



Arts & Culture Plan

2025 – 2035

We Make things Here | The Region

TRANSFORMING
COMMUNITIES • ART
through the power of arts and culture

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Images from Winterfest, Downtown Connersville

EAST CENTRAL, IN

Comprised of Blackford, Delaware, Fayette, Grant, Henry, Jay, Randolph, and Wayne Counties, the region describes itself as offering:

*Unparalleled advantage for businesses looking to grow and thrive.
This region is more than just a dot on the map –
it's a **powerhouse of opportunity** within reach of several major cities.*

Population

The region is home to **5.8% of the state's population**.

For perspective, the ECI region at just over 374,500 residents is **slightly smaller than Hamilton County** (approx. 379,700). It is also more than twice the population of its neighboring region to the south.

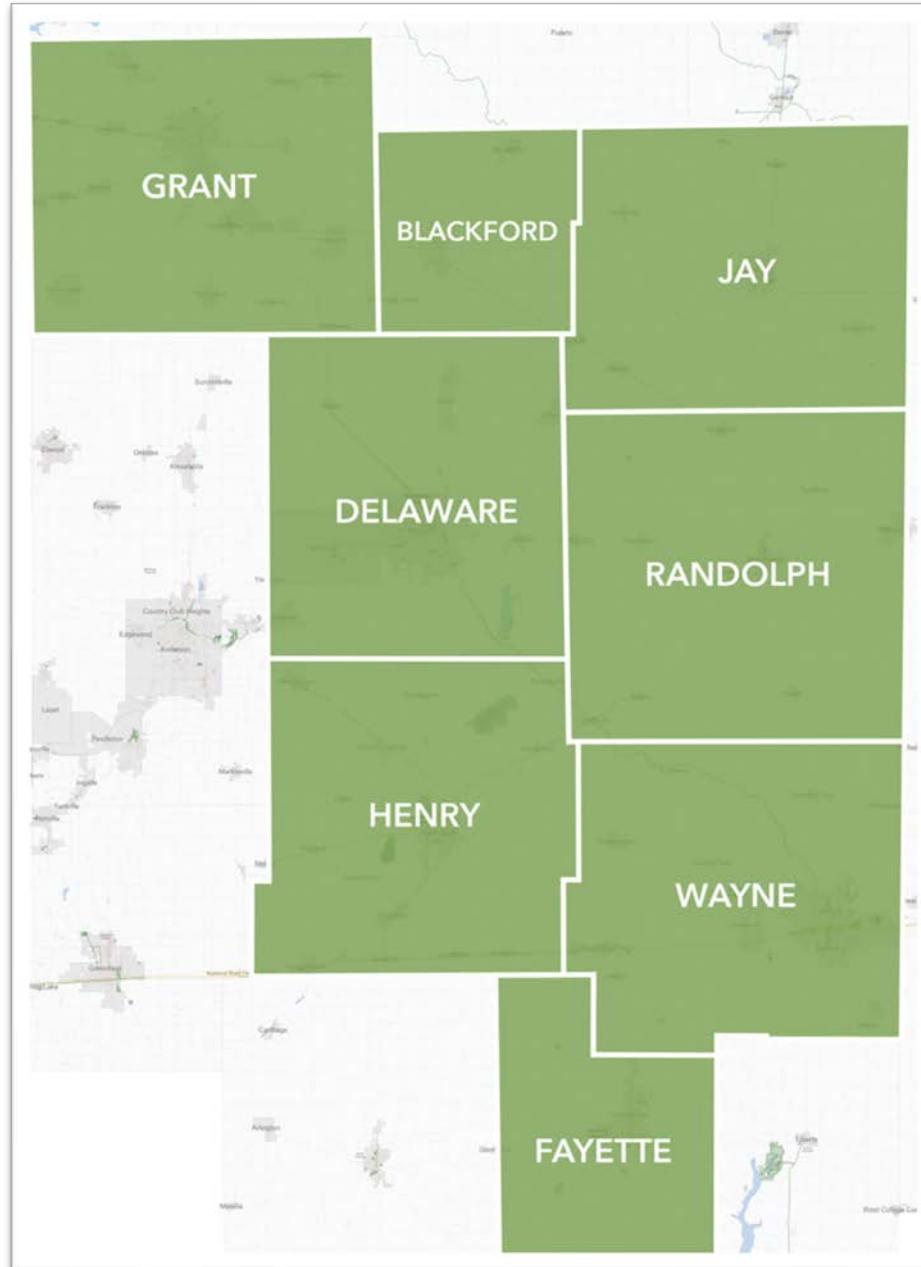
It finds itself in an interesting place between major metropolitan areas:

- Delaware and Henry are in the [Indianapolis-Carmel-Muncie CSA](#)
- Wayne-Fayette are the Richmond-Connersville Metropolitan Area
- Henry is its own Micropolitan area
- Leaving Blackford, Jay, and Randolph as too small or too distant to garner any designation.

Economic Drivers

From an economic development perspective, the region touts its:

- Access to Transportation
- Access to Quality Healthcare
- Dedication to Lifelong Learning & Educational Excellence
- Vital Agriculture Economy
- Strong Manufacturing Legacy



- Outdoor Recreation Opportunities
- Central Location



Key Numbers

The region has **challenges to contend with**.

- **Poverty Rate.** Every county has higher rates than the state.
- **Median Household Income.** All eight counties are in the bottom 30% of Indiana counties for household income. In fact, **5 of the bottom 10 are in this region.**
- **Population Growth.** Population is stagnant-to-shrinking.
- **Median Age.** At the same time regional population is **1-5 YEARS OLDER** than the state with only one exception – Delaware County with a median 2 years younger.

	2020 Census	2020–24 Growth	2024 Median Age	2023 Median Household Income	2023 Poverty Rate
Delaware	111,903	< 1%	36	Co. Rank #86 \$55,704	19%
Grant	66,674	(0.3%)	39	#89 \$53,872	20%
Wayne	66,553	(0.02%)	41	#90 \$52,493	17%
Henry	48,914	0.3%	42	#64 \$62,048	13%
Randolph	24,502	(0.07%)	43	#83 \$58,009	15%
Fayette	23,398	(0.3%)	43	#75 \$60,483	20%
Jay	20,478	(1.5%)	39	#70 \$61,030	13%
Blackford	12,112	(2.4%)	43	#91 \$51,799	16%
ECI REGION	374,534	0.005%	41	\$56,930	Ave. 17%
INDIANA	ECI is 5.8% of IN	2.0%	38	ECI is 82% of \$69,458	12%
NATION	-----	2.6%	39	and 71% of \$80,610	11%

See each county's profile for additional numbers (pages 65-114).

One Region, Eight counties,

5.8%

of the state population



Ball Jars, Ball Corporation, Muncie

“ **Growing places face problems, but these are happy problems.**

Shrinking places also face problems, but they are unhappy problems.

The loss of residents means declining demand for restaurants and grocery stores... fewer well-educated residents to run for city council or school board... a shortage of volunteers. Declining places suffer from higher overhead costs of operating everything.

Population, Service & Professional Needs

With an aging population, the region is on the verge of shrinking. A step further, as a region, East Central Indiana faces critical human capital needs.

- **Legal Deserts.** A [July 2025 report from the Commission on Indiana's Legal Future](#) categorized Blackford, Fayette, Henry, Jay, Randolph, and Wayne Counties as legal deserts (< 1/1,000 residents).
- **Health Professional Shortage Areas.** Every county has at least one [HPSA designation](#). (See also <https://www.indianapca.org/about-chcs/hpsa-mua/>)
- **Banking Deserts.** The [Federal Reserve](#) has identified four banking deserts in Delaware county (each with the closest branch 5-8 miles away) with one potential in Henry.

This region needs active vigilance and in-migration – or more aggressive strategies – to counter-balance age and other risks like these.

Livability

We know that **quality of life** and place drive individual location decisions, and that people go to a place first to find a job later.

Because of this, it is important to understand the region's livability. With many ways of doing this, we chose the [AARP Livability Index](#) for its consistency, depth, and focus on all life cycles.

"AARP employs a variety of survey research to inform [its methodology] to reflect a wide range of preferences for people living at all stages of life.

*Metrics... are scored for each of the **seven livability categories**: Housing, Neighborhood, Transportation, Environment, Health, Engagement, and Opportunity...*

Those communities with more livability-friendly practices earn a score above 50 and those facing obstacles to livability score lower."

According to the 2024 Index, the region's **strongest category is "Engagement"** with a score 17 or more points higher than the U.S. median. Its **weakest category is "Neighborhood"** where none of the counties do well. Grant has the lowest score (U.S. median **-6 points**) and Delaware the highest (U.S. median **+1 point**).

Digging Deeper What comes first, people or jobs?

Today, the conclusion is simple:

“ People are increasingly relocating to and staying in places where they wish to live, and jobs are following.

Places with higher estimated quality of life are associated with higher population growth and in turn higher job growth.

This is true in the Midwest and even more so for rural areas in the Midwest.

[M]ore than a dozen key amenities – including school spending, low crime rates, recreation and arts and culture places, food stores, and personal care places – are associated with quality of life,

They also found that natural amenities, such as moderate temperatures, play a more modest role in quality of life after accounting for the prevalence of recreation businesses.

Together, this work suggests **public, private, and natural amenities are playing a significant role in fostering healthy local economies.**

The Regional Average Compared with U.S. Median Scores

	Region	U.S.	Difference	
Livability Overall Score	49	50	- 1 pt	
The 7 Livability Categories – Ranked				
1. Engagement	64	47	+ 17 pts	2 STRENGTHS with scores above 50 and above the U.S. median
2. Opportunity	60	50	+ 10 pts	
3. Housing	48	59	- 15 pts	
4. Health	48	40	+ 8 pts	5 CHALLENGES with scores below 50 of which 3 are also below U.S. median
5. Transportation	47	44	+ 4 pts	
6. Environment	44	61	- 17 pts	
7. Neighborhood	33	36	- 4 pts	

The Region's Top Strength & Challenge by County

	Delaware	Wayne	Henry	Blackford	Fayette	Randolph	Grant	Jay
Livability Overall Score	51	51	49	49	48	48	48	48
1. Engagement	66	60	73	65	63	62	60	59
7. Neighborhood	37	33	31	32	35	32	30	36

Green boxes highlight each county's highest score. Pink boxes highlight each county's lowest score

Index Scores are based on 61 Indicators (outlined in the Appendix along with county scores for all 7 categories, page 131). Full details are available at [/livabilityindex.aarp.org/methods-sources](https://livabilityindex.aarp.org/methods-sources).

Access to (or lack of) reliable **internet, computing, broadband** is often a dealbreaker for today's mobile workforce. 2022 data put **the region up to 5 points behind Indiana** overall.

% of Households	No Internet	Cell Data Only	Mobile Dev. Only	No Computing Device
Regional Average	14%	16%	22%	10%
Indiana	11%	13%	17%	7%
United States	9%	11%	15%	7%

2017-2022 change, urban/rural differences, and county-by-county details are available in the Appendix, page 132. [Analyzing Indiana's Digital Landscape](https://www.purdue.edu/ruraldev/research/analyzing-indianas-digital-landscape) (Purdue Center for Rural Development, January 2024)

The data shows big gains at both the county and regional level in recent years, but there remain holes to fill in order to maximize resident and business potential.



Community School of the Arts, Marion

Digging Deeper Beyond Connectivity

“ Rural counties with **high broadband adoption rates of over 80%** have significant advantages over those with low usage, including:

- 213% higher Business Growth
- 10% higher Self-Employment Growth
- 44% higher GDP Growth
- 18% higher Per Capita Income Growth

“Broadband is the equalizer in today's economy.”

[Beyond Connectivity: The Role of Broadband in Rural Economic Growth & Resilience](https://www.ruralinnovation.org/beyond-connectivity) (Center on Rural Innovation, September 2024)

Conclusions

Even before looking at the **State of the Arts**, several things are clear:

- The region must **attract families, young people, and professionals** to sustain and grow its population and economy.
- East Central Indiana is a high “**Engagement**” region (AARP) which sets it up well for many of the goals and strategies in this plan.
- It has critical barriers to address in **Health, Housing, Environment, Transportation, and Neighborhoods** (AARP). Of these, the goals and strategies of this plan could have a positive impact on all but health (only because of the measures used for that category). This plan can certainly have a positive impact on community health outside those specific measures.

See [//livabilityindex.aarp.org/methods-sources](http://livabilityindex.aarp.org/methods-sources) for additional details about each category and their measurement indicators.

Recognizing the above, **this plan provides a framework for harnessing the region’s creative assets to improve quality of life, strengthen communities, and support sustainable growth.**



Music for All’s Bands Across America camps, symposiums, and institutes come to Muncie each summer

Forge ECI

East Central Indiana’s Regional Economic Development Organization

Forge ECI fosters economic growth in its nine-county region as the lead economic development marketing and business attraction organization.

Forge ECI works in collaboration with local economic development organizations and the Indiana Economic Development Corporation to attract new investment, support existing industries, and enhance the quality of life, place, and opportunity for all residents. It:

- Coordinates with local economic development organizations (LEDOs)
- Communicates with and educates local officials
- Grows trust throughout the region
- Supports business development through a clear brand that LEDOs can use cooperatively
- Generates leads for key business segments
- Assists with prospect and BR&E strategy
- Works to mitigate local challenges re quality of place and opportunity as a barrier to workforce
- Advances priority projects identified in the Forge Your Path Regional Development Plan



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STATE OF THE ARTS

Overview

This section provides an overview of the region's unique identity, the strengths and weaknesses of its arts and culture sector, and a similar assessment of the supports surrounding that sector.

Arts & Culture Identity

East Central Indiana stands as a testament to American ingenuity, perseverance, and community spirit – a region where extraordinary history continues to shape a vibrant cultural future. Spanning eight counties from the Ohio border west toward Indianapolis, this region has produced some of the world's most recognizable cultural icons while maintaining the authentic character of small-town Indiana life.

A Legacy of Innovation and Industry

The region's identity is inseparable from the transformative Indiana Gas Boom of the late 19th century. The abundant, inexpensive fuel attracted manufacturers who built empires here – most notably the Ball Brothers' glass manufacturing in Muncie (nicknamed the "**Magic City**"), but glass factories flourished throughout. Blackford County alone hosted 15 glass manufacturers in its heyday, drawing skilled craftsmen from Belgium and France, while Jay County's Dunkirk earned the title "**Glass Capital of Indiana**" and Winchester joined in.

The automotive industry further transformed the region. Connersville evolved from the "furniture and buggy town" to "**Little Detroit**" with automobile manufacturing's arrival. Henry County's Maxwell automobile factory was once the nation's largest, while automobile pioneer Elwood Haynes hailed from Jay County. Legacy of this industry persist today through speedways and cruise-ins integrated in events and festivals.

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- Overview
- Arts & Culture Identity
- Creative & Capacity Assets
- Capacity Needs
- Conclusions

“When arts thrive in a community, the community thrives.

– Indiana Arts Commission



Henry County was home to Jesse French & Sons Piano, a significant manufacturer later purchased by Selmer and distinguished itself as **one of the country's first viral sensations** – the Hoosier Cabinet. With over 2 million sold, one in 10 households had them. This prosperity created lasting institutions. Ball State University stands as the most visible legacy, joined by six other universities across the region – together providing significant arts and culture offerings that serve as both educational anchors and cultural drivers.

Cultural Icons of Global Significance

For a predominantly rural region, East Central Indiana has **produced a staggering number of nationally and internationally significant figures**. Garfield creator Jim Davis, talk show legend David Letterman, Hollywood icon James Dean, Hoosier Group painter J. Ottis Adams, internationally renowned choreographer Twyla Tharp, fashion designer Angel Chang, and artist Robert Indiana (whose iconic LOVE sculpture is replicated – twice – in New Castle's Arts Park) all claim roots here. Aviation pioneer Wilbur Wright, astronaut Kevin Ford, and basketball legend Steve Alford add further dimension, while Mrs. Wicks gives us pies.

Richmond's distinction as the "**birthplace of recorded jazz**" through Gennett Records – which recorded Louis Armstrong, Hoagy Carmichael, and other jazz and blues legends – reveals how this region has consistently punched above its weight in cultural influence. Union City gave the world The McCoys and their rock classic "*Hang on Sloopy*." Henry County inspired the novel and movie "*Raintree County*," while Knightstown's Hoosier Gym achieved immortality in the film "*Hoosiers*." And Muncie was the fictional setting for "*Close Encounters of the Third Kind*" ([50th anniversary approaching in 2027](#)).

Heritage Rooted in Freedom and Tradition

The region's cultural identity extends deep into its foundational heritage. **Miami Indian ancestry** remains honored through sites like the 25-foot sculpture in Montpelier and the Godfroy Reserve.

Quaker settlements in Wayne and Randolph Counties established a legacy of abolitionist activism, with the Underground Railroad playing a significant role. The Union Literary Institute – founded in 1846 as **one of Indiana's first integrated schools** – and the Levi and Catharine Coffin State Historic Site symbolize enduring values of education and equality. The region's racial history includes difficult chapters alongside stories of progress – experiences that communities continue to acknowledge as part of their evolving identity.

Cross Sector Strategies for Creative Rural Development

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

Rural economic resiliency is 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.



Strategy Sampler
National Association of State Arts Agencies, 2025

Asset Highlights

Fiber includes artists and trades (e.g., tailoring), suppliers (e.g., sheep and goat farms), shops, groups, exhibits, competitions, and festivals are vibrant in the region

There is a core of creative businesses that every community seems to need and support.

Every county has at least one **Photography** and one **Dance** studio. If we looked closely, we'd find the same for **Florists**.

Amish communities across the region (as many as 2,700 Hoosiers in 28 congregations, www.tharda.com) add another cultural dimension, preserving traditions of craftsmanship, agriculture, and faith that enrich the regional tapestry. **Even notorious history** found its way here: Dillinger made his mark and the Brady Gang robbed the Farmland, Indiana branch of the Peoples Loan and Trust Company, capturing a slice of outlaw lore.

A Culture of Performance and Pride

Basketball isn't just a sport in East Central Indiana – it's woven into regional identity. Henry County houses the world's largest high school fieldhouse and the Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame, while its connection to "**Hoosiers**" and Steve Alford reinforces this identity.

Performance culture extends beyond the court. Fayette County claims the first high school band in the country. In New Castle, show choir and band are central to community life, with the high school's Bundy Auditorium serving as THE performance venue – a reminder that school facilities often anchor cultural life.

This is a **region of contrasts**: cities adjusting to global manufacturing shifts revitalizing alongside thriving agriculture, rural communities with easy access to metropolitan areas. From those contrasts come a spirit of collective action and shared purpose. "Stronger together" represents both current work and future vision as the region's eight counties build connections across boundaries, university and hometown cultures, past and future.

This commitment manifests in **impressive cultural infrastructure**: arts organizations across every county, over 500 documented public art pieces region-wide, the 62-mile rail trail Cardinal Greenway connecting communities, and countless festivals celebrating local traditions. The region's extraordinary history of industry, innovation, and entrepreneurship – the very forces that produced globally significant cultural icons – now provides the foundation for a vibrant arts and culture future built on collaboration and shared identity.

Creative & Capacity Assets

While the sector could greatly benefit from capacity building programs, services, and networking, there are key strengths and a creative sector backbone in each county.

Asset Highlights East Central Indiana Artisans

The region has 17 designees

Delaware

[Carol Burt](#), Clay
[David Calvin](#), Wood
[Brian Gordy](#), Painting
[Jan McCune](#), Jewelry
[Carrie Wright](#), Fiber



Fayette

[Tracy Burns](#), Fiber

Henry

[Terry Dukeman](#), Clay
[Kerry Moncrieff](#), Leather

Grant

[Janet Webb](#), Jewelry

Randolph

[Wayne Gaydos](#), Stringed Instruments
[Tim Passmore](#), Wood
[Martin Price](#), Clay
[Carol Strock Wasson](#), Painting

Wayne

[Dan Sims](#), Glass

Food & Beverage Delaware

[Tonne Winery](#), Beverages
[John Tom's BBQ](#), Sauces & Syrups

Wayne

[Abbott's Candies](#), Sweets



What is Indiana Artisan?

Indiana Artisan is a statewide nonprofit that elevates a curated network of makers as standard-bearers for Indiana's creative community. It supports artisan entrepreneurs through marketing, retail opportunities, education, and peer networking to help them grow their businesses.

Cultural Asset Inventory By the Numbers

Category	Blackford	Delaware	Fayette	Grant	Henry	Jay	Randolph	Wayne	Total
Public Art	11	171	75	32	19	14	67	119	508
Artist/Creative Bus.	13	77	18	47	30	17	23	39	264
History & Heritage	5	43	10	26	19	17	13	45	178
Events & Traditions	15	31	12	23	28	27	12	20	168
Art in Non-Art Spaces	6	32	4	28	11	15	9	16	121
Informal Arts Group	—	13	5	29	3	3	1	2	56
Nonprofit Arts	5	17	2	7	3	4	7	9	54
Discipline & Form									
Music & Related	6	37	5	45	14	6	3	13	129
Visual Arts	4	37	8	25	7	9	14	25	129
Traditional Craft	4	22	9	4	10	8	10	12	79
Design	2	9	1	6	1	4	3	2	28
Theater & Related	—	5	3	7	4	3	2	2	26
Literary Arts	1	9	2	1	4	1	—	7	25
Dance	1	8	1	4	2	1	1	5	23
Film	1	1	—	5	2	—	—	1	10
Location Type									
Venue	1	12	1	10	5	6	2	9	46
Museum	—	8	3	9	4	5	1	14	44
Retail	2	13	4	2	3	7	3	4	38
Library	2	7	1	8	4	3	5	5	35
Center/Coop/Council	3	5	1	5	1	2	5	1	23
History Society/Club	4	4	1	4	1	3	3	2	22
Support Entities									
Friends & Volunteers	4	4	2	3	3	6	5	7	34
Economic Develop.	6	3	1	4	4	2	3	2	25
Foundation / Funder	1	6	1	3	1	1	1	4	18
Professional Network	1	5	1	1	1	2	1	2	14
Local Media or Club	1	3	2	1	1	3	1	2	14
Tourism / CVB	—	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	7
Miscellaneous									
Parks/Trails (inc. Tourism)	10	17	12	29	27	9	24	24	152
K-16 Education	4	36	8	29	18	6	15	29	145
Historic Districts	1	11	1	5	3	2	4	9	36
Craft Products	4	6	—	1	4	11	2	1	29
Other Attractions	2	3	2	—	4	2	2	1	16

Detail in the Appendix, pages 134-135

About The Cultural Asset Inventory

The cultural asset inventory is a compilation of as many of the arts and culture assets as possible within the project's desk research and crowdsourcing. ***It is not about "regional" assets but rather assets in the region.***

It is incomplete, and that is okay. Errors are a byproduct. Almost by definition, any asset inventory like this will be incomplete. Information is always incomplete; someone is always moving; something is always changing. Someone (or several ones) will be missing and may even be wrong.

Readers may argue with categories. That's okay too. ***The purpose is less about perfection than about identifying opportunity to build from.***

With that in mind, the cultural asset inventory should be considered ***a living, working tool for communities and the region.***

- What is a [Cultural Asset](#)?
- Here are [the inventory sheets for each county](#)
- Here is the [interactive map online](#).



Need help with the categories?

See Methodology in the Appendix for details about how this inventory was compiled, what is (or isn't) included in it, and a few caveats about it.

For the table here, a few of the categories are broader than they may seem at first glance. For instance, the following include:

Visual Arts includes two-dimensional (e.g., painting, photography, tattoo) art and sculpture

Traditional Crafts include ceramics, fiber, glass, jewelry, leather, metal, and wood

Design includes graphic, web, interior, and other designers as well as architects, and SWAG shops (e.g., embroidered sweatshirts)

Economic Development includes local organizations such as Main Street, Beautification, and Downtown Revitalization

Venues include indoor, outdoor, public- and private-owned

Backbone. Every county in the region has at least some form of arts infrastructure (creative sector backbone) – whether formal or informal – providing a strong base to build upon. While every county has elements of a creative backbone – anchor arts organization, spaces, and outlets for artists, the presence and strengths of those assets vary across the region. The box to the right highlights the region’s Creative Backbone.

Anchors. In addition, the region’s creative sector has anchors providing capacity and strength.

- **Universities:** The region’s universities (Ball State, Bethany, Earlham, Indiana Wesleyan, Ivy Tech, IU East, Purdue Polytechnic, Taylor) provide access to high quality education, creative opportunities, and facilities including faculty across arts disciplines, performing arts groups and student performers, venues and exhibit halls, regularly scheduled events, and a local market for supplies. Some of the region’s signature events and arts anchors are embedded on those campuses (e.g., David Owsley Museum of Art, Marilyn Glick Center for Glass, Phillippe Performing Arts Center, Taylor Music Theatre Camp, and more).
- **Performing Arts:** While universities provide access to opportunities and signature performance venues, communities in all counties have invested in indoor and/or outdoor venues to host live music. In counties without a university presence, high schools help address this gap. Live music is also hosted across the county in taverns, bars, and outdoor amphitheaters.
- **Libraries** are also key contributors to the creative space by providing creative programming (book clubs, arts and crafts workshops, lectures, performances, community art exhibits, etc.) for all ages and serving as a convenor and partner. In some cases, they serve as a place-based attraction: the Hartford City Public Library in Blackford County recently opened their outdoor Nature Play Park attracting all ages to interact and engage. The outdoor space also includes an area for small musical performances.
- **Individual artists, teachers, makers, and their businesses.** While asset mapping identified 272 artists / creative businesses, there’s no doubt many more exist. Individual artists and creative businesses frequently do not include their local address presumably because there’s a concern they won’t be taken as seriously as those from larger areas.
- In addition, there are numerous arts and craft festivals, non-arts markets with vendor opportunities, groups, and private studios.

Backbone Highlights

3 counties have **government created or endorsed** arts councils (intermediary or policy entities), though two are either defunct or largely inaccessible to the public.

- [Hartford City Arts Council](#), Blackford
- [MuncieArts & Yorktown Council for the Arts](#), Delaware
- [Marion Arts Commission](#), Grant

4 have largely volunteer **member-driven associations** with classes, exhibits, and artist supports.

- [Whitewater Valley Arts Association](#), Fayette
- [Grant County Art Association & Fusion Arts Alliance](#)
- [Arts in Union City Alliance](#), Randolph

All 8 have local arts **centers or community art schools** – are staffed hubs similar to the above with broader program offerings, often with performing arts.

- [Arts Place](#) in both Jay and Blackford
- [Cornerstone Center for the Arts](#), Delaware
- [Imagine Performing Arts](#), Fayette
- [Community School for the Arts](#), Grant
- [Art Association of Henry County](#)
- [Art Association of Randolph County & Start with Art](#)
- [Oblivion Cinema & Arts](#), Wayne

5 have additional formal **artist co-ops, guilds, or studio** rental spaces. There are also informal groups in each county where individuals practice their art as a community. This is an area for the region to build.

Businesses sell local art in all 8. Many are coffee or gift shops, but [1 has a full gallery with representation](#).

- 5 with quilt shops and/or fiber farms
- 4 with stores for musicians
- 2 with independent book/comic book shops
- 2 with makers markets
- All in addition to the artists who sell from their studios or storefronts. In some places, artists rent booths in antique malls to sell their work.

Even so, artists report needing access to retail space.

Support Structures. The state of the arts depends heavily on the support structures in place, which means that we have to understand those functions and sectors in order to understand the creative sector. Below are a few of the most important supports for this plan and its implementation.

- **Economic development** across East Central Indiana is in transition, shifting toward community development approaches while experiencing significant turnover – four of eight counties saw leadership changes in 2025 alone. This state of flux, combined with limited staffing in some areas, makes strategic progress more difficult to sustain.
- **Tourism and destination management** face capacity challenges throughout the region. One county lacks tourism infrastructure entirely, while others maintain limited programs or embed tourism within economic development roles. Some counties focus primarily on traditional metrics around major attractions rather than the broader engagement approach of becoming known as places locals love first, which naturally attracts nearby neighbors and visitors. Overall, the region would benefit from better county-to-county connections and access to modern tools like aggregator calendars, mobility data, and updated digital strategies.
- **Main Street programs and downtown improvement initiatives** vary across the region—some are volunteer-led while others, like New Castle, demonstrate what well-structured programs can accomplish with proper support.
- **Purdue Extension** is an active source of support and capacity building in every county.

Capacity Needs

Functional Needs. While the sector has a strong base, it struggles in key functional areas:

- **Staffing.** Many of the arts and culture nonprofits (including the historic societies) are all-volunteer organizations. This isn't always a choice. Some have been unable to hire or keep staff – struggling to find candidates (especially younger ones) able to move organizations forward, maintain funding for a position, or keep volunteers after a hire.
- **Connections.** As connected as smaller communities tend to be, the sector often lacks the relationships it needs for success – both within the creative sector and across to others. In focus groups and most visioning sessions, participants realized they'd never met together and promised to start meeting in the future recognizing the potential.

Asset Highlights >>500 Pieces of Public Art

MURALS

Well over 100 in [Wayne](#) alone

UTILITY WRAPS/BOXES & BARN QUILTS

80	Wraps in Muncie and counting
64	Quilts in Fayette + 47 in Randolph

MULTIPLES

33	Garfield Statues (14 Grant, 17 Delaware)
16	Pamela Bliss Murals
7	Bicentennial Bisons
6	New-Deal Murals
4	E. M. Viquesney Doughboys

ARTISTS & FABRICATORS

200+ identified, including pieces by:

Girl Scouts • Boys & Girls Clubs • Foundation Staff • High School Classes • Local Associations • Grand-kids & Family • 100+ not-yet-attributed



- **Relationships.** The sector needs strong working relationships with key support entities. Primary among these are tourism, Main Street, economic development, and planning. They need the kind of relationships where one can call the other and ask hard questions as trusting colleagues, where they can negotiate each other's needs easily.
- **Marketing.** Marketing was consistently cited as a key weakness – needing to cross-promote, identify new strategies, understand current trends and practices, and improve effectiveness. The sector needs training, partnerships, and resources to have effective social media campaigns, modern websites, media relationships, branded collaterals, representation in aggregator sites, better storytelling, and placement in tourism magazines, etc. Right now, most lack the capacity to make this happen.
- **A Place at the Table.** Overall, the Creative Sector needs a seat at the table in City Hall, the county building, economic development, Main Street, and more. Until they are included, many of the goals and strategies in this plan will struggle.

Funding Needs. Arts & Culture Funding is the number one most cited need, and that **support is needed for current operations, leveling up capacity, and deferred maintenance** before building new capital or programming. This is becoming truer in the current environment of uncertain, shrinking, and disappearing public funding.

Taken a step further, it is important to note that some of the region's counties feel this even more than others. SMU DataArts Arts Vibrancy Index (*below*) highlights some of those differences among the region's counties. For example, there's a **significant difference in "Public Support" between Delaware's 75 and Henry's 44, not to mention Fayette's score of 13.**

Indices (Percentile)	Delaware	Henry	Grant	Wayne	Jay	Randolph	Blackford	Fayette
Arts Vibrancy Score	84	67	59	49	48	38	28	20
Component Scores								
1. Arts Providers	50	82	38	79	43	52	24	54
2. Arts Dollars	64	89	80	49	39	49	60	36
3. Public Support	75	44	57	49	55	34	26	13

Detail in the Appendix, page 133

In the chart that follows, analysis of state and federal arts-related grants shows fewer federal dollars reaching East Central Indiana. Making up **5.8% of the state's population**, it has received a proportional per capita share of state arts funding and funds managed by the state agency. However, it has been able to **attract less than 3% of federal program dollars** coming to the state.

Your Ideas View from the Survey

“ We need to be as pragmatic as possible without starting initiatives that can't be sustained,

and focus on saving irreplaceable community treasures that could otherwise disappear.

I like the regional approach presented if we can leverage dwindling resources to cross-promote activities and share equipment, expertise, etc.

Many of this region's **groups operate on shoestring** budgets. Quite a few are all-volunteer driven and in **danger of volunteer burnout**, failing during leadership transitions, they need help with planning a year or two into the future instead of just surviving, etc.

It would be helpful to have a **steady resource to turn to** for small tasks when an organization (or an individual artist) doesn't have the funds or the need to hire a full-time employee but just needs a little bit of support occasionally with marketing, accounting, legal skills outside their realm of expertise.

Individual response from the regional survey used to provide feedback on the plan's vision, goals, and strategies.



Of the total arts-related funding, 39% came from covid-related funding.

Grant Programs	Total Grants Made to IN	Received by ECI Region	% of Total IN
IAC	2019-24	\$ 22,066,309	\$ 1,278,464 5.79%
ARPA & CARES via IAC	2021-22	\$ 10,873,582	\$ 626,122 5.76%
SVOG	2021	\$139,090,261	\$ 1,362,964 0.98%
NEA	2019-24	\$ 13,198,447	\$ 205,000 1.55%
NEH	2019-24	\$ 19,330,299	\$ 898,625 4.65%
IMLS	2019-24	\$ 29,110,349	\$ 722,457 2.48%

Detail in the Appendix, page 136

Community foundations are the most important sources of grant funding for the creative sector across the region. The only exception is Delaware County where private foundations provide an additional \$4M to arts and culture each year.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that community foundations are key drivers behind much of what the region has today.



Raintree Children's Choir, New Castle



Union City Art Hub



Need help with the abbreviations?

STATE AGENCY PROGRAMS
IAC Indiana Arts Commission

FEDERAL COVID-RELIEF PROGRAMS

ARPA American Rescue Plan
CARES Coronavirus Aid, Relief, & Economic Security
SVOG Shuttered Venue Operators Grant

FEDERAL AGENCY PROGRAMS

IMLS Institute of Museum and Library Services
NEA National Endowment for the Arts
NEH National Endowment for the Humanities

Conclusions

The Importance of Investment. Years of limited investment across East Central Indiana have created accumulated challenges around maintenance and infrastructure in smaller communities and smaller counties. Historically, state funding has primarily gone to large-scale projects, major institutions, and high-density population areas. At the same time, small communities often lack the capacity to pursue competitive grants, particularly when they cannot meet match requirements or manage federally sourced funds. Most arts nonprofits – especially smaller ones – have little to no access to state funding beyond arts-specific opportunities for several reasons. As a result, opportunity for growth is limited and gaps in cultural programming exist across the region.

The Importance of Local Leadership One of the most notable observations across the region is the impact of local leadership. Communities with leaders who bring an abundance mindset, ambition for positive change, and authentic connections to act consistently show stronger momentum. Curiosity, creative problem-solving skills, and field expertise make a meaningful difference. This aligns with the Forge ECI regional development plan's identification of "*Engaged Citizens with Positive Outlooks*" as a key opportunity for the region.

The Downsides of Competition. Competition between communities can sometimes work against shared progress. Smaller towns and larger ones may feel at odds as they navigate changes like school consolidations and hospital mergers. County-focused boundaries – whether in council directives or funding approaches – can limit opportunities for collaboration. County seat leaders may assume their amenities serve everyone, while residents of other communities prefer local access. These patterns reflect understandable pressures but can prevent the region from leveraging collective strengths.

The Importance of Collaboration & Scaffolding. The path forward involves embracing collaboration and recognizing how progress builds upon itself.

A "*State of the Arts*" assessment naturally emphasizes broader community factors because the arts thrive when supported by strong infrastructure and collaborative relationships with all sectors on both the county and regional level. Gaps in areas like small grant programs, tourism partnerships, shared resources, and broadband affect everyone, including cultural organizations. Addressing these foundational needs creates conditions for growth. By investing thoughtfully, nurturing leadership, fostering collaboration over competition, and building regional connections, East Central Indiana can create an environment where all communities and their cultural assets flourish.

Digging Deeper into Local Leaders Take Note

Openness is a pathway for positive change, growth, and momentum.

“ Openness to new ideas makes the difference. The world is changing around all of us, and Iowa State University has been studying what characteristics help communities facing change. They followed 99 small towns for over 20 years. In that time, those towns experienced every kind of change you can name. Some lost a manufacturer; others gained a new business. Some lost a local school, some had big growth in their schools. Some were hit by natural disasters, others were not.

No matter what happened or didn't happen, the towns that came through it the best were the ones that were open to new ideas.

Those were the towns that saw "better economic and demographic outcomes" no matter what change threw at them. ISU Professor David Peters said, "They realize no one is coming to save their town. If their town was going to survive and have a future it was going to be up to them." It's that openness to new ideas that boosts our resilience."

Becky McCray, *The Idea Friendly Guide*. (2025)



Detail from Super Nova, Carrie Wright Silks

DEFINING SUCCESS

Vision 2035

County by county and then together as a region this process asked East Central Indiana to imagine a Vibrant Arts & Culture Future for itself – one that embraces an **"Arts and"** approach. It builds from the region's extraordinary history and its foundation of industry, innovation, and entrepreneurship – a combination that produced some of the most well-known cultural icons in the world. The aspiration that emerged describes an East Central region circa 2035 in which:

The Arts are a Thriving, Vital Force

shaping regional connection and resilience.

Downtowns – of every size – are Vibrant Cultural & Economic Hubs. They are revitalized, walkable, centers filled with public art, entertainment, food, and creative retail – a blend of historic preservation with contemporary energy attracts residents, visitors, and business.

The Next Generation is Engaged, Empowered & Educated through the Arts. Creative programming, leadership roles, and accessible arts education have fed talent pipelines, increased retention of the region's youth, and embedded them in community life.

The Region's Mosaic of Communities are Physically & Culturally Connected. Cultural trails, public art, regional initiatives, and design have unified communities, increased access to cultural assets, and promoted exploration and place-based tourism.

Cross-Sector Partnership Drives Arts & Culture Success. Coordinated leadership, planning, and shared communications have maximized resources, strengthened partnerships, and catalyzed arts and culture development throughout.

The Creative Sector is Growing in Strength & Impact. The sector is an effective partner in innovation and prosperity because the region supports and incentivizes artists, creative businesses, and nonprofits as a valued industry. Because...

We Make Things Here –

Forging a Creative Path for East Central Indiana.

Forge ECI
2021 Regional Development Plan

ALIGNING VISIONS

"Arts and" recognizes that arts and culture are not separate, but integral to efforts in economic development, tourism, community development and vitality, activating parks, education, and more. Implementation depends on leaders across these sectors working together, with arts and culture seen as a key ingredient for shared success.

This plan fully embraces the region's vision for economic development, its aspiration to be:

"A welcoming region in which new and existing residents are invited to be their authentic selves and create a life that matters. Backed by community resources, residents are empowered to forge their own path to success. There are three elements that serve as the backbone for East Central Indiana's vision:

- A Mosaic of Communities,
- Innovative Eds & Meds Institutions, and
- Amenities that Enable Residents to Thrive.

These three elements encapsulate the region's strengths, while also providing a focus for the future."

The arts and culture vision here works hand in glove with that aspiration, ensuring regional success.

In the pages that follow, readers will see that alignment in action. Goal, strategy, and outcome excerpts from Forge ECI's plan in boxes like this highlight those connections.



This also aligns with plans reviewed from communities across the region. (See Methodology in Appendix, pages 139-146.)

Measuring Success

Because this work is part of READI 2.0 and framed by the LEI Arts & Culture Initiative gift, their **Quality of Place** goals will inform success measures long after those initiatives end. But success for this plan should be more targeted to local needs. ***This plan belongs to the entire region.*** Every community across the region comes to this plan from a different place – with different assets, resource levels, capacity, expertise, and authentic identity. Because of this, the plan assumes that key stakeholders and organizations in each community, as well as Forge ECI, will:

1. Periodically Re-Prioritize this Plan's Goals & Strategies
2. Develop Appropriate Action Plans for Implementation
3. Set Developmental Benchmarks and Plans for Measuring Success considering:
 - a. **Arts & Culture Output Documentation**
Any activity tied to any of the plan goals or strategies, engagement of community in the process, and capacity built toward plan goals should be documented and tracked.
 - b. **Arts & Culture Outcome Measures – Proposed**
Each goal in this plan includes a list of proposed success measures – indicators to consider in setting targets toward vision achievement. The region and each community should set benchmarks and steppingstones applicable to their vision for success.
 - c. **Existing Success Measures – Forge ECI Benchmarks**
Because the Arts & Culture plan supports the Forge ECI Regional Development Plan, it should positively impact those goals and target benchmarks .
 - Attracting and Retaining Population
 - Increasing Degree Attainment
 - Building Housing Units
 - Boosting per Capita Income
 - Increasing Business Start Ups

Implementation Support

This plan includes a toolkit of ideas and inspiration drawn from national and local examples to spark creativity and show what's possible (*beginning on page 115*). These resources align directly with goals and are designed to deepen understanding, build confidence, and equip leaders with the tools they need to translate ideas into action.

Forge ECI

2021 Regional Development Plan

ALIGNING OUTCOMES

Regional economic development targets are:

- 1. STABILIZE THE POPULATION**
Increase the annual regional growth rate to 0% or higher... [T]his requires attracting or retaining 1,500 people across the region each year.
- 2. INCREASE EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT**
Boost educational attainment in the region by enabling an additional 1,300 people to obtain a bachelor's degree or higher each year. This will result in 25% of residents holding such a degree.
- 3. PROMOTE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT**
Build at least 7,200 housing units across the region by 2031, including 3,000 housing units with READI support.
- 4. SUPPORT LIVELIHOODS**
Boost the regional per capita personal income by \$22,043, which would represent a 47% increase over the course of the decade.
- 5. FOSTER INNOVATION**
Encourage filing of 100 additional business applications each year across the region (a 45% increase in new business applications).



This is the Place Mural by Addeline Griswold (pictured), Marion

GOALS & STRATEGIES

Introduction

This section begins with an overview of the six goals and how key priorities align with the regional development plan

From there forward, each goal is presented in detail – with strategies, tactics, proposed measurement indicators, and a clear presentation of its alignment with the regional development plan. Along the way are resources, recommended tools, and first steps for implementation. There are even three BIG IDEAs for supersizing implementation and impact as a region.



Mobile Art Studio
Real Art. Real Learning. Right Where You Are.

Program of the Art Association of Randolph County

Plan Guide

While each priority, goal and strategy is intended to be regional in scope, they should be implementable at regional, county, and community levels.



Reminders to the reader.
Each of the priorities, goals and strategies in the Arts & Culture plan are intended to be regional in scope, implemented at regional, county, and community levels.

Residents across the region were asked to prioritize goals and strategies through an online survey.

The ones they chose are marked with 

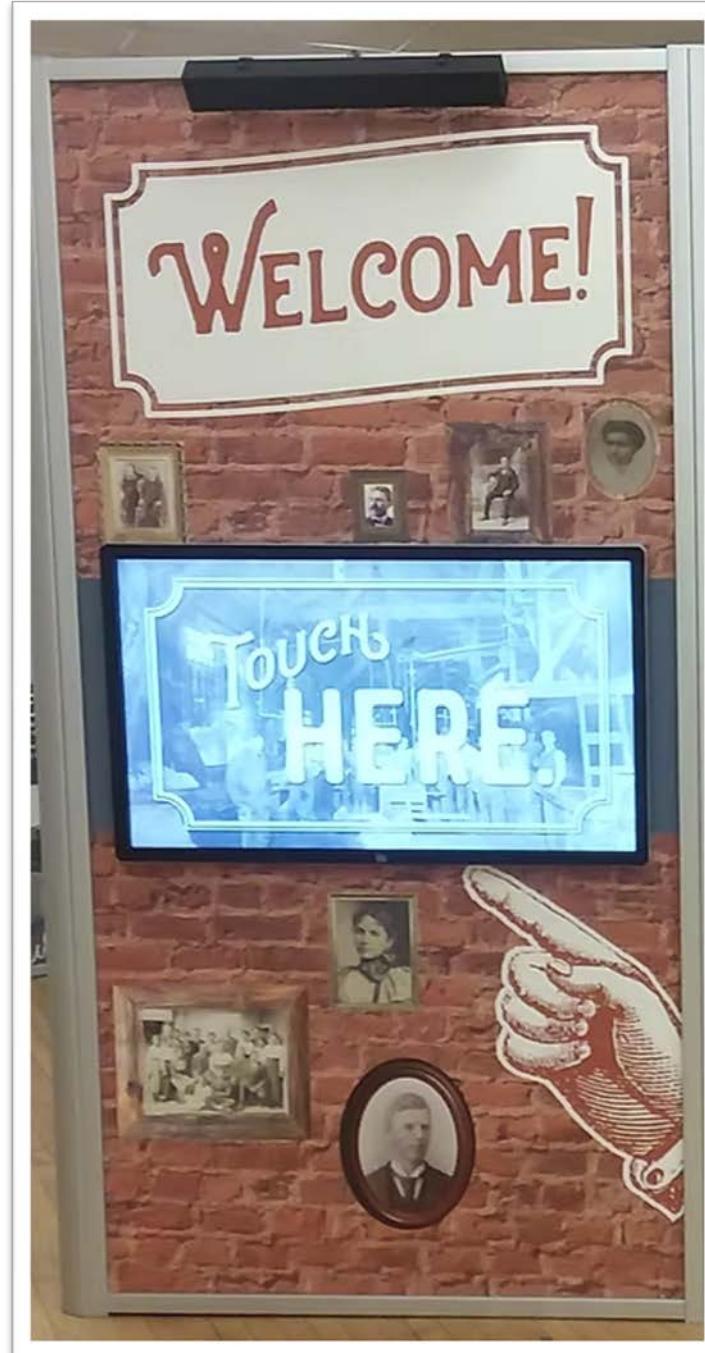
Document Color Coding

priority • **priority** • **priority**

big ideas • **counties** • **appendix** • **everything else**

Overview of Goals by Priority Area

priority PLACE & IDENTITY	<p>1. ACTIVATE DOWNTOWNS Activate and revitalize downtowns – of every size – through arts, culture, and local heritage. Filled with public art, entertainment, food, and creative retail they become Cultural Hubs – blending historic preservation with contemporary energy to attract residents, visitors, and business.</p> <p>2. CONNECT COMMUNITIES Leverage Cultural Identity & Creative Experiences (e.g., public art trails, regional program, and wayfinding) to increase access to cultural assets, unify communities, and promote exploration and place-based tourism.</p>
priority ATTACHMENT & OPPORTUNITY	<p>3. DEEPEN NEXT GENERATION ATTACHMENT Invest in initiatives with and for next generation – expanding access to arts programming and education, increasing participation, and opening pathways to creative careers. Deeply engaging the next generation in a vibrant Cultural Life will feed talent pipelines while increasing resident and college student retention across the region.</p> <p>4. GENERATE BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY Position Artists & Creative Businesses for success within the local and regional economy. Generate opportunities with, by, and for artists, creative entrepreneurs, and cultural nonprofits through training, workforce development, and material supports needed to grow in strength and impact.</p>
priority LEADERSHIP & COLLABORATION	<p>5. MOBILIZE, COLLABORATE & COMMUNICATE Collaborate to advance Cultural Development & Regionalism. Systemize collaboration and communication among leaders to align planning, build networks, share resources, and create joint programs to strengthen the region's collective capacity for long-term cultural growth.</p> <p>6. FORMALIZE SUSTAINABLE COMMITMENTS Hardwire Arts & Culture Strategy into governance, economic development, funding, and civic frameworks. Embedding arts and culture into plans and policies will ensure their sustainable visibility, investment, and impact.</p>



History Center at Marion Public Library

Goal Alignment

While the Arts & Culture Plan goals are an imperfect match with those in the regional development plan, the two plans align in key themes, strategies, and metrics (*described on the coming pages*). Three overarching regional priorities each supported by two goals, provide a balanced framework that addresses the core needs of every focus area. Similarly, Forge ECI's development plan includes four regional goals (*box right*).

Arts & Culture Priorities	Regional Development Plan
Place & Identity	<p>Directly aligned: Quality of Life Supporting key outcomes related to: Population Stabilization, Livelihoods, & Innovation</p>
Attachment & Opportunity	<p>Directly aligned: Education & Opportunity Supporting key outcomes related to: Population Stabilization, Educational Attainment, Livelihoods & Innovation</p>
Leadership & Collaboration	<p>Directly aligned with vision backbone: Amenities that Enable Residents to Thrive, enabling all regional outcome targets</p>



Montpelier Storefront Murals

Forge ECI

2021 Regional Development Plan

ALIGNING GOALS

The region's four economic development goals are:

1. QUALITY OF LIFE

Stabilize our region's population and encourage growth through investments that directly benefit the health and well-being of residents, promote tourism, and support vibrant downtowns.

2. HOUSING & INFRASTRUCTURE

Stimulate the development of quality housing in the region to create thriving neighborhoods that appeal to both current and future residents.

3. CHILDCARE & SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES

Position the region as a great place to raise a family, and attract employers seeking a robust workforce, by investing in quality, affordable childcare.

4. EDUCATION & OPPORTUNITY

Enhance the upward mobility of residents and promote regional prosperity by developing talent, supporting innovation, and attracting well-paying jobs to the region.



Reminder to the reader.

Each of the priorities, goals and strategies in the Arts & Culture plan are intended to be regional in scope, implemented at regional, county, and community levels.

ACTIVATE DOWNTOWNS

goal 7



Activate and revitalize downtowns – of every size – through arts, culture, and local heritage. Filled with public art, entertainment, food, and creative retail they become **Cultural Hubs** – blending historic preservation with contemporary energy to attract residents, visitors, and business.

Alignment with Regional Development Plan

Forge ECI's Quality of Life goal focuses on six strategies (box right).

Activate Downtowns directly addresses all but the last of these, prioritizing Arts, Culture & Community.

At the same time, it sets the stage for success achieving population stabilization as well as increases in livelihoods and in innovation for the region.

Success Measures – Proposed

- Façade, alley, and streetscape improvements completed
- Resident survey results show increased pride in downtown
- Increased number of programs
- Underused/vacant properties activated as cultural assets
- Increased foot traffic and increased tourism



Defining Downtowns

As used in this plan, downtowns include everything down to the two-block Main Street in a town of 200.

Forge ECI
2021 Regional Development Plan

QUALITY OF LIFE

This regional goal includes strategies intended to:

- 1. MARKET** existing regional attractions and encourage the development of new arts and culture, recreation, retail, and culinary destinations.
- 2. REVITALIZE** historic downtowns through façade, structure, and streetscape improvements, as well as the introduction of new businesses, including nightlife.
- 3. ADVOCATE** for the preservation of existing rural health services.
- 4. ENHANCE** pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure to encourage healthy lifestyles and provide alternative transportation options.
- 5. ENHANCE** existing parks and trails and consider opportunities to develop new outdoor recreation amenities.
- 6. EXPAND** access to mental health resources and to drug and alcohol rehabilitation services in the region.





Goal 1 Strategies

7.1 Enhance through Identity & Design

Create welcoming, walkable environments that spark pride and a sense of arrival.

tactics

- a) Create a **sense of arrival** using intentionally designed signage, gateways, and zoning standards
- b) Spark **civic pride** with programs to maintain and beautify façades, alleys, and streetscapes (e.g., small matching grants)
- c) Create safe, **welcoming, walkable environments** through landscaping, lighting, design features (e.g., awnings where there are no trees), and public art

7.2 Activate with Public Art & Programming

Bring downtowns to life year-round with arts, culture, and community programming.

tactics

- a) Install **public art** in strategic locations to reinforce identity and animate gathering places
- b) Expand **programming across all seasons** (e.g., markets, concerts, temporary art installations, winter festivals)
- c) **Partner with** business, youth, and artists to host arts and culture activities (e.g., live music, art displays, artist talks, open mic)

7.3



Restore & Reuse Downtown Assets

Preserve history and spark creative reuse using existing assets.

tactics

- a) Leverage arts to restore and creatively reuse **historic buildings** as mixed use creative hubs (e.g., arts venues, co-working hubs, and creative businesses)
- b) Transform **underused properties** into cultural assets (e.g., pop-up exhibit, retail, and restaurant opportunities)
- c) Beautify and activate **open, visible spaces** such as alleys and abandoned sites ('brownfields') (e.g., gardens and pocket parks)

Digging Deeper to Activate the Region

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- Façade and beautification incentive programs
- Creating a Cultural District
- Adding to the [Public Art Archive](#)

RECOMMENDED TOOLS

- [The Power of 10+](#) See Recommended Tool: Cultivating P.L.A.C.E. on page 41.
- [America in Bloom](#) promotes and builds vibrant and sustainable communities through volunteerism and education emphasizing flowers, plants, trees, heritage, and environmental and lifestyle enhancements (see page 118).
- [Better Block](#) is a great placemaking source including free downloadable designs to activate a downtown space.



Ecco Lawn Chair

([Wikiblock](#) design from [Better Block in a Box](#))



Looking for more?

Check out The Toolkit (pages 115-128), where you will find more on these and other ideas.

CONNECT COMMUNITIES

goal 2

Leverage **Cultural Identity & Creative Experiences** to increase access to cultural assets, unify communities, and promote exploration and place-based tourism.

Alignment with Regional Development Plan

Forge ECI's Quality of Life goal focuses on six strategies (see *goal 1*).

Connect Communities directly addresses all but the last of these. It does so emphasizing the breadth of the region and prioritizing Arts, Culture & Community.

At the same time, it sets the stage for success achieving population stabilization as well as increases in livelihoods and in innovation for the region.

Success Measures – Proposed

- Artist collaborations to create wayfinding that integrates community identity
- Partnerships among relevant sectors, organizations, and groups
- Cultural trails or corridor routes extended, connected, or established
- Sites activated for creative programming, exhibitions, or performances
- Increase in trail usage
- Cost savings through shared tools (e.g., Placer.ai, Yodel)
- Visitors attending multi-county or packaged cultural-tourism experiences.

Forge ECI
2021 Regional Development Plan

QUALITY OF LIFE across a MOSAIC of COMMUNITIES

The regional vision includes three elements that serve as the backbone for East Central Indiana's vision:

- A Mosaic of Communities,
- Innovative Eds & Meds Institutions, and
- Amenities that Enable Residents to Thrive.

The mosaic is described as:

The region is made up of diverse communities ranging in size and character, from rural communities like Redkey to metros like Muncie.

Your Ideas View from the Survey

“Celebrating – linking together the past, present, and future of the arts,

and their respective impacts to who we were, who we are, and who we can become is a

critical responsibility for leadership and arts funding in our region.

Individual response from the regional survey used to provide feedback on the plan's vision, goals, and strategies.

Goal 2 Strategies

2.1

Celebrate Cultural Heritage

Bring local history and identity to life through art, storytelling, and place-based interpretation

tactics

- Incorporate local history identity into cultural **programming** (e.g., public art, festivals, plays, art exhibits, storytelling nights)
- Collaborate with artists to create **wayfinding** that integrates community identity (e.g., street signs, trail markers, bike racks)
- Historical societies, libraries, and tourism bureaus collaborate to highlight **shared heritage** (e.g., Black History, National Road, gas boom, glass production) within and across county boundaries via: Interpretive signage, Walking tours, and storytelling (e.g., QR codes, digital media)

2.2

Link Physical & Cultural Assets

Leverage recreational infrastructure and cultural assets to connect communities

tactics

- Develop **new cultural trails** using existing assets (e.g., Garfield sculptures across Delaware and Grant Counties)
- Enhance recreational trails** with designed wayfinding, public art, and intentional connections to key cultural and recreational destinations (e.g., physically connecting trail segments, new bike lanes, mapping, signage)
- Activate underused and historic sites along **cultural corridors** for creative programming, exhibitions, and performances (e.g., Levi Coffin Days, Ghost Stories) that encourage exploration and economic activity

2.3

Advance Regional Tourism

Develop regional tourism strategies that tell compelling stories from the region in collaboration with the creative sector.

tactics

- Develop **regional relationships and strategies** to support cross-promotion, cross-county marketing, and shared expertise
- Develop **shared marketing assets** that increase local capacity and efficiency while reducing costs (box right).
- Intentionally pairing tourism attractions with cultural assets for marketing **packaged experiences**

Digging Deeper to Connect Communities

PUBLIC LIBRARIES (for 2.1c)

Don't forget your local libraries. These community cornerstones and often ***the*** anchor for arts and culture in smaller communities. They're also skilled programmers, partners, and convenors and a key asset for building better communities.



Jay County Public Library, Portland

TOURISM RECOMMENDATIONS (2.3b)

- Develop agreed-upon **methods** for marketing key assets (e.g., all use [Public Art Archive](#) versus locally created GIS maps)
- Collectively purchase of **tools** (e.g., Placer.ai data subscription) to reduce overall costs
- Mirror **content** county-to-county, city-to-city (e.g., Yodel) to make the most of limited staff capacity
- Develop a regional **website** aggregating arts and culture opportunities for more complete and effective information sharing

Recommended Tools for Goals 1 & 2

Cultivating P.L.A.C.E.

P: The Power of 10 The Project for Public Spaces Power of 10 theory is a great place to start. It's a simple but very effective way to think about creating thriving places. Essentially, the idea is that **a region needs 10 great destinations, each destination needs 10 unique places, and each place needs at least 10 things to do, see, or experience.**

L: Locals To create a vibrant and sustainable destination, never start with the tourists. Prioritizing the engagement and enjoyment of locals when activating spaces is a more effective foundation. Creating places and amenities for residents prepares these areas for potential elevation to destination marketing status—if that is what the community desires. Without enough locals loving an asset, it won't last. Regardless of how great your mountain bike trail network is, having a reliable group of local volunteers to help maintain and protect it is essential if it's going to be a sustainable destination. The same goes for your Main Street organization's programming, boutique retail shop, or restaurant. A locally sourced burger with a story about the farmer or chef from a business ooohooozing local character is a compelling reason to exit the highway and go beyond the fast food chains along the interstate. Also pie. I love pie."

A: Assets & Attractions These are tangible things. A museum, a park, a fountain, a mural, a food truck, a farmers' market, a big tree, a quiet path... Anything can be elevated from an asset to an attraction. Make a list of all the things. Make lots of lists. Natural assets, dining assets, historic assets, arts, music, what else?

C: Cultural Connection Does this thing feel like it's from this place? You can get barbecue or visit a farmers' market in many places, but are there enough connections to the local people and cultural history to make it feel like this place? For example, where I'm from, George Washington apparently slept a lot of places. Each one of those places has a similar but slightly different way of integrating that history into its unique experience.

E: Experiences This is the real measure of success. A memorable and shareable experience with a place emerges when everything mentioned above comes together. Are your assets loved and cared for in a way that elevates them to an attraction? Whether it's a bustling town square or a quiet copse of pine trees in the middle of a national forest, have you created a compelling way for people to engage with it? Is it done in a way that makes them feel connected to the place? To the experience, they are having in it?

Above article: [How do places become places people love to be?](#) (Hersick + Webster Creative Partners, 2023)



Digging Deeper to Jumpstart Your Placemaking

- Start with Petunias.**
In other words, keep it [Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper](#), and visible for early, obvious wins.
- They Always Say, "It Can't Be Done."**
Don't believe it.
- Engage Community**
Involve residents in planning and decision-making, so that projects reflect local values and needs – fostering ownership and community bonds.
- Collaborate Across Sectors**
Partner with other sectors – local businesses, government agencies, and nonprofits – to pool resources and expertise, amplifying your impact.
- Use Asset-Based Development**
Identify and use local talents, traditions, and resources. This builds on what the community already has, leading to sustainable development.
- Be Flexible & Adaptable**
Be open to evolving ideas and feedback. This allows projects to remain relevant and responsive to changing community dynamics.
- Focus on Quality of Place**
Make public spaces more inviting and functional. Parks, community centers, and public art enhancements boost pride and attract newcomers.

This is a compilation of ideas from:

- 1) [Eleven Principles for Creating Great Community Places](#),
- 2) [Rural Placemaking and the Thrive Rural Framework](#),
- 3) [Creative Placemaking Resources](#), 4) [Placemaking_Wikipedia](#)

DEEPEN NEXT GENERATION ATTACHMENT

goal 3

Invest in initiatives with and for next generation – expanding access to arts programming and education, increasing participation, and opening pathways to creative careers. Deeply engaging the next generation in a vibrant **Cultural Life** will feed talent pipelines while increasing resident and college student retention across the region.

Alignment with Regional Development Plan

Forge ECI's Education & Opportunity goal focuses on five strategies (see goal 4).

Deepen Next Generation Attachment directly addresses the first two – pathways to jobs and connecting recent college graduates to career opportunities – reinforcing the region's eds and meds backbone.

At the same time, it sets the stage for success in achieving population stabilization as well as increases in educational attainment, livelihoods and in innovation.

It can also improve the next generation's mental and physical health – implicit in the region's quality of life goal.

Success Measures – Proposed

- Internships, apprenticeships, or mentorships created and filled
- Youth serving on boards, committees, or councils
- Youth-driven initiatives launched or supported
- Schools integrating creative career pathways
- Arts offerings tailored to under-40 and participation by ages 20-30

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2021 Regional Development Plan

INNOVATIVE EDS & MEDS

Another of the backbones for East Central Indiana's vision is "innovation eds and meds" as described here.

ASSETS. East Central Indiana has one of the state's most concentrated clusters of higher education institutions producing graduates that stay.

IU East & IU Muncie School of Medicine • Purdue Polytechnic Institute – Richmond • Ivy Tech (Marion, Muncie, Richmond, and satellites) • Ball State University • Taylor University • Earlham College • Indiana Wesleyan University • Bethany Theological Seminary

Plus, outstanding hospitals and medical programs.

IU Health • Reid Health • Marion Health • Ascension St. Vincent • Henry Community Health • Centerstone • Meridian Health Services • Open Door Health Services • Neighborhood Health Centers • Veterans Affairs Clinics

[It] is also developing a reputation as a center of excellence in medical education.

OPPORTUNITY. These provide transformative educational opportunities and critical health service to rural and underserved communities. To support the needs of these anchor institutions to fill high-wage positions, East Central Indiana is committed to talent development and talent attraction.



Regional Outcome Targets include:
POPULATION. Growth rate at 0% or higher
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT. An additional 1,300 obtain a bachelor's degree or higher each year

Goal 3 Strategies

3.1

Empower Civic Engagement

Build a culture that welcomes and empowers civic engagement of youth, young adults, and young families.

tactics

- a) Intentionally **empower** formal (e.g., youth councils, board positions, training) and informal (e.g., finding and supporting the party planners and doers who make things happen) forms of **youth leadership**
- b) Actively support **youth-driven initiatives** and involve them in community decision-making (e.g., surveys, committee roles)
- c) Ensure participation is **welcoming and accessible** for any project or engagement (e.g., adapting meetings times)

3.2

Expand Arts Opportunity

Increase access to meaningful arts and culture experiences for all ages.

tactics

- a) Create safe and affordable **third spaces** – places to create, perform, socialize, and share – in **every** community (e.g., coffee shop, library, center, park)
- b) Directly work with the next generation to **co-design** programming according to their creative wants and needs
- c) Expand arts program offerings to engage each community and to reach young audiences where they are:
 - Targeted offerings for **under-forty** and intergenerational audiences (e.g., youth plays based on senior stories)
 - Arts programming integrated into **non-arts spaces** (e.g., community events, parks)
 - Exhibits, performances, and **showcases** for budding talent

3.3

Build Creative Career Pipelines

Connect high school and college-aged youth to arts opportunities, skill-building, and pathways to creative careers

tactics

- a) Integrate **creative career pathways** into k-12, after-school, community, and higher education programs
- b) Establish **intern and mentorships** (apprenticeships) that connect students and creatives to the business community for skill-building (e.g., arts administration, instrument repair, media production, web design)

Digging Deeper Next Generation Attachment

Forge ECI's 2021 youth survey (1,720 responses, most between the ages of 15 and 21) produced useful data.

Will the Youth Surveyed be in the Region in 10 years?

Only 21% envisioned themselves staying in the region

- | | |
|-----|----------------------------------|
| 43% | Were UNSURE where they would be |
| 34% | Could NOT see themselves staying |

Why Stay or Leave?

Factors Motivating them to Stay

- | | |
|-----|----------------------------|
| 52% | Close To Friends/Family |
| 29% | Job Opportunities |
| 24% | Small-Town Charm |
| 18% | Close To Significant Other |
| 17% | Housing Options |

Factors Motivating them to Leave

- | | |
|-----|-----------------------|
| 51% | Job Opportunities * |
| 28% | Entertainment Options |
| 27% | Lack City Life |
| 25% | Housing Options |
| 16% | Safety |
| 16% | Diversity |

* 41% see future job opportunities for themselves in the region. 38% were unsure.

Encouragement to Stay

Respondents Suggest Expanding/Improving::

- | | |
|-----|---|
| 56% | Job Opportunities |
| 48% | Entertainment (inc. Festivals/Concerts) |
| 42% | Housing Options (inc. Rentals) |
| 41% | Downtown |
| 39% | Safety In The Region |

GENERATE BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY

goal 4

Position **Artists & Creative Businesses** for success within the local and regional economy. Generate opportunities with, by, and for artists, creative entrepreneurs, and cultural nonprofits through training, workforce development, and material supports needed to grow in strength and impact.

Alignment with Regional Development Plan

Forge ECI's Education & Opportunity goal focuses on five strategies (box right).

Generate Business Opportunity directly addresses all but the last of these. It does so by emphasizing the breadth of the region and prioritizing Arts, Culture & Community.

At the same time, it sets the stage for success achieving population stabilization as well as increases in educational attainment, livelihoods and in innovation.

Success Measures – Proposed

- Affordable spaces established or sustained (e.g. studios, makerspaces)
- Retail opportunities for artists (pop ups, art fairs, art on walls in business).
- Artists/creative businesses connected to small business resources (e.g., ISBDC)
- Increased contract opportunities between artists and arts providers (e.g., with schools, towns, libraries)

Forge ECI
2021 Regional Development Plan

EDUCATION & OPPORTUNITY

This regional goal includes strategies to:

1. **INCREASE** awareness of existing educational resources and skills training opportunities as pathways to well-paying jobs in East Central Indiana.
2. **CONNECT** recent college graduates to satisfying career opportunities in the region.
3. **CREATE** dedicated spaces to encourage innovation and collaboration, such as coworking spaces, makerspaces, and community kitchens.
4. **ENCOURAGE** the creation of new businesses through financing and technical support.
5. **INVEST IN** quality of life and of place improvements to attract jobs and talent

Goal 4 supports each of those strategies leading with by, and for the region's creative sector.



Goal 4 Strategies



4.1 Empower Creative Capacity

Provide artists, entrepreneurs, and nonprofits with the resources, training, and infrastructure they need to thrive.

tactics

- a) Develop and sustain affordable spaces for creatives (e.g., shared studios, co-work, and makerspaces)
- b) Connect creative businesses and artists to existing state, local, and related **support systems** for:
 - Small Businesses (e.g., incubators, SBA, Chambers, Main Street, Ivy Tech, Extension) and
 - Artists (See "Artists & Creative Businesses" in *The Toolkit*, page 121-121)
- c) Develop tools and training to fill **unmet needs** of artists and creative businesses:
 - Material (e.g., microloans, grants, tool-libraries)
 - Apprenticeship (matching artists, creatives, and/or businesses – e.g. [Traditional Arts Indiana](#))
- d) Supports for **up-skilling** particularly in digital commerce (e.g., digital commerce/marketing training, micro-grants)



4.2 Grow Creative Opportunity

Expand markets locally and regionally to promote local talent and open and grow markets.

tactics

- a) Support **programs** that contract with and provide visibility to artists (e.g., residencies in schools, libraries, and parks)
- b) Facilitate **retail opportunities** (e.g., arts trails, curated arts markets, vendor space at events, consignment in businesses) that reduce start-up risk and encourage sustainable growth
- c) Encourage **cooperatives** to collectively expand markets (artist cooperative gallery, regional online store, shared studios, or makerspaces)

Digging Deeper into Generate Business Opportunity

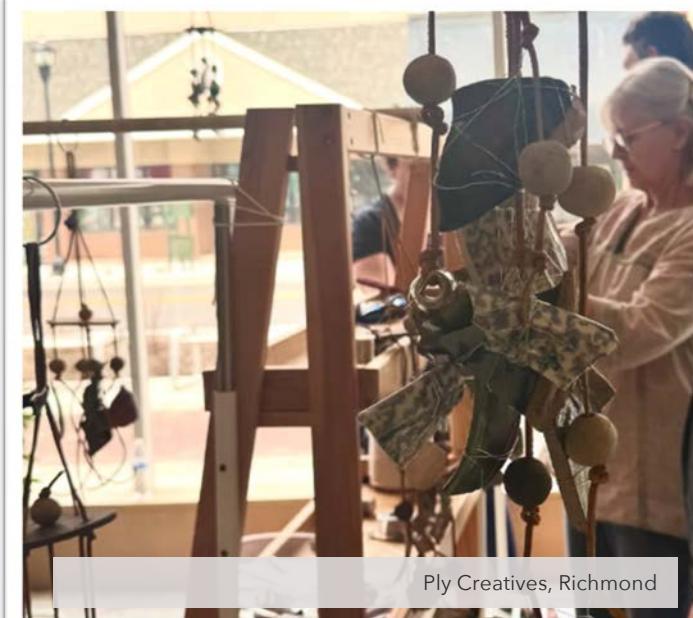
Here is another of your ideas from the goals and strategies prioritization survey.



This is all exciting.

I would also suggest that we broaden the conversation of creative careers to clearly include graphic design, marketing, social media content creators, video and film production, web design, architecture, urban design, etc. Too often the general public only thinks about murals and boutiques.

We need to expand the imaginations of all stakeholders to help them understand that future economic development and talent attraction depends on all of the creative fields.



Ply Creatives, Richmond



Recommended Tools for Goals 3 & 4

What do Indiana Artists Need?

Below are key findings from the [2023-24 Indiana Arts Commission Artist Needs Assessment](#), which reinforce the goals in this plan – research that can be used to advocate for programmatic support in implementation.

Networks & Connections

Artists want to build more connections with artists. Artists want to build more relationships and connections with other artists, within and beyond their respective disciplines. They want mentors, resources to find local artists, recurring opportunities to meet other artists, and community hubs dedicated to creatives to spark organic networks and relationships. Networks and connections were seen as vital to career success and the ability to grow locally.

Marketing Support & Education

Artists need marketing support (resources, platforms, education). Marketing is a challenge for many artists. Social media marketing is considered time-consuming with little return, and artists see a lack local resources outside social media to advertise and champion local artists. Technical assistance and educational resources about marketing emerged as priorities.

Financial Support & Education

Artists need resources and guidance to strengthen their financial footing while pursuing their art. Artists find a recurring tension between creativity and financial stability that limits their artistic practice. Challenges such as inconsistency of cash flow, health insurance, cost of materials, and time for business planning are key drivers that build tension between creativity and financial stability. The time and stress of running a business as an artist often meant the need for multiple part-time positions or a full-time position to subsidize their artistic career.

Local Investments in Local Artists

Local government and organization support are critical to artists. Artists view local government and local organizations as critical catalysts for artists' careers and artist retention. Public art, local festivals, and local performing and exhibiting opportunities are essential resources, particularly for young artists, and lay the groundwork for local artist growth, as well as public engagement. Artists emphasize the importance of government and organizations prioritizing support, resources, and opportunities for artists working locally.

Digging Deeper into Business Training for Artists

Springboard for the Arts – [Work of Art](#)
Minerva Financial Arts – [Financial Education](#)
Center for Cultural Innovation – [Business of Art](#)
Artists Thrive – [National Resource Hub](#)
Indiana Arts Commission – [Artist Services Hub](#)



See also the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation's [Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Playbook 3.0](#)

More resources and programs in
The Toolkit, pages 115-128.

“More than many other occupations, networks have an incredibly powerful influence on the trajectory of artists' careers.

“... not only the functional dependencies that artists have on one another to produce creative products but also the social dependencies many artists have with one another that help them get their next gig and build a reputation.”

MOBILIZE, COLLABORATE & COMMUNICATE

goal 5

Collaborate to advance **Cultural Development & Regionalism**. Systemize collaboration and communication among county and regional leaders to align planning, build networks, share resources, and create joint programs to strengthen the region's collective capacity for long-term cultural growth.

Alignment with Regional Development Plan

Forge ECI's **Stronger Together** Vision and READI initiatives focus on achievement through a collaborative approach (box right).

Mobilize, Collaborate, Communicate directly aligns with and supports this vision and collective effort. It does so by developing a convening structure to increase communication and set the stage for collaboration and collective action.

Success Measures – Proposed

- Creative sector partners that regularly participate in meetups
- Active cross-sector partners engaged in community conversations per county
- Regional, creative sector meetups by type and frequency (artists, nonprofits)
- Average attendance and diversity of participants (artists, nonprofit, county)
- Partnerships, joint projects or initiatives from network and cross-sector activities
- Counties with regular, cross-sector "community conversations" convenings
- Annual, regionwide, convening held
- Evidence of increased communication (shared calendars, attendee feedback)

Forge ECI
2021 Regional Development Plan

STRONGER TOGETHER

The regional vision includes a focus on collaboration:

...to leverage the unique perspectives, assets, and opportunities our region has to offer, East Central Indiana is committed to collaboration across sectors and scales. Our towns, cities, and counties understand that we are stronger together, and can learn from one another. When opportunities to work together arise, our region steps up.

Deeper in the Forge ECI plan you'll find:

READI 1.0. East Central Indiana combines the strengths and talents of eight counties, over 60 cities and towns, and approximately 375,000 residents. Counties in our region... offer unique attractions and exciting opportunities. This regional development plan represents an effort to leverage county assets, build consensus on regional strategies, and promote vibrancy and resiliency in East Central Indiana.

READI 2.0. The region has learned from READI 1.0 that there are **no shortcuts to regionalism**. Past engagement efforts are no substitute for active attempts to engage the community.



Sunflowers Mural by Amy Carnes & Family, Connersville

Goal 5 Strategies

5.1

Mobilize County-Level Creative Networks

Build support networks that facilitate resource sharing, joint programming, skill-building, and plan alignment region-wide.

tactics

- a) Commit to regular (weekly-monthly), *EASY, face-to-face meetups and mixers* within the creative sector
 - Artists (e.g., studio visits, after hours social network)
 - Arts, Culture & History Nonprofits (e.g., Coffee & Calendars, page 64)
- b) Develop creative sector **support networks** (e.g., art associations, guilds, informal groups) and initiatives (e.g., Muncie Creative Corridor, Richmond Arts Organization Council) to foster collaboration, communication, and resource sharing among and between artists, makers, and organizations.
- c) Curate **cross-sector interactions** – conferences attendance, projects, dinners – where the experience organically leads to new relationships, ideas, and initiatives with the creative sector (e.g., road-trip idea and community foundation support)

5.2



Catalyze a Regionwide Arts & Culture Movement

Strengthen the region's capacity for arts and culture success through cross-sector collaboration, communication, and the power of celebrating together.

tactics

- a) Facilitate understanding between the region's **tourism and creative sectors** to align goals and leverage best practices.
- b) Facilitate **cross-sector communication within each county**, sowing the seeds for organic partnership, resource sharing, and arts and cultural initiatives throughout the region (e.g., lunch and share-out "community conversation" ideally hosted by the community foundation or similarly situated entity)
- c) **Convene all** established and newly established individual sector and cross-sector networks and groups – spanning creative, cultural (history and libraries), tourism, civic (community foundations and Main Streets), and other sectors at least annually to:
 - Celebrate the State of the Arts, Annual Awards, and other successes
 - Share data and promote regional efforts in and outside the region
 - Spark innovation, plan future arts and culture strategy, and foster regionalism

Digging Deeper to Mobilize, Collaborate & Communicate

“We've already heard from leaders who've said, "I didn't know these cultural assets or these creatives were in this region." Those new relationships are already beginning to bring about regional change.

– Miah Michaelsen
Executive Director to the Indiana Arts Commission

Your Ideas Suggestions from the Survey

Two resources that would help the sector succeed:

Database providing free/low-cost access grant opportunities and tutorials that address common grant writing needs.

Regional Portal for artists and arts organizations with a calendar of events, deadlines, on-demand trainings, forums, artist portfolios, etc.

“... a place online with public facing links for “what's going on where, when and all the pertinent information” also a place for those looking to purchase work from artists or hire performing artists.

Individual response from the regional survey used to provide feedback on the plan's vision, goals, and strategies.

FORMALIZE SUSTAINABLE COMMITMENTS

goal 6

Hardwire Arts & Culture Strategy into governance, economic development, funding, and civic frameworks. Embedding arts and culture into local and regional plans and policies will ensure their sustainable visibility, investment, and impact.

Alignment with Regional Development Plan

The third of Forge ECI's vision backbones – **Amenities that Enable Residents to Thrive** (box right) – is in many ways a backbone without a goal.

The fact, especially in an increasingly uncertain funding environment, is that the region will not be able to make the progress it needs to make without hardwiring arts and culture strategies into every level of local and regional government and civic life – the focus of Goal 6 **Formalize Sustainable Commitments**.

Success Measures – Proposed

- New community champions and institutional partners (e.g. mayors, schools, libraries, civic groups)
- Percent for Art and related policies adopted
- Government-appointed arts councils established
- Arts representation at non-arts sector tables (e.g., boards, committees)
- New funding mechanisms or partnerships established (e.g., city-based small grant programs, donor-advised funds, endowment matches, dedicated revenue streams)

Forge ECI
2021 Regional Development Plan

Amenities that Enable Residents to Thrive

The final backbone of East Central Indiana's vision is:

Amenities that Enable Residents to Thrive – The region leverages existing assets in outdoor recreation, arts, and culture, and family-owned small businesses to enhance quality of life for residents. Residents are further supported by a commitment to increase educational attainment, expand access to childcare, and revitalize historic downtowns. By expanding access to valuable amenities, East Central Indiana enables residents to thrive.

.... When pursued, this vision should manifest in population growth and regional prosperity.

This is the focus of the Arts & Culture Plan.



Our Small Town Mural, Parker City



The “hardwired” concept was inspired by “In London, we have been on our own mission, working to future-proof our city as a world creative capital, hardwiring culture into the fabric of our city – and planning is at the heart of our work.” Quote from Forward to [The Routledge Handbook of Urban Cultural Planning](#) (2025).

Goal 6 Strategies

6.1

Build Support for Arts & Culture Strategy

Expand the pool of community champions, leaders, and volunteers actively committed to arts and culture strategy.

tactics

- Engage key leaders as **champions** (e.g., mayors, foundation executives, civic boards) then expand pool through **civic institutions** such as libraries, Purdue Extension (4H), schools, and Rotaries
- Encourage **businesses** to directly engage with local creatives (e.g., exhibits, commissions, performances, sponsorships)

6.2

Build Policy Infrastructure

Formalize local government policies and practices that directly support arts and culture strategy.

tactics

- Adopt **Percent for Art and related** policies (e.g., food & beverage tax, public art guidelines and plans, design code, designated outdoor refreshment area) that create opportunity and support the creative sector. Also, simplify and streamline policies that create barriers to success
- Institute government-appointed **arts councils and small grant programs** in alignment with city goals.
- Commit to **direct representation of the creative sector** in public processes to center arts strategies in future plans (e.g., Main Street, tourism, historic preservation, economic development, and infrastructure)

6.3



Secure Sustainable Funding

Cultivate a portfolio of long-term support and investment in arts and culture

tactics

- Designate **public funds** and revenue streams that demonstrates commitment to arts and culture (e.g., portion of hotel/lodging tax, portion of utility or telecommunication fees, local sales tax, budget line item).
- Cultivate **local philanthropy** with each county's community foundation and private philanthropy partners (e.g., donor advised funds, endowment matches, donor engagement)
- Pursue **grants** for arts initiatives while leveraging public, private, and corporate match opportunities, such as those found in the Appendix
- Advocate for supportive **state and federal** policies, grants, and programs that reinforce local investment (e.g., legislated cultural district incentives).

Digging Deeper Formalize Sustainable Commitments

The Recommendation

Explore the policy ideas on page 51 along with grant information in The Toolkit (page 124). Then dive into public funding mechanisms such as:

- Percent for Art in Development
- [Food & Beverage Tax](#) IC 6.9.27.3
- [County Innkeeper Tax](#) IC 6.9.18
- [Designated Outdoor Refreshment Area](#) IC 7.1.3.31

Your Ideas

Views from the Survey

“ **The most important part of this is to have a dedicated organization in each County or city to oversee this process.**

Providing a salary for this person would solve a lot of problems with fundraising.

“ With the passing of SB1 into law there will be no available government resources for funding this initiative. Funding will have to start at the state level as the state legislature has choked any ability for this initiative to begin on a local level that relies on local government resources for success.

Individual response from the regional survey used to provide feedback on the plan's vision, goals, and strategies.



Recommended Tools for Goals 5 & 6

Actions Local Government Can Take to Strengthen Community *through* the Creative Sector

Establish Key Supports:

- Designate staff – a point of contact between local government and the creative community
- Charter a local arts commission, board, or council within local government
- Develop grant programs to support the development of arts organizations and arts events

Provide Programs in Partnership with:

- Local arts to provide programs for underserved populations
- Main Street on pop up visual arts and live music events
- The Boys & Girls Club or parks department on out of school arts programs for youth
- The library, area agency on aging or other community partners on programming for vulnerable populations such as older adults

Commit Resources for:

- Commissioning public art and murals
- Visual / performing arts in local parks, greenspaces, farmers markets, other public spaces
- Events to bring community together such as street dances or community performances

Adopt Ordinances & Policies that:

- Designate funds for arts – general funds or non-tax (e.g., Percent for Art, energy) sources
- Support creative efforts such as murals and outdoor performances
- Establish a cultural district or a creative or cultural hub
- Support community events such as artist markets, concerts or festivals and public art installations such as murals and sculptures (e.g., right-of-way guidelines and processes)

Actively Engage the Creative Sector:

- Including creative entrepreneurs in the local small business community.
- Putting creatives on boards and commissions and asking them to serve on task forces
- Involve the creative sector in economic and community development planning

Or Maybe...

- Support the development of artist studios and creative makerspaces
- Decommission surplus equipment or buildings for creative use

Digging Deeper into Policy Options

EXPLORE STATE & LOCAL LEGISLATION

- Advisory Boards & Commissions (Arts Councils)
- Zoning Overlay Districts (Cultural or Design)
- Public Art Guidelines and Master Plans
- Right-of-Way Guidelines
- Special Permitting for Pop Ups

INCLUDE THE SECTOR IN PLANNING FOR:

- Regional Development Authorities and CEDS
- Economic Development (City, County, Region)
- Comprehensive Plans (City and County)
- Downtown Development & Revitalization
- Tourism (Commissions, CVBs, DMOs)
- Workforce Development
- Trails, Bike + Pedestrian, Parks & Recreation
- Innovation and TIF Districts
- Public Transportation and Safety
- Quality of Life, Quality of Place, & CBAPs
- Public Libraries, Community & Senior Centers
- Purdue Extension (County and Region)
- Strategy for Community Foundation, Main Street, Chamber of Commerce, College or University, United Way, Council on Aging, etc.

AND ALWAYS

Make the case that arts and creativity have significant positive impacts on Indiana's people and places.



Have arts and creative inspiration and information sent to your inbox: <https://www.in.gov/arts/about/news/>.

Recommendations from the [Indiana Arts Commission](#).

THE BIG IDEAS

Overview

Shaped by community input and grounded in regional assets, strengths, and themes, these bold, high impact BIG IDEA opportunities are designed to elevate the plan for maximum impact. Secondary to the goals and strategies above, they are ***"What if?" opportunities for long-term, whole-region advancement*** rather than short-term project recommendations. Since great change requires enthusiasm and commitment, these ideas are offered for exploration and consideration.

1. PLACE AMPLIFIED: **Cultural Districts**

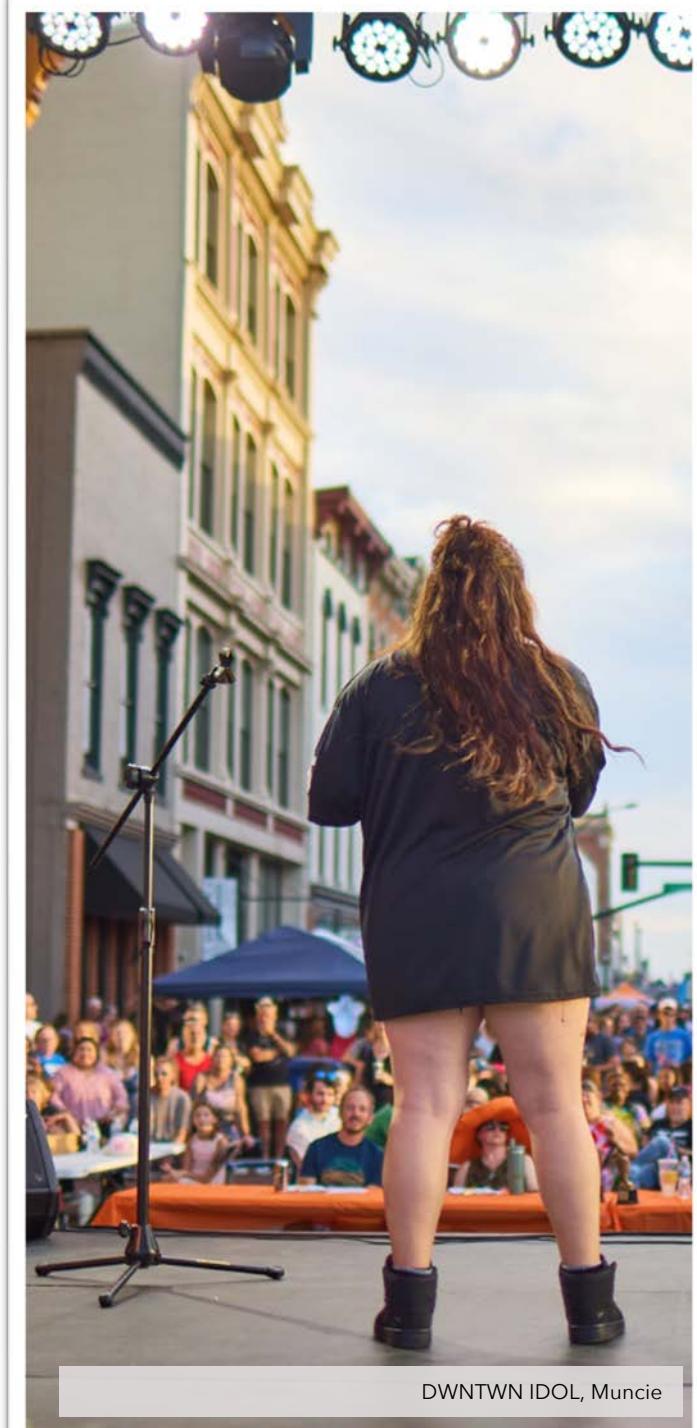
Every county in East Central Indiana has at least one community with strong potential to become a cultural district. ***Imagine the entire region connected through a network of these districts***, each one celebrating its own character while collectively showcasing the richness of East Central Indiana's arts and cultural scene. Practically, implementation could provide a framework for downtown revitalization, local action plans, and implementation.

2. ALL-IN MARKETING: **Indiana Icons & Industry**

What would it look like to go 'all in' – to showcase incredible artists and icons like Garfield, Gennett Records, James Dean, and Bob Ross alongside a treasure trove of attractions and sites? Imagine a collectively curated web platform weaving in stories, showcasing artisans, highlighting events and opportunities, and connecting residents and visitors to the people and places that define the region. Then think bigger. Imagine a ***shared regional marketing strategy across multiple platforms that creates a clearer "brand" or sense of united identity centered on Indiana Icons & Industry*** – a combination that produced some of the most well-known cultural icons in the world.

3. A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN FORGE ECI & SEI READI: **Indiana's Music Corridor**

Imagine if Forge ECI ***leveraged East Central Indiana's deep music-education and performance culture as a regional music strategy***. Doing so would benefit communities



across all eight counties and set up the region as an ideal partner for strategies in adjacent regions. Specifically, SEI READI is considering a music corridor – running from Richmond, [birthplace of recorded jazz](#) to Madison's "[music city](#)" – **to celebrate the deep musical roots of Indiana's eastern tier**. The case for showcasing both regions' incredible musical legacies and today's vibrant cultures could reverberate across East Central Indiana

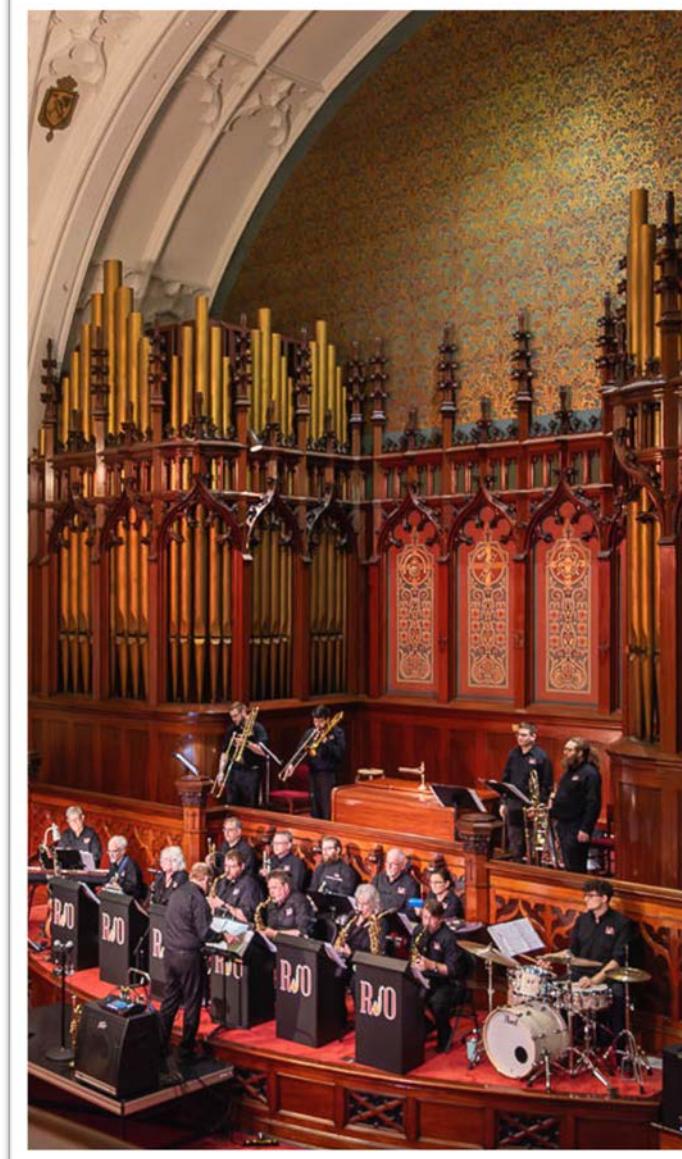
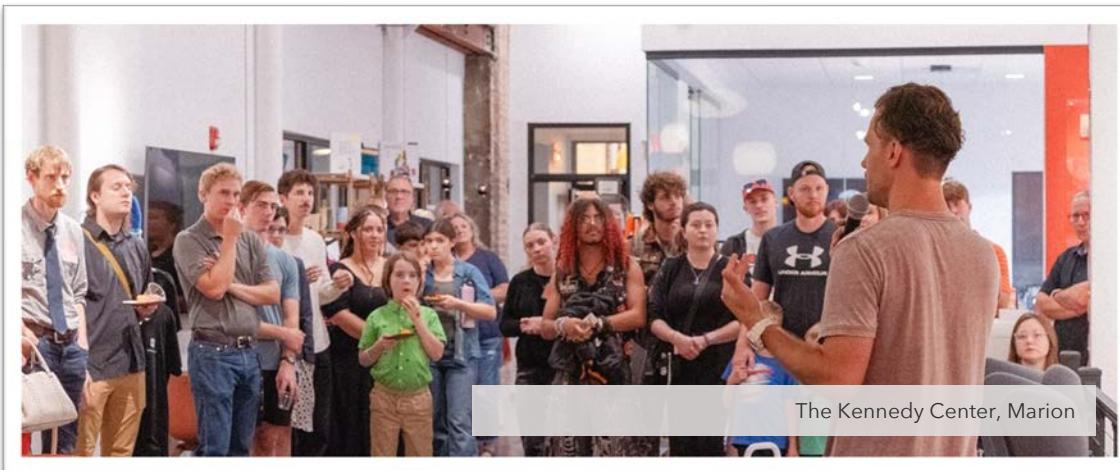
Next Steps

When it comes to Big Idea implementation, the following steps are recommended. Key is taking a community engaged approach to build buy-in, momentum, and maximize results.

First. Get the rest of the plan up and running, network groups meeting, and past the region's first convening so that new expectations are starting to form.

Once that's done, start small, develop, test, improve with cross-sector partners.

1. **Start the conversation** with individual leaders, expand to facilitated groups, and identify interest for further exploration.
2. **Deeply explore** the options with traction via brainstorming sessions, site visits, and conversations with other communities.
3. **Hone the idea** – continue to ask for input (think public survey, open house, etc.) to build interest – and develop cross-sector implementation plans.



Richmond Jazz Orchestra at The Reid Center, Richmond



Important for Big Idea #3

If pursuing Indiana's Music Corridor, be sure to meet with SEI READI, Accelerate Rural Indiana, and Our Southern Indiana leaders to build those partnerships first. Each has relevant arts and culture plan goals. See page 60.

7. PLACE, AMPLIFIED CULTURAL DISTRICTS

The Idea

Imagine the entire region connected through a network of Cultural Districts, each one celebrating its own character while collectively showcasing the richness of East Central Indiana's arts and cultural scene.

Cultural districts - located in a defined area downtown where arts and culture assets and activities serve as a key draw – offer incredible benefits. They boost the local economy, reinforce the community's identity, attract visitors, and strengthen arts and culture while fostering belonging and quality of life. Communities may consider pursuing state level designation through the Indiana Arts Commission, but most importantly is the drive to amplify the incredible places East Central offers. Practically, implementation could provide a framework for:

- Downtown revitalization, local action plans, and implementation
- Regionwide marketing campaigns (e.g., a dedicated [tourism platform](#) / comprehensive website to showcase the districts)

The Opportunity

Development aligns with Goals 1, 2, 4, and 6 (activate downtowns, connect communities, generate business opportunity, formalize sustainable commitments), and offers an exciting opportunity to showcase what makes East Central Indiana so special.

Bringing this idea to life requires a coordinated, community-driven effort within each county to develop and elevate its own cultural district. While full realization – where every county maintains a publicly designated cultural district – may take time, the development process itself offers substantial value. Tourism can come alongside and showcase the development with storytelling, milestone celebrations, and event calendar.

Making the Case

The Arts as a Strategy for Revitalizing Our Cities

“ A cultural district is a ***well-recognized, labeled, mixed-use area of a city in which a high concentration of cultural facilities serves as the anchor of attraction.***

The impact of cultural districts is measurable: The arts attract **residents and tourists** who also support adjacent businesses such as restaurants, lodging, retail, and parking.

The presence of the arts enhances **property values**, the profitability of **surrounding businesses** and the tax base of the region.

The arts attract a well-educated workforce- a key incentive for **new and relocating businesses**.

Finally, the arts contribute to the **creativity and innovation** of a community.

Excerpt: Hilary Anne Frost-Kumpf,
Americans for the Arts (1998)

Indiana Arts Commission's **Cultural District Program**

Indiana has [official designated 12 districts](#) since this program started.

Contact Eric Ashby, Director of Programs (eashby@iac.in.gov) for more.



An Abundance to Build from for Big Idea #1

Every county in East Central Indiana has at least one community with strong potential to become a cultural district.

BLACKFORD

Hartford City has great anchor assets it could leverage to build support and momentum.

DELAWARE

Muncie has tried for state designation in the past without success, but recent collaboration around its Creative Corridor, [Creative Space Action Plan](#), and College & Community Collaboration Program-funded work at BSU could become a recipe for success.

FAYETTE

Connersville has a number of local champions working to develop downtown, a supply of visitors from the railroad, and a cute factor that could support a strong district in time.

GRANT

Marion has begun working on this as part of its downtown and river revitalization work. The College & Community Collaboration work around Taylor University (Upland) and Indiana Wesleyan (Marion) may also become district potential.

HENRY

New Castle has made great strides through its Main Street, has a 2025 downtown revitalization plan, and key assets poised it well for a focused effort.

JAY

Portland began the process in 2023 and could pick it back up.

Redkey is developing a core of activity that could become a mini district in its own right.

RANDOLPH

Union City has been deepening its efforts since its finalist days in the state's Stellar Communities program.

WAYNE

Richmond has a plethora of cultural assets, artists, and a significant revitalization effort with Earlham University funded through the College & Community Collaboration Program all giving it great district potential.



Images Above: Downtown New Castle

2. ALL-IN MARKETING INDIANA ICONS & INDUSTRY

The Idea

What would it look like to go 'all in' – to showcase incredible artists and icons like Garfield, Gennett Records, James Dean, and Bob Ross alongside a treasure trove of attractions and sites?

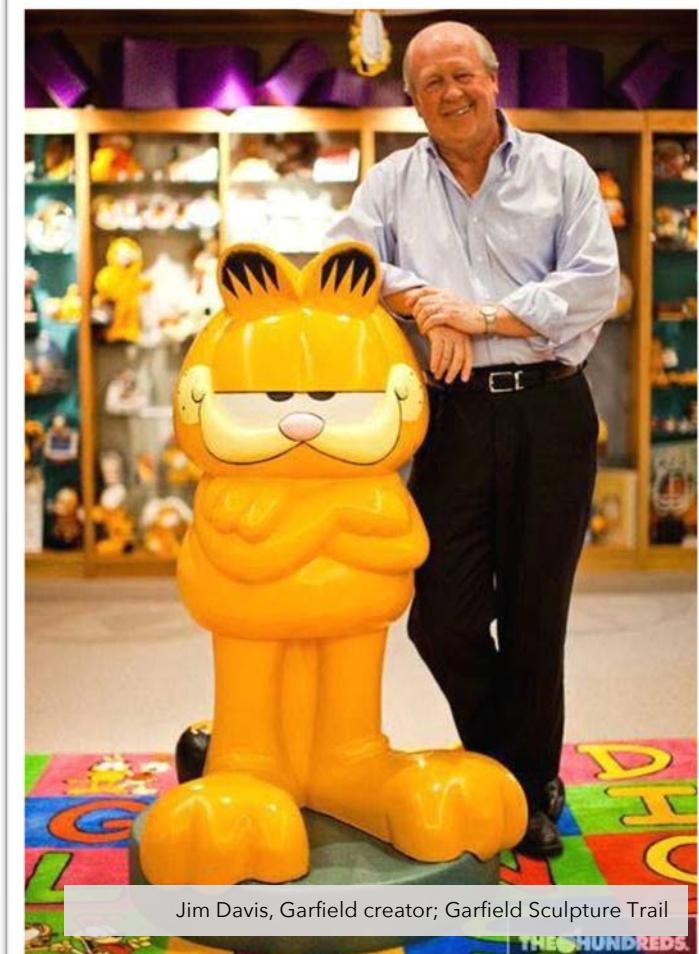
Imagine a collectively curated web platform weaving in stories, showcasing artisans, highlighting events and opportunities, and connecting residents and visitors to the people and places that define the region. Then think bigger. Imagine a ***shared regional marketing strategy across multiple platforms that creates a clear "brand" or sense of united identity centered on Indiana Icons & Industry – a combination that produced some of the most well-known cultural icons in the world.*** Practically, implementation could include:

- Digital components (online and in-person enhancements)
- Information booths, staff to answer questions, merchandise
- Aggressive marketing throughout the Midwest (online and print)

The Opportunity

This idea takes Goal 2 and supersizes it, offering a powerful opportunity to connect communities through iconic arts, culture, and rich history steeped in innovation.

The Garfield Sculpture Trail, James Dean Festival, Bob Ross Experience, and National Road already draw global visitors, yet many never discover the region's broader arts and cultural landscape. By creating more connected experiences such as coordinated arts, music, and icon trails, and uniting the region's assets under a shared narrative and digital platform, East Central Indiana can amplify visibility, deepen resident pride, and elevate engagement. A centralized events calendar and cohesive storytelling approach would position the region as a national example of how arts, culture, industry, and iconic figures can define place.



An Abundance to Build from for Big Idea #2

East Central Indiana's rich, iconic people, places, and uniqueness provide much to build upon.

CULTURE ICONS

- **Art.** Bob Ross, Robert Love
- **Design.** Frank Lloyd Wright, Round Barns, Tiffany
- **Illustration/Comics.** Jim Davis & Garfield
- **Film/TV.** James Dean, Robert Wise, David Letterman
- **Books.** The Snake Pit & Raintree County
- **Dance.** Twyla Tharp
- **Music.** So much! (See Big Idea #3)

Beyond the most well-known and popular, there are less iconic, but equally important: Samual Plato, the Richmond Group, Overbeck Sisters, Starr Piano, Reid Center, and more

BASKETBALL – Henry

- Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame
- "Hoosiers" and its physical legacy - the Hoosier Gym and Hickory Bus used in filming

INDUSTRY & INNOVATION

- **Astronauts.** Kevin Ford
- **Cars.** Little Detroit
- **Gas Boom.** Gas City, Gas Boom Trail (Muncie, Dunkirk, Marion)
- **Glass Production.** Ball Glass as one of many
- **Inventions.** Hoosier Cabinet, Phantoscope, earliest mass producible car, cruise control
- **Inventors.** Wilbur Wright, Elwood Haynes, C. Francis Jenkins, Ralph Teeter
- **Transportation.** Railroads, the National Road, Whitewater River, and more

AND MORE

- Haunted Asylum Sites (Randolph, Blackford) & Ghost Stories
- Popcorn Capital of the World (Van Buren, Grant)
- Jack's Donuts (New Castle)
- Car Culture – Cruise-Ins & Speedways throughout
- The Brady and Dillinger Gangs

“ The James Dean Festival began in 1975...

Now, 50 years later, it's a full-blown, three-day affair honoring the actor with a parade, dance contest, and a memorial service. Dean was born in **Marion**, Indiana, in 1931. His family moved to California when he was 6. Three years later, his mom died [and] his father sent him to live with his aunt and uncle in a farmhouse in **Fairmount**, where he lived until he graduated high school. Then, back to California, where he... briefly became one of [Hollywood's] brightest stars, then died in a car crash at age 24. That, of all those places, the site of his annual tribute is Fairmount, is instructive:

**Dean wasn't Hollywood.
He was America.**



[Rebels with one cause: A three-day Midwest blowout for James Dean](#), The Washington Post, October 11, 2025

Jim James Dean Cutout Mural, Fairmount

3. A PARTNERSHIP TO JOIN INDIANA'S MUSIC CORRIDOR

The Idea

Imagine if Forge ECI leveraged *East Central Indiana's deep music-education and performance culture as a regional music strategy*. Doing so would benefit communities across all eight counties and set up the region as an ideal partner for strategies in adjacent regions. Specifically, SEI READI is considering a music corridor – *running from Richmond, birthplace of recorded jazz* to Madison's "[music city](#)" – to celebrate the **deep musical roots of Indiana's eastern tier**.

The case for showcasing both regions' incredible musical legacies and today's vibrant cultures connecting historic studios, performance venues, and living traditions is strong, and the rewards could reverberate across East Central Indiana as a framework for:

- Linking existing festivals and tours, while opening the doors for new ones as well;
- An aggressive marketing campaign spanning across regions; and
- A dedicated [tourism platform](#) / comprehensive website to host that campaign.

The Opportunity

Joining a broader music movement – with Richmond as a key anchor – offers a strong opportunity to *deepen the region's performing arts focus* and expand multi-regional marketing and connections. If SEI READI pursues the strategy, it will depend on partnership with Forge ECI as northern anchor point. If [SEI READI](#) does not immediately pursue the strategy, Forge ECI can make it inevitable by building its assets independently. In either case, two other regional arts and culture plans include music goals to leverage goals – goals Forge ECI could join in implementing or otherwise benefit from (page 59).

In any scenario, Forge ECI leaders would want to work with regional stakeholders to identify the vision, gameplan, and assets to serve as key stops along the music corridor. Engaging key leaders in Batesville, Madison and Richmond could bring early energy to the work.



An Abundance to Build from for Big Idea #3

Forge ECI can reach deep into its counties, ***building a music performance and education strategy*** that links its well-documented culture of music, venues, festivals, bands, orchestras and more throughout East Central Indiana (maybe connecting with Big Idea #2) including:

Assets Across the Region

Music Education

- College and university performing arts programs, wealth of venues (e.g., Ball State Performing Arts Center, Phillippe Performing Arts Center, Rediger Auditorium, Goddard Auditorium), local faculty and students, established audiences, and supports
- K-12 school programs and assets of note such as New Castle Choirs and The Bundy

Venues & Production

- Outdoor venues, amphitheaters, and pocket park performance spaces across the region
- Performing Arts Centers in Gas City, Richmond, and university campuses
- Historic local gems like the Castle Theater and Guyer Opera House
- Local audio/video production like 357 Studios and Frequency Canvas
- And a vibrant scene in bars, breweries, wineries, churches, high schools, town parks, community centers – every county

Festivals & Events

- Summer festivals in every county including Hudson Family Park Summer Concert Series and Muncie Three Trails Music Series
- Larger commemorations (e.g., Black Music Month)
- Music for All's long-term connection with Delaware County

Groups & Education

- Numerous bands and performers including faculty
- A tremendous number of university-based groups, ensembles, and choral groups
- Mississinewa Valley Band

Instruments & Retail

- Specialty Providers: Player's Gear Guitar Shop and Hunt Guitars
- Music Stores with Lessons: Quinlan & Fabish Music Co. and Sight & Sound Music Center
- Record Stores: Monkey Jacks Emporium and Thrifty Sounds

Music Goals in Other Plans

A corridor would require four regions to collaborate (from [Forge ECI](#) through [SEI READI](#) and [Accelerate Rural Indiana](#) to [Our Southern Indiana](#)). Luckily their arts and culture plans include music goals to leverage – goals Forge ECI could join in implementing.

SEI READI

Parallel Big Idea

The SEI READI strategy parallels this one without the anchors. It provides the connection and scale that makes the idea truly BIG!

Accelerate Rural Indiana: Batesville

Music & Venue Strategy

- Create Regional Performance Venue Network
- Implement Tiered Venue Development Strategy
- Establish Music Heritage Program
- Launch Regional Performing Arts Collaborative
- Develop Music Education Ecosystem

[Our Southern Indiana](#): Madison

[Southern Bookend on the Ohio River](#)

Build on Madison's "[Music City](#)" momentum, busking and grassroots platforms, and school-based sound production capacity to create a regional circuit of venues and outdoor stages, a music incubator with rehearsal and recording access, and youth pathways into music technology and stagecraft.

(See also Rust Belt Magazine:

[Madison Wants to Be the Next 'Music City'](#), 2020)

The Case for Developing the Northern Bookend

While the bulk of a corridor would flow through SEI READI, it relies on Richmond's unique legacy as a critical anchor. Given its incredible history and rich music scene, it's a natural focal point within a broader regional – potentially even multi-regional – effort.

North on the Whitewater River: Richmond, IN

“ Richmond doesn’t rank among the ten largest cities in the state, let alone the nation. Yet the course of American music was fundamentally changed by the songs recorded within its city limits.

Where do I begin? Perhaps with the recordings of **King Oliver's Jazz Band**, made in Richmond in 1923 – these were the most influential jazz sides of their day and introduced the world to **Louis Armstrong**. ...**Bix Beiderbecke**, who's classic 1924 recordings also came from Richmond. But we can't forget **Jelly Roll Morton**, the most important jazz composer of the era, who made history in Richmond, collaborating with the **New Orleans Rhythm Kings** on the first racially integrated jazz recording session... **Charley Patton**'s "Pony Blues," a recording that single-handedly created the commercial market for Delta blues. By the same token, the market for Texas blues was built by **Blind Lemon Jefferson**, whose final recordings were made far from the Lone Star State, again in Richmond. The father of black gospel music **Thomas Dorsey** recorded here, as did country music legend **Gene Autry**, and the great songwriter **Hoagy Carmichael**.

No matter what style or genre, Richmond was at the crossroads. It may have been a tiny city, but the rest of America danced to its beat.

Excerpt from Ted Goia's forward to ***Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagy: Gennett Records and the Rise of America's Musical Grassroots***, by Rick Kennedy (2013)

A HISTORIAN'S VOICE ON RICHMOND

Richmond is so important that Charlie Dehan, historian of American music and the Gennett–Starr legacy has proposed historic markers there for the Country Music Hall of Fame, Mississippi Blues Trail, Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. "The music recorded by Gennett... led to a dynamic shift in American music culture. After Gennett's founding, American vernacular music went from ignored to mainstream..."

[The Music Never Stopped](#) (2016)

Richmond Assets Rooted in Music Legacy

Organizations & Groups

- Richmond Jazz, Community, and Symphony Orchestras
- Chanticleer String Quartet

Host Venues & Retail

- Music Pantry
- 4th Street Blues Club
- Morrison-Reeves Library
- "E" Street Pub
- Firehouse BBQ & Blues
- Smiley's Pub
- Civic Hall Performing Arts Center
- Dudas Inspiration Venue
- The Reid Center
- And many more

Sites & Trails and More

- Starr Historic District
- Gennett Records Walk of Fame
- Gennett Recording Studio
- Richmond Music Festival
- Related murals and more

CALL TO ACTION

What's Next?

Now that the plan has been adopted and rolled out, it is time for the region, all eight counties, the communities within them, and every corner of the creative sector to find its place in the goals and strategies – to convert the plan into specific actions it will take. Here are some thoughts to get started.

Goal & Strategy	2026-28: NEAR TERM	2028-30: MID-TERM	2030-35: LONG-TERM
1. ACTIVATE DOWNTOWNS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhancement projects (signage, façade programs, landscaping) Activate with public art and programs Restore and reuse downtown assets (historic buildings, open spaces) 	Leadership from Local Economic Development, Main Street and/or Community Foundations Begin Small Identify Projects & Strategy	Learn Repeat Better	Repeat Bigger Sustain
2. CONNECT COMMUNITIES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Celebrate cultural heritage (incorporate into signage, public art, programs) Link physical & cultural assets (new trails, trail enhancements, activation) Advance regional tourism through relationships, collective strategies & efforts 	Leadership emerges from Goals 5 & 6 (key partners will be schools, youth-serving organizations, arts anchors) Advocate & Connect Train & Co-Design Identify Projects & Strategy Pilot Programs	Learn Repeat Better	Grow & Sustain
3. DEEPEN NEXT GENERATION ATTACHMENT <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empower civic engagement by involving youth Expand arts opportunities for all ages – co-design with target audiences Build creative career pipelines (internships, programs) 	Forge ECI takes the lead (Local Economic Development Organizations and Community Foundations partner) Convene Groups Identify Opportunities Build Momentum	Learn Repeat Better	Grow & Sustain
4. GENERATE BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empower creative capacity (affordable spaces, connect to resources, training) Grow creative opportunity (support paid gigs, retail, expand markets) 			
5. MOBILIZE, COLLABORATE & COMMUNICATE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mobilize county-level creative networks (coffee & calendar mtgs, build networks) Catalyze a regionwide movement (cross sector, annual convening) 			
6. FORMALIZE SUSTAINABLE COMMITMENTS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build stakeholder support Build policy infrastructure (% for art, streamline policies...) Secure sustainable funding 			

The Toolkit

We encourage readers to follow the guidance found in The Toolkit as they move forward with this plan (*beginning on page 115*). These resources align directly with goals and are designed to deepen understanding, build confidence, and equip leaders with the tools they need to translate ideas into action. Not every idea will fit every community, but all can inform new approaches.

What You Can Do Now

Forge ECI will take the lead with Goals 5 and 6, providing a structure for other conversations, and IEDC will roll out Arts Initiative funding opportunities. But both of these are only first steps in a long race toward success. Arts and culture planning and implementation is a team sport, and this plan is intended to work at the region, county, community, and even the organizational and individual levels.

So, a few suggestions for getting started.

Region-Level Forge ECI	<p>Roll Out</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Host discussions and presentations of the plan for key stakeholders in each of the counties to build buy-in and early action steps <p>Begin Implementation & Support Early Action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate first meetings for all under Goals 5 and 6 to start new networks Host webinars in support of the LEI Initiative when re-launched, and offer proposal review consultations
Organizations & Councils at Any Level	<p>Take it In</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Read the plan and discuss it as a group Dive into the information for your county, and add to it Dive into the other counties, to find new opportunities Look for connections to your mission and existing plans <p>Act On It</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Publicly endorse the plan Use the resources in the plan to learn more and guide your organization in setting goals that align with the plan

Digging Deeper into The Role of Community Foundations in this Plan

Community Foundations already play important roles as funders, convenors, capacity-builders, connectors, and more. This plan leans into those roles, which underscores the importance of community foundations as key implementation partners for this plan.

Many have already begun the work.

For example, the Community Foundation of Randolph County is IAC's local service partner, committed to supporting cultural activities throughout the region. The Community Foundation of Muncie & Delaware County has led the community planning process for the arts in Muncie. All eight foundations have strategies that mirror ones in this plan such as building capacity and convening alliances.

We couldn't ask for better alignment and expect the same across the region.

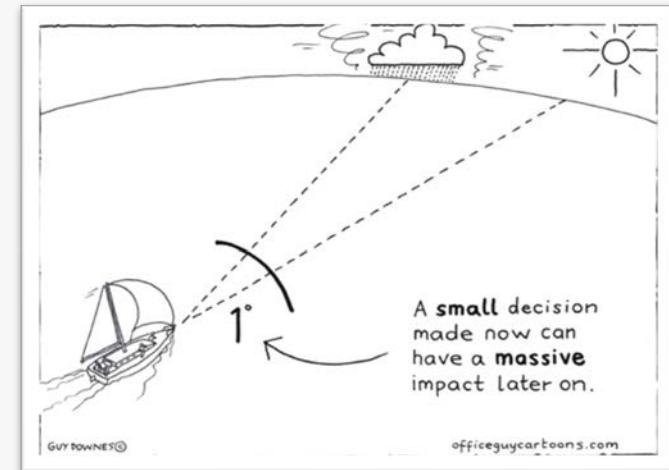


More of What You Can Do Now...

County-Level	<p>Community Foundations & Tourism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Start a Coffee & Calendars-like group in your county Call your peers across the region, convene, and start discussing the plan <p>Economic Development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invite the creative sector to join you in touring empty and underused buildings / sites to inventory them throughout the county (downtowns and elsewhere) and share ideas for their use
Community-Level	<p>Main Street</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take the Downtown Revitalization Readiness Assessment Convene key stakeholders to discuss the plan and the assessment Host walking tours for key stakeholders to better know your assets and identify opportunities <p>Civic Organizations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Join in when the community foundation, economic development, tourism, Main Street, or arts and culture anchor calls <p>Local Government</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Go back and review the ideas on page 51. Learn about and explore public policy and funding available to you Meet with the creative sector to understand its strengths and challenges
The Creative Sector	<p>Arts Nonprofits & Groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Call your peers across the region, convene, and start discussing the plan Join the local Chamber of Commerce, Main Street, and related Get to know the leaders for all of the above, then get a seat their table Join in the conversations and tours OR take the lead in getting them started (don't wait for others) <p>Artists & Creative Businesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Check out offerings from IAC, IEDC, and your local SBA <p>Public Libraries, Historic Societies & Museums</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Call your peers across the region, convene, and start discussing the plan
Any Individual	<p>Get Inspired, Learn Something New, & Share the Plan</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Read something from The Toolkit, then keep exploring Call a friend and talk about the plan Do something on this list of things that don't require anyone's permission

Before We Go... What's your one small thing?

Just as one small decision now can have a massive impact over time, so one small action can sustain momentum.



The Recommendation

We encourage every reader to consciously identify one small thing to do today, tomorrow, the next day when they put this document down.

- Who should you meet and talk with?
- What can you learn more about?
- What can you talk with your board about?
- What action can you take that aligns with something in the plan?

Once that is done...

What's your next small thing?

Contact

Caitlin Hancock, chancock@forgeeci.com

Recommended Tool for Implementation

Every Small Town Can Try Coffee & Calendars

It's the antidote to "I wish I'd known about that!" Ever found out about an event or project in your town only *after* it was happening? Ever wish you could have helped with something or offered some insight, *if you only knew it was coming?* You want to collaborate more with local and regional organizations, but you can't possibly know everything that's going on. ***Even in a small town, we don't keep each other informed like you'd think.***

Here's the simple solution: Why not just get folks together and compare organization calendars once a month or so? ***Keep it simple:***

- Invite some local people to coffee.
- Ask them to bring their groups' calendars.
- Go somewhere together and get some coffee.
- Let each person go over their group's calendar and tell what they have going on.
- That's all. Just share coffee and calendars.

Who to invite: Start with people who are part of any organizations related to your ideas. Think of arts or history groups, town or county government, the chamber of commerce or schools. ***You can start with a few and grow over time.*** Reach out to all kinds of community groups, local boards, churches, organizations, clubs, and everyone. Have them bring their calendars, too. Yes, declare it as an official public meeting of government groups if the law requires. Whatever you need to do to stay legal, but keep the coffee discussion itself informal.

What to talk about: ***The only goals (at first) are to share what you have planned and get to know each other better. Coffee and calendars.*** Later, people will naturally start talking about maybe cooperating, or doing shared projects, or noticing when they have shared goals. Then even later, maybe people can talk about collaborating in bigger ways. It will all start with just a few folks sitting down for "Coffee and Calendars."

Avoid this common trap: Don't try to replace the in-person get together with a combined online calendar. ***The calendar is not the goal. The conversation is the goal.***

Homework: ***Invite one person who is working on good things in your town to join you for Coffee and Calendars.*** Forward this story to them and suggest a specific day next week to get together.

Digging Deeper where
This is already happening

IN EAST CENTRAL INDIANA

Among the region's examples are:

Coffee with Bill Muncie (Delaware)

Bill Lett, developer and Elm Street Brewing owner, hosts this WEEKLY power table in Muncie.

Coffee with the Mayor Connersville (Fayette)

Hosted by a civic group, this periodic sit down is for the community to chat with Mayor Frank.

Emerging Group Connersville (Fayette)

This is a small invitation-only group of leaders just getting started – a first step toward new relationships.

IN A NEIGHBORING REGION

Community Council Brookville (Franklin)

The Franklin Community Foundation schedules these, sends out invitations, and distributes notes to the list.

The Recommendation

Community Foundations in each county are uniquely positioned to launch efforts like this, jumpstarting Goals 5 & 6. We encourage them to dive in.



Article left by [Becky McCray](#) at
<https://saveyour.town/every-small-town-can-try-coffee-and-calendars/>

The content is also found in
From Possibilities to Reality: Save Your Small Town with these Uniquely Do-able Ideas, Projects, and Success Stories
By Deb Brown and Mars Manderico (2024) [available for purchase](#)



