

MARCH 2026

Center *for an*
Urban
Future

CAPITAL REGION'S
CREATIVE
SPARK

Center *for an* Urban Future

CAPITAL REGION'S CREATIVE SPARK is a publication of the Center for an Urban Future. Researched and written by Rachel Neches, Eli Dvorkin, and Sarah Amandolare. Edited by Dorian Block. Additional research by Alejandra Díaz-Pizarro, Udonne Eke-Okoro Rebecca Ortiz, Nora Lewis, Yona Litwin and Samuel Weidman. Designed by Stislow Design.

Center for an Urban Future (CUF) is a leading think tank focused on building a stronger and more equitable economy in New York City, and expanding economic opportunity for all New Yorkers.

CREATIVES REBUILD NEW YORK

This report was made possible thanks to support from **Creatives Rebuild New York**.

Any opinions, findings, or recommendations expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of our funders.

General operating support for the Center for an Urban Future has been provided by **The Clark Foundation** and the **Altman Foundation**.

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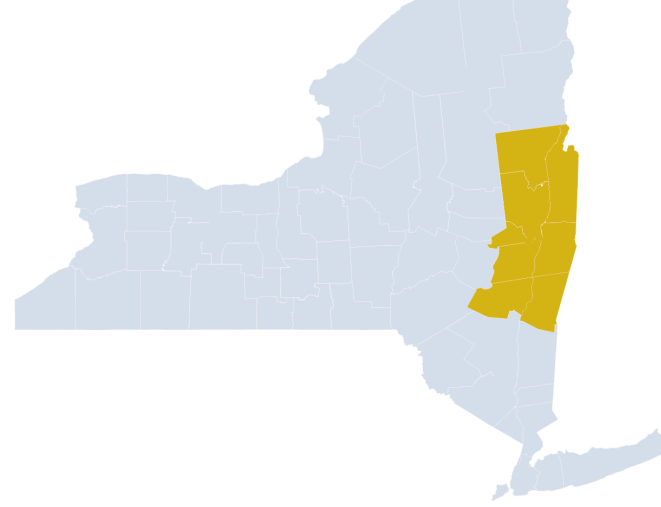
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Regional Arts Profile

Capital Region



ON AN AUGUST NIGHT IN 2024, MORE THAN 200 PEOPLE flooded into Schenectady's Central Park to experience North Indian and Guyanese culture. There were musical performances, food and other vendors, a henna artist, and a Bollywood film screening. The event was the culmination of a year-long effort by Veena Chandra, a North Indian sitarist from Latham, to bring music workshops into Schenectady public schools and the community.

"That was catalyzed by an artist," says Ellen McHale, executive director of New York Folklore, a nonprofit that helped Chandra apply for the National Endowment for the Arts grant to fund her project. Until then, the organization hadn't managed to reach Schenectady's large Guyanese Hindu population, according to McHale.

Throughout the Capital Region, in cities and rural towns, artists have become a powerful catalyst for community building and economic growth, even while largely facing financial instability themselves. From 2014 to 2024, the region's resident artist population increased 43.5 percent, an addition of over 900 artists, while the overall regional population ticked up just 2.9 percent.¹ Several disciplines more than doubled over the last decade, including merchandise displayers and window trimmers (+281.7 percent or +586 total), fine artists (+107.9 percent, or +150 total), and craft artists (+113.1 percent, or +95 total). During that same decade, the arts and culture sector added over 1,000 jobs, a 50 percent increase, while overall employment increased by only 3.7 percent.²

"In the last few years, we have seen a lot of new arts enterprises starting. There's many more small, owner-driven pop-ups and collective organizations," says Elizabeth Reiss, president and CEO of the Arts Center of the Capital Region, a nonprofit arts organization that provides programming, advocacy, and grantmaking services. The Troy Listening Room transformed from a casual live music series in a South Troy private home to a formalized ticket-selling operation. Circus, a community print shop in Albany, started hosting drop-in printmaking workshops. Small venues such as No Fun and the

Hangar on the Hudson have provided a stage for independent musicians from the area and beyond for the past decade. "There's a lot of this kind of activity breaking through after years of planning or more quiet work," Reiss says.

Established arts and cultural venues are also thriving and evolving. The Troy Savings Bank Music Hall hosted 102 concerts—from the Preservation Hall Jazz Band to the National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine—drawing 50,000 visitors in one year. Caffè Lena in Saratoga Springs, among the longest continuously-operating U.S. folk music venues, hosted a sold-out show by South Korean bluegrass group Country GongBang. The two-time Grammy award-winning Albany Symphony Orchestra hired a new director, Emily Fritz-Endres, among a "new wave" of Capital Region women arts leaders recognized by the Times Union.³

Ambitious artists and cultural organizations from the Capital Region are making their mark locally and further afield. Painter Bianca DiLella and multidisciplinary artist Maya Lewis led afterschool art programs for Hamilton Hill Arts Center that created two new murals in Jerry Burrell Park celebrating the bond between mothers and sons. Printmaker Rachael Sophrin Lorimer and performing artist Justin Reif collected personal histories from multigenerational residents of Troy's underserved Hillside North Neighborhood and led collaborative artworks that will be housed at the Hart Cluett Museum. In 2025, the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Wisconsin, undertook the challenging task of choosing four resident artists from 700 applicants for its program, which offers rare access to industrial facilities for three months. Margaret Jacobs, one of the selected resident artists, says first completing a residency with her hometown arts organization Salem Art Works in 2024 "helped me put myself on track for the residency I'm in now."

Former Glens Falls Post-Star editor Ken Tingley adapted his memoir for the play "The Last American Newspaper," the Adirondack Theatre Festival's first local commission in 25 years. The Black Theatre Troupe of Upstate New York, which received the City of Albany Commission on Human Rights's

annual recognition award, staged its first musical, *Once On This Island*, featuring 25 local BIPOC actors and drawing hundreds of people to the Capital Repertory Theatre. “Six out of eight performances sold out with a very diverse audience, and the other two performances had over 200 people,” says Jean-Remy Monnay, founder and artistic director of the Black Theatre Troupe. “That’s why I started this, to give opportunities and make local theater more diverse.”

Public art has also been cropping up in all corners of the area. Troy Art Block, featuring 27 temporary murals by multiple artists, was named the No. 1 Best New Festival by USA Today, beating out festivals in much larger cities. Muralgarten is transforming a five acre section of Glens Falls’ Shirt Factory neighborhood into a public art space with murals, sculptures, history panels, and landscaping. Schenectady unveiled its largest mural yet, *A New Day*, a 40-foot-tall piece inspired by local students.

Behind all of this growth, most artists are struggling to make a living. Seventy-seven percent of artists in the Capital Region surveyed by Creatives Rebuild New York say that their household earns less than \$35,000 a year. Seventy percent of the artists surveyed say that they could not cover a \$400 cash emergency.

Support from New York State, including the Regional Economic Development Council (REDC) initiative and New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA), has been essential to growing and diversifying the Capital Region arts landscape, and using the arts as an economic development strategy. The region received \$6.7 million in grants for artists and arts organizations in FY 2025, which is 7.6 percent of statewide NYSCA funding.⁴ In 2025, six of 52 REDC grants that went to the Capital Region are supporting arts and culture projects, including upgrades to the Palace Theatre, and *Broadway Begins Here*, a marketing campaign to attract overnight visitors and tourists to world-premiere productions in the region put on by the Capital Repertory Theatre, Adirondack Theatre Festival, and Proctors.

In FY2025 Collar Works, a nonprofit focused on emerging and underrepresented artists, received a \$960,000 NYSCA capital improvement grant to renovate a historic Troy foundry into a new headquarters with artist live-work units, affordable artist studios, and community gathering space. The Troy Savings Bank Music Hall received a \$3.4 million NYSCA capital improvement grant that same year, along with \$1.6 million from Empire State Development for major updates including a 200-seat regional Music Hub.

Although local officials “have a better understanding of the power of the arts” compared to even a few years ago, says Reiss of the Arts Center of the Capital Region says, federal funding instability threatens to set back progress and commitments. Slashes to National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding hit the Capital Region hard: total funding to the region declined 82.5 percent in just one year, falling from \$381,000 in FY 2024 to \$66,724 in FY 2025. Only three grants were distributed in 2024, compared to 13 grants the prior year.⁵ Already, the Empire State Youth Orchestra, based in Schenectady, saw its \$10,000 grant offered last year, intended to support its after-school program for low-income students, withdrawn.⁶

Simultaneously, some organizations who have the capacity to be declining NEA grants this year, fearing censorship and refusing to comply with requirements that ban a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). In September 2025, the Arts Center of the Capital Region rejected a \$50,000 grant, intended for a public art project in Troy, over concerns of censorship under new updates to NEA guidelines.⁷

Alternatives to federal funding have become more important than ever. Albany County has stepped up by launching the Arts and Culture Grant Program, which awarded more than \$500,000 to six local organizations at the end of 2024, followed by more than \$700,000 to 28 local artists and arts organizations in 2025.⁸

Nationally, the Helen Frankenthaler and Andy Warhol Foundations distributed \$800,000 to small arts organizations to make up for canceled NEA Challenge America Grants. Reiss worries that, instead of investing in the arts, private funders and the state will be forced to use funds to fill deficits in areas outside of the arts.

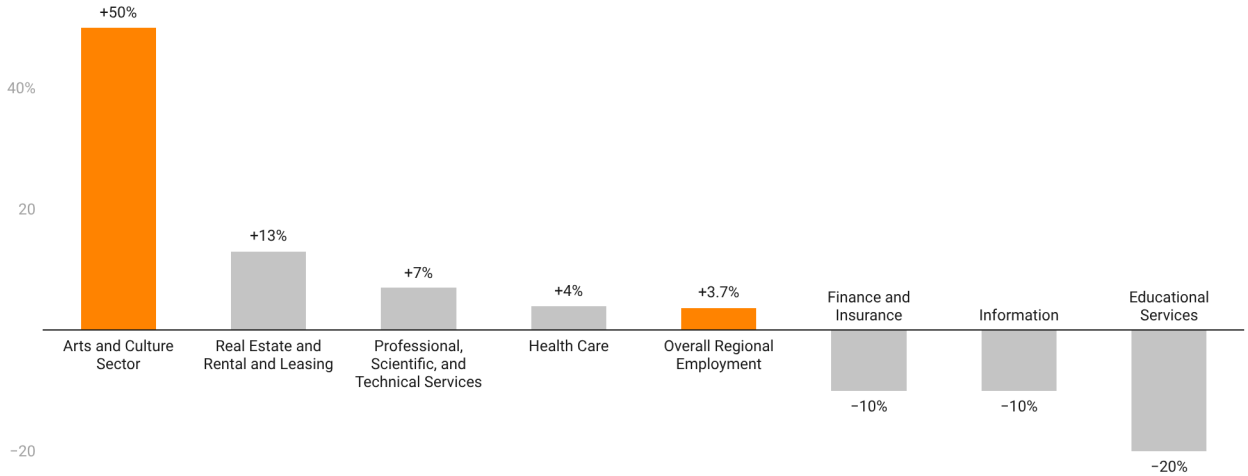
“Everyone’s holding their breath because we all know the federal budget is going to include radical cuts,” Reiss says. “And the state of New York will be forced into funding some of those cuts for its own citizens.”

This is especially critical given that there are more artists in the region, but many are struggling to make a living. Seventy-seven percent of artists in the Capital Region surveyed by Creatives Rebuild New York say that their household earns less than \$35,000 a year. Seventy percent of the artists surveyed say that they could not cover a \$400 cash emergency.

1. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast.
2. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast.
3. Steve Barnes, "New Wave of Arts Leaders Hits Albany Institute," *Times Union*, February 1, 2025, <https://www.timesunion.com/preview/article/new-wave-arts-leaders-hits-albany-institute-19970088.php>.
4. Center for an Urban Future analysis of NYSCA funding.
5. Center for an Urban Future analysis of National Endowment for the Arts grants.
6. Benita Zahn, "Two Local Orchestras Lose Funding Due to Federal Cuts," *WNYT*, January 15, 2025, <https://wnyt.com/top-stories/two-local-orchestras-lose-funding-due-to-federal-cuts/>.
7. Steve Barnes, "Arts Center Gets NEA Grant for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Efforts," *Times Union*, July 8, 2025, <https://www.timesunion.com/preview/article/arts-center-dei-nea-grant-21040902.php>.
8. "Albany County Awards More Than \$729,000 to Local Arts Initiatives," *Advance Albany County Alliance*, August 2, 2024, <https://advancealbanycounty.com/news/93/Albany-County-Awards-More-Than-729-000-to-Local-Arts-Initiatives/>.

Arts and culture employment growth outpaces major sectors in the Capital Region

Change in jobs, 2014 to 2024 (%)

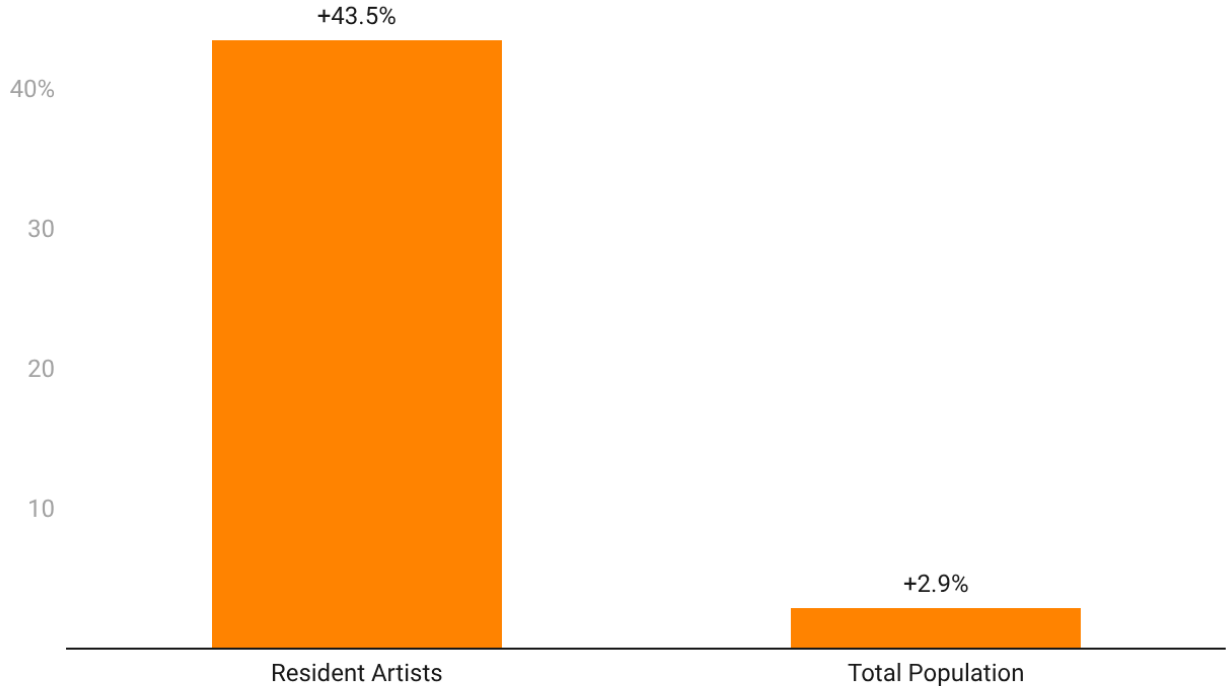


Arts and culture sector grew from 2,133 jobs in 2014 to 3,200 jobs in 2024

Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. • Created with Datawrapper

The Capital Region's artist population grows faster than the region as a whole

Change in population, 2014 to 2024 (%)

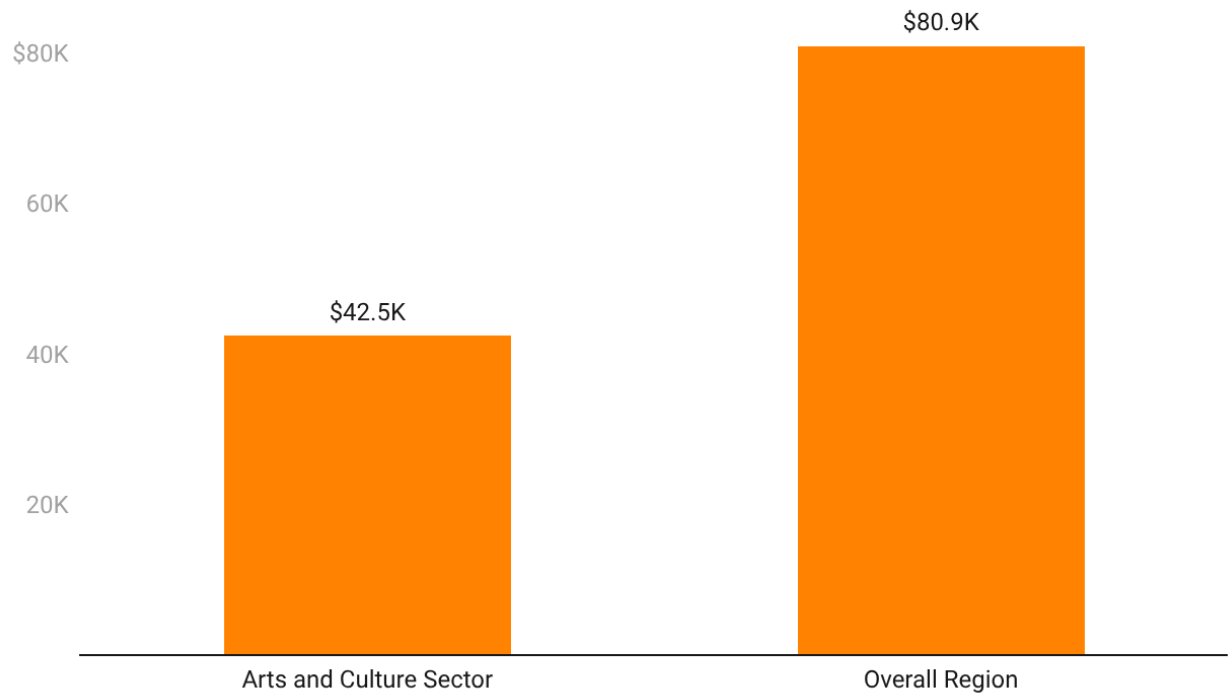


Artist population in the Capital Region totaled 3,026 in 2024.

Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. • Created with Datawrapper

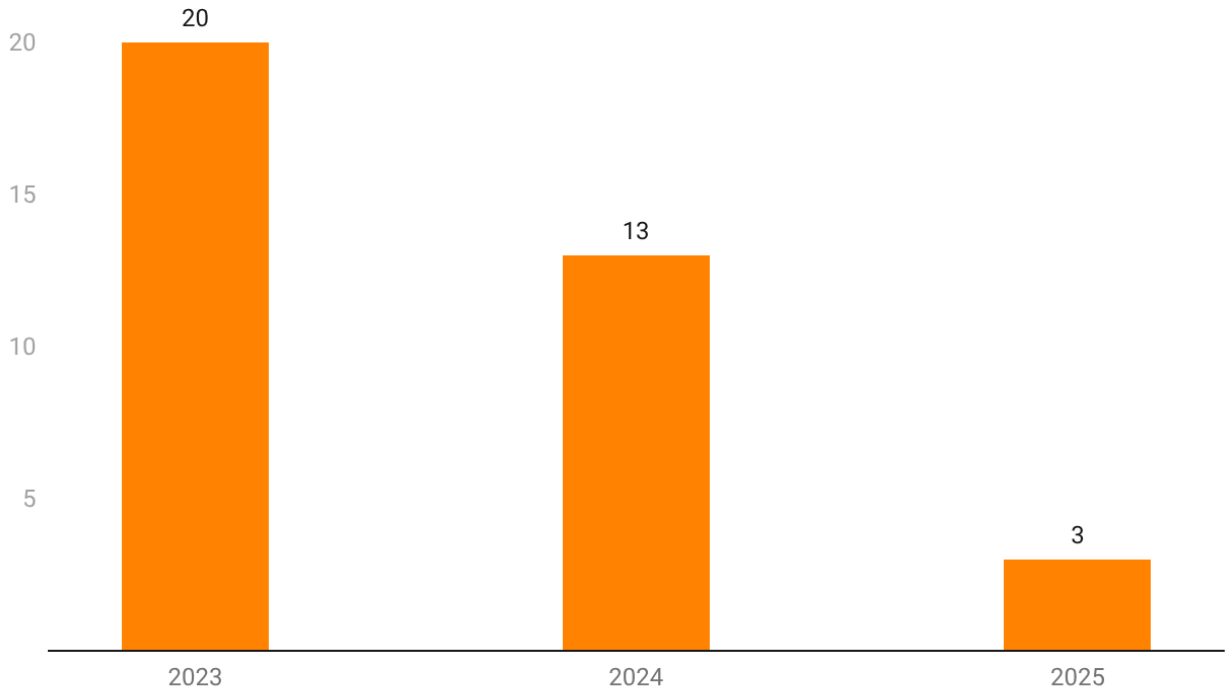
Arts and culture workers in the Capital Region earn half the private-sector average annual wage

2024



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. • Created with Datawrapper

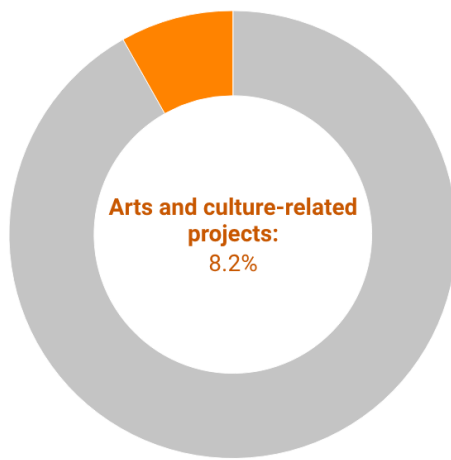
National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grants to the Capital Region fall from 13 to 3 in just one year



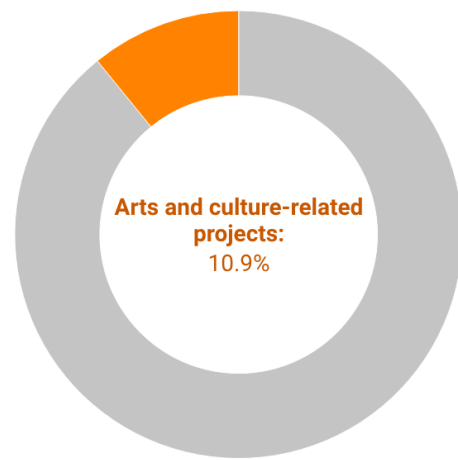
Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of the data from the National Endowment for the Arts Online Grant Search, available from <https://grantsearch.nea.gov/>. • Created with Datawrapper

In the Capital Region, 8.2 percent of FY 2025 REDC funding went to arts and culture-related projects

■ Other projects ■ Arts and culture-related projects



Capital Region



New York State

Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the Round 15 Regional Economic Development Council (REDC) Awards • Created with Datawrapper

Recommendations

1. PROVIDE RELIABLE, INFLATION-ADJUSTED FUNDING FOR THE ARTS. New York's arts sector is playing a growing role in driving economic vitality across communities statewide, but public funding has not kept pace with rising costs or the sector's expanding impact. When NYSCA was at its peak in 1990, it provided the equivalent of \$133.4 million in operating support, adjusted for inflation; in FY 2026, that figure was just \$84 million. Recent budget proposals would move funding in the wrong direction, underscoring the need for a more stable and predictable approach. The state should commit to increasing annual aid to localities to \$150 million, indexed to inflation going forward, while sustaining capital funding at \$80 million annually. Without reliable operating support, the state risks weakening one of its most effective engines of regional growth.

2. INTEGRATE THE ARTS ACROSS THE STATE'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND POLICY AGENDA. Despite its growing impact, the arts sector still represents a small share of the state's broader economic development strategy. New York should make the arts a core pillar of its approach to inclusive growth—ensuring the sector has a seat at the table in regional planning and investment decisions and expanding the share of arts-focused projects within REDC and Downtown Revitalization Initiative funding. State agencies should also incorporate arts-based strategies into their core work. This could include engaging artists to support community outreach around major transportation and infrastructure projects, partnering with artists to design and deliver public health campaigns, and expanding technical assistance for affordable housing developments that include artist preference units and live-work space. Embedding these approaches across agencies will help reduce costs, improve program effectiveness, and expand opportunity across the arts ecosystem.

3. LAUNCH A PORTABLE BENEFITS PILOT FOR FREELANCERS AND SELF-EMPLOYED ARTISTS. The number of independent artists, writers, and performers in New York State has grown rapidly, yet most lack access to basic safety nets such as health insurance, paid leave, retirement savings, and unemployment protections. This is especially challenging given the intermittent nature of creative work and the volatility of income in the sector. The state should pilot a portable benefits system that allows workers to accrue and retain benefits as they move between gigs, employers, and sectors. Benefits should follow the worker—not the job—and be designed to minimize administrative burden while maximizing access. Expanding access to benefits would help stabilize creative careers and retain artists across New York's regions.

4. TAKE ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE PROGRAMS TO THE NEXT LEVEL. The state's recent launch of a statewide artist-in-residence initiative was an important and long-overdue step—the first time New York has embedded artists within state agencies at scale. Now is the time to build on that progress by expanding the model significantly. With leadership from the governor, New York should extend artist-in-residence programs across additional state agencies and into county and local governments, while also partnering with schools, community-based organizations, and cultural institutions to create a broader statewide network. Public-private partnerships can help fund and scale this expansion, bringing in philanthropic and institutional partners to support placements and program infrastructure. With sustained investment, the state could develop a true statewide artist corps—creating a lasting system for deploying artists in public service across New York.

5. FUND AND EXPAND THE SAVING PERFORMING ARTS AND CULTURAL EXPERIENCES (NY SPACE) PROGRAM. The governor's proposed \$10 million NY SPACE initiative would help nonprofit performing arts organizations acquire and stabilize permanent venues. The legislature should act to fund this program and position it as the foundation for a longer-term strategy to expand access to affordable space for the arts. Over time, the program should expand to support organizations seeking to create new spaces in development projects, activate vacant storefronts and underutilized buildings, and secure long-term affordable leases. It should also help address ongoing operating challenges, including rising insurance costs and maintenance expenses. Expanding access to stable, affordable space will be essential to sustaining the sector's recent growth.

6. GENERATE AND DEDICATE RECURRING REVENUE FOR THE ARTS. The arts ecosystem remains highly vulnerable to fiscal swings and one-time funding cycles. To improve long-term stability, policymakers should establish recurring revenue streams dedicated to arts and culture. Potential sources include billboard taxes, surcharges on overnight stays, ticket surcharges on events at major stadiums, and value-capture tools tied to new development. The state should also enable the creation of local cultural districts supported by modest, dedicated funding streams to sustain programming and maintenance over time. Establishing predictable revenue would allow the sector to plan, grow, and contribute more consistently to regional economies.

7. EXPAND AND STANDARDIZE NEW YORK'S PERCENT FOR ART POLICY STATEWIDE. New York City's Percent for Art program has, for more than 40 years, required that a share of major public construction budgets be dedicated to public art—transforming public spaces across the city. New York State has a more limited version of this policy tied to certain state building projects, but it does not apply broadly across economic development or infrastructure investments. The state should expand and standardize this approach to cover all major state-funded economic development and infrastructure projects. Doing so would ensure that arts and culture are integrated from the outset, enhancing public spaces while supporting local artists and creative economies.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

Capital Region's Creative Spark is part of a series of 10 reports—one for each of the state's economic development regions—documenting the growing power of the arts as a catalyst for economic vitality, as well as the challenges facing the state's arts sector.

For more, check out: nycfuture.org/NYCreativeSpark