [Materials \(tab\)](#) with everything from their Community Input Sessions (Agenda, PPT, Recap); and
- Discussed implementation and engagement strategies with stakeholders tied to history/heritage, tourism, local elected officials, community foundations, Main Streets, entrepreneurship, as well as 'College and Community Collaboration' Grant recipients

Along the way:

- Blackford and Jay County plans (started as an NEA Our Town grant) finished and will be released in July.
- [ECIRP rebranded as Forge ECI / Forge East Central Indiana](#).

TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES ART

celebrating the power of arts and culture in community

Next Steps

Forward from here, we:

- Are launching surveys with two stakeholder groups and expect to launch 1-2 more;
- Are meeting with Muncie's Creative Arts Action Plan group (July 9);
- Are convening focus groups with tourism leaders (July 15) history leaders (July 16), and a group of arts organizations toward the end of the month (more coming soon);
- Are meeting with the Forge ECI READI Steering Committee (August 5);
- Are compiling benchmark data for the plan and continuing stakeholder conversations (July), and
- Will begin drafting the plan in August, anticipating a review/revision process in September.

About

The Project

The LEI Arts Planning Initiative, a regional effort aimed at fostering creative transformation through public art and cultural investment.

- About the planning process <https://www.TransformingCommunities.Art/eastcentral>
- About the READI 2.0 Lilly Arts Funding <https://forgeeci.com/lei-grants/>

Contacts

Caitlin Hancock	CHancock@ForgeECI.com
Sara A. Peterson	Peterson@SaraPetersonConsulting.com
Paige Sharp	Paige@SharpVisionarts.com

READI Arts Initiative Goals

Engage residents and communities across boundaries of creative disciplines, geography, and demographics.

Unleash regional creative transformation through investment in public art and cultural amenities that are accessible to the entire community.

Elevate READI's quality of place impact on Indiana's cities and towns.

Build a critical mass of authentic, yet bold, artistic, and cultural assets with a long-term plan for their maintenance and expansion.

For more, see "LEI Grant" at <https://indianareadi.com/resources>

Principles

Planning for a Vibrant Arts & Culture Future

We believe arts planning should be:

1. **Ground-Up.** Regions are comprised of counties, which are comprised of communities, which are people, places, organizations, activities, traditions – we build from the bottom not the top.
2. **Authentic.** Celebrate community history, heritage, stories, and points of pride – its unique cultural identity.
3. **Asset-Based.** Built on the foundation of your strengths – it's the best way to fill in the gaps.
4. **Team Sport.** This is a “yes, and” proposition – It only works with broad collaboration and community engagement – Artists & Culture WITH economic development and planning, education and health care, cities and civic organizations, tourism, and Main Street, et cetera.
5. **Visionary.** We need to think big about a long-term horizon for goals and strategies, not projects – that's where the magic happens.
6. **Interdependent.** Not just aligned with the momentum of existing plans and projects but mutually reinforcing – other plans support Artists & Culture, and Artists & Culture support other plans.
7. **Sustainable.** First, do no harm – Then, make sure what we do can last.
8. **Creative.** We are arts and culture after all and will ARTify / ARTivate all the goals and strategies.
9. **So Much More than Murals.** It's your local artists and creative economy, theaters and museums, arts education for all ages, festivals, and concert series, knitting circles and woodworking clubs, amphitheaters, and bar stages, and so very much more.
10. **Interesting & Fun.** Because that's what Artists & Culture ultimately brings – joy and discovery (and besides, we all need motivation – every great pop song has a hook)

Where does it fit?

If tourism is focused on attracting visitors: what is there to do here?

And development on attracting businesses and jobs: what supports are here?

Both depend on a vibrant quality of life and of place – which is where we come in.

We are focused on individuals, families, the community – what you celebrate, what brings you joy, what is good for your kids and your health, how you express yourselves and develop as full humans.

It isn't just what we are close to

It's who we are and what we have, right here, every day.