

MARCH 2026

Center *for an*  
Urban  
Future

**FINGER LAKES'**  
**CREATIVE**  
**SPARK**

# Center *for an* Urban Future

**FINGER LAKES' 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**.

### EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Jonathan Bowles

### EDITORIAL & POLICY DIRECTOR

Eli Dvorkin

### CHIEF OF STAFF

Stephanie Arevalo

### SENIOR EDITOR

Dorian Block

### SENIOR DATA & POLICY RESEARCHER

Rachel Neches

### SENIOR FELLOW FOR CLIMATE & OPPORTUNITY

John Surico

### POLICY RESEARCHER

Alejandra Díaz-Pizarro

### RESEARCH AND OPERATIONS ASSOCIATE

Sophia Tumolo

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Gifford Miller (Chairman)

Margaret Anadu

Jonathan Bowles

Rafael E. Cestero

Russell Dubner

Garnesha Ezediaro

Susan Fine

Kyle Kimball

Katy Knight

Jessie Lazarus

David Lebenstein

Eric S. Lee

Josh Moskowitz

Monisha Nariani

Max Neukirchen

Andrew Reicher

Peter Schubert

John Siegal

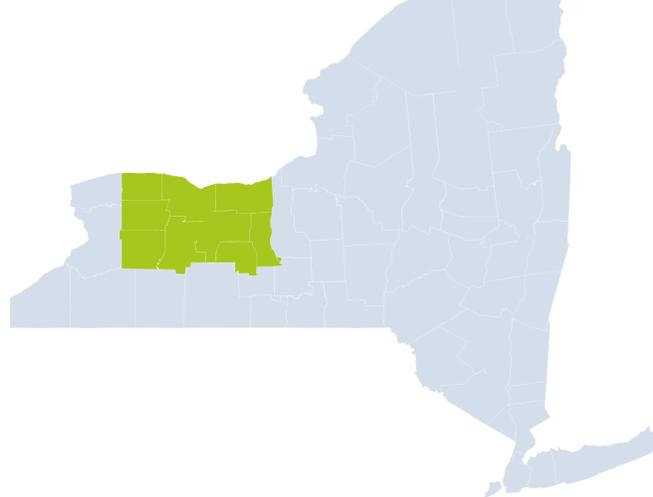
Thomas Vecchione

Sherry Wang

Kate Wittels

# Regional Arts Profile

## Finger Lakes



**THE FINGER LAKES, LONG KNOWN FOR THEIR NATURAL** beauty, are now a home to increasing numbers of artists, arts organizations, and celebrated annual cultural festivals—from the decades-old Indigenous Music & Arts Festival at the Ganondagan State Historic Site, where Haudenosaunee dancers, musicians, storytellers, and artists celebrate traditions with thousands of visitors each year, to the quirky celebration of contemporary puppetry at the New York State Puppet Festival, which began in 2018. In September, the 200-year state-wide celebration of the Erie Canal included the Erie Canal Artisan Festival run by Genesee-Orleans Regional Arts Council (GO ART!) brought an estimated 100,000 visitors to the three-day juried artisan festival, ferrying visitors by boat taxi.<sup>1</sup>

Once home to Xerox, Bausch + Lomb, and Kodak, the Finger Lakes region is no longer the tech innovation and manufacturing powerhouse it was. But a growing arts and culture scene is renewing the region's identity and encouraging young people to stay, even when artists themselves are often financially instable.

As the Finger Lakes grapple with stagnation, the arts have emerged as a powerful catalyst for growth. Over the last decade, employment in the arts and culture sector increased 20.1 percent, while total regional employment is the same as it was a decade ago.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, artists are surging: the resident artists and design worker population grew 28 percent from 2014 to 2024, even as the total population experienced no growth. Among growing disciplines, merchandise displayers and window trimmers are up 193.6 percent (+395 total), fashion designers are up 190 percent (+76 total), and fine artists, including painters, sculptors, and illustrators, are up 84.6 percent (+104 total).<sup>3</sup>

One of the region's greatest strengths is its cultural diversity, which has in part driven and shaped its arts renaissance. Garth Fagan Dance, now in its 55th season, put Rochester on the global map through its fusion of modern

dance, Afro-Caribbean dance, and ballet. New spaces like The Avenue Blackbox Theatre, a Black-led arts organization founded by Reenah Golden, aims to transform the Joseph Avenue neighborhood into an arts corridor. The Borinquen Dance Theatre, which has trained more than 1,000 underrepresented youth in Puerto Rican dance and performing arts since 1981, recently moved into its own dedicated space for the first time in its history. The Rochester Latino Theatre Company serves as the city's first bilingual theater, and gives Latino writers and performers a vital platform for their experiences.

Individual artists living in the region range from accordionist Richard Koski, from the Finnish band Metku; Seneca Nation artist Hayden Haynes, who recently had his work added to the Brooklyn Museum's collection; and Danielle Ponder, once a public defender in Rochester, who is now a breakout R&B/soul artist named one of NPR's 2023 "Artists to Watch."

Local businesses are taking notice of the arts' role in community revitalization. In Rochester, The Joseph Avenue Arts and Culture Alliance—launched by the local business association—has been working to repurpose a long-abandoned historic building into an anchor for neighborhood arts programming.

"The value of a robust arts and culture community is something local lawmakers really need to focus on," says Hillary Olson, president of the Rochester Museum & Science Center. "That's a big reason why people stay here—it's part of what makes our community strong. And in recent years, so many of our arts organizations have expanded their work to support populations in need."

Olson says the museum saw a 26 percent increase in attendance in the last year through Museums for All, a national program offering reduced admission for visitors receiving SNAP benefits—evidence of both growing demand and the essential role that arts organizations play in community wellbeing.

While making contributions that drive economic growth, artists themselves are often struggling financially. Almost 65 percent of Finger Lakes artists surveyed by Creatives Rebuild New York say that they could not cover a \$400 cash emergency if one came up. In the Finger Lakes, arts and culture workers earn an average of just \$39,163 annually—far below the regional average wage of \$73,659.

State funding has played an essential role in fueling the region's arts and culture sector and expanding its reach. The Village of Perry received \$9.7 million from New York State's Downtown Revitalization Initiative, for 11 projects, including transforming Village Hall into an arts venue and converting a vacant historic building into artist lofts. Regional Economic Development Council (REDC) grants are bringing Architects of Air's internationally-acclaimed "Luminarium" installation to Rochester, hoping to draw 100,000 visitors, a new building for the Saunders Finger Lakes Museum in Branchport, and support for the historic Williams Opera House renovation in downtown Attica.

Yet even with these successes, funding has not kept pace with need. The New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) remains the backbone of support for the region's cultural organizations, but after adjusting for inflation, operating aid to localities is down 27.1 percent in the Finger Lakes—from \$4.1 million in FY 2000 to \$3 million in FY 2025.

Looming federal cuts threaten to deepen the shortfall. From FY 2024 to FY 2025, National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding to the Finger Lakes fell 44.9 percent from \$276,602 to \$152,500. In Rochester, youth theater organization A Magical Journey Thru Stages received a cancellation notice for its \$10,000 NEA grant, intended to support collaborations with a city charter school.<sup>4</sup> Visual Studies Workshop was similarly impacted when both current and forthcoming NEA grants—meant to provide direct support to artists—were abruptly withdrawn.

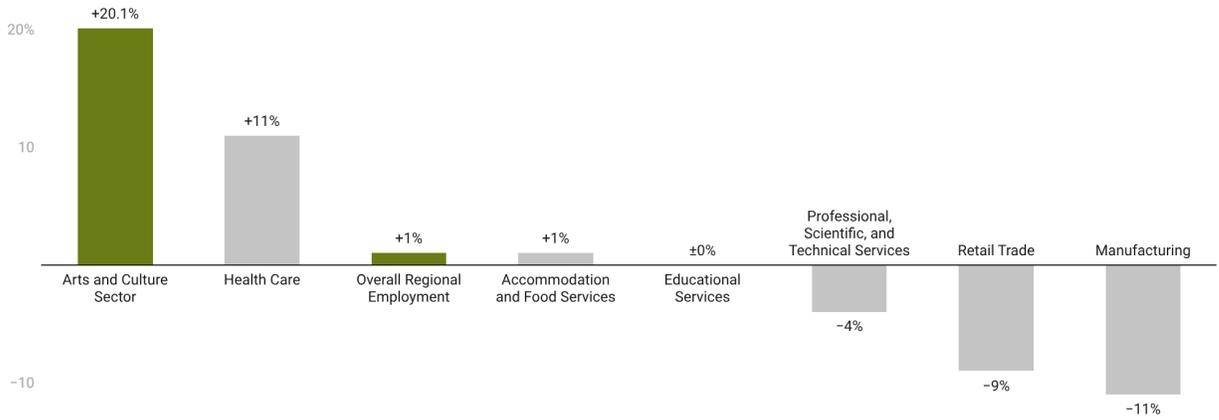
"We may have to bring in fewer artists, publish fewer books," said Jessica Johnston, executive director of Visual Studies Workshop, on a recent segment on WXXI News. "This is certainly an attempt to stifle artistic expression and free speech."<sup>5</sup>

These financial pressures are felt most acutely by the more than 3,000 people who work in the arts and cultural sector. Almost 65 percent of Finger Lakes artists surveyed by Creatives Rebuild New York say that they could not cover a \$400 cash emergency if one came up. In the Finger Lakes, arts and culture workers earn an average of just \$39,163 annually—far below the regional average wage of \$73,659.

1. *Erie Canal Artisan Festival, GO ART!*, accessed February 22, 2026, <https://goart.org/erie-canal-artisan-festival/>.
2. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast.
3. Ibid.
4. Daniel Finkelstein, "Visual Studies Workshop Appeals NEA Grant Cut amid Trump Administration Funding Shift," *13WHAM*, May 7, 2025, <https://13wham.com/news/local/visual-studies-workshop-appeals-nea-grant-cut-amid-trump-administration-funding-shift-national-endowment-for-the-arts-organization>.
5. Patrick Hosken, Megan Mack, and Julie Williams, "Visual Studies Workshop Enters a New Era," *WXXI News*, March 7, 2025, <https://www.wxnews.org/show/connections/2025-03-07/visual-studies-workshop-enters-a-new-era>.

### In the Finger Lakes, employment in the arts and culture sector outpaces other sectors

Change in jobs, 2014 to 2024 (%)

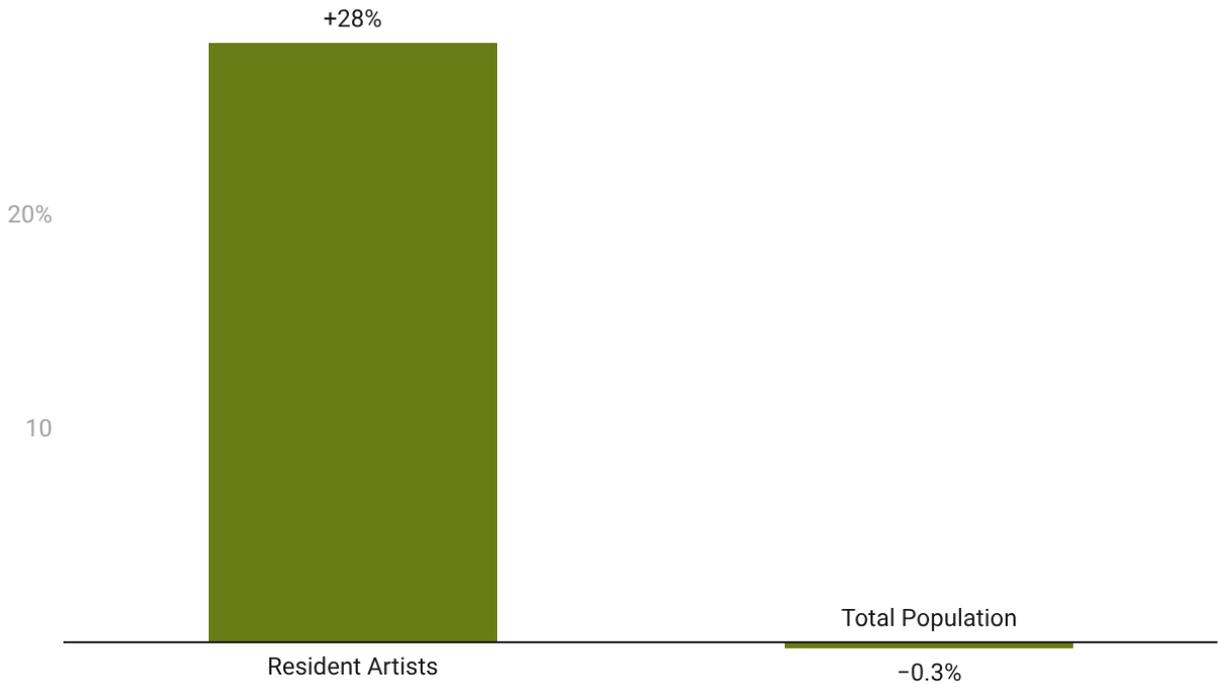


Arts and culture sector totaled 3,242 jobs in 2024.

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

### The Finger Lake's resident artist population grows rapidly

Change in population, 2014 to 2024 (%)

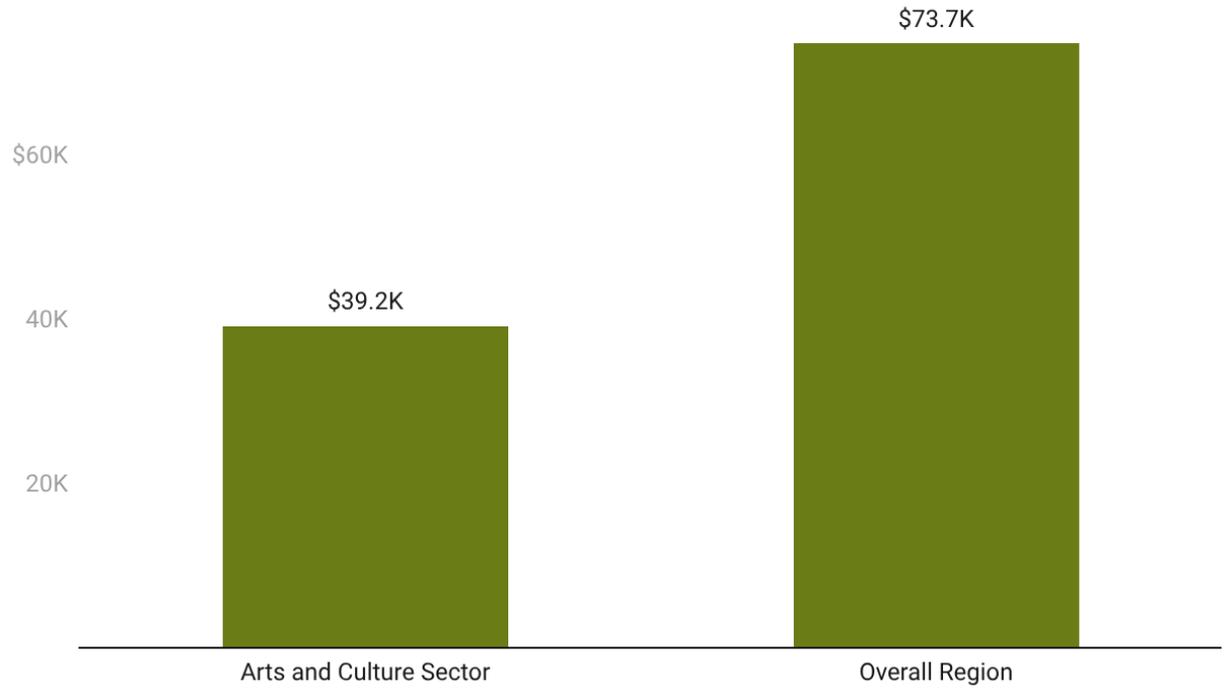


Resident artist population totaled 2,838 in 2024

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

## Arts and culture workers in the Finger Lakes earn far less than the private-sector average annual wage

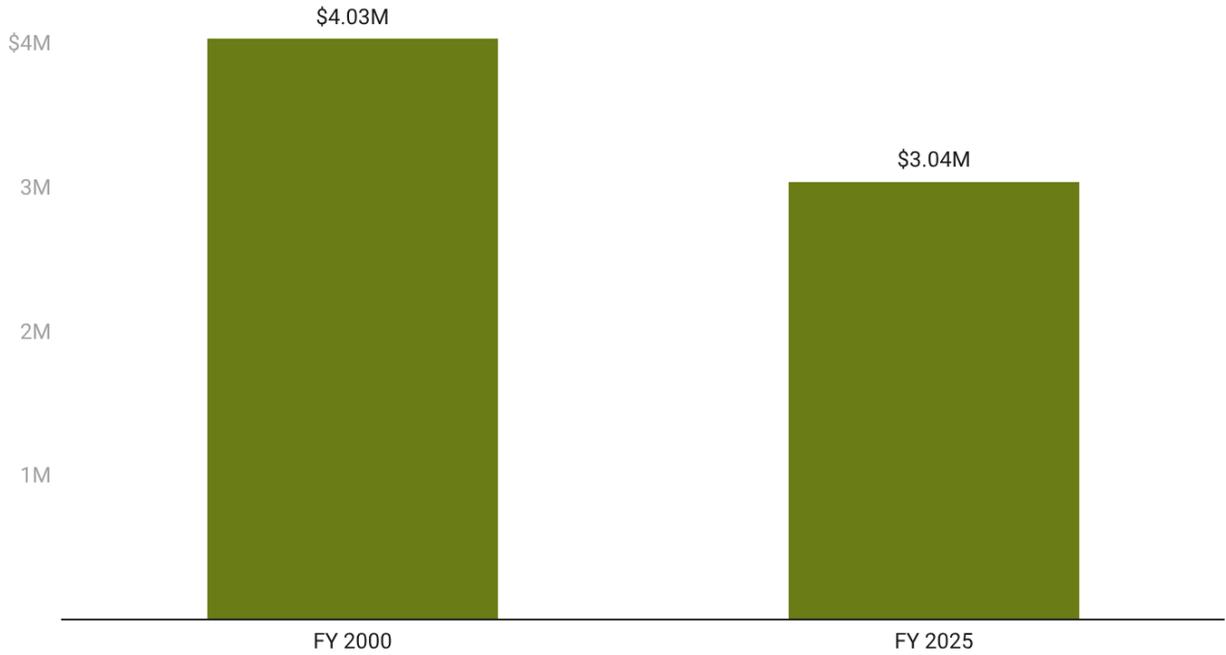
2024



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

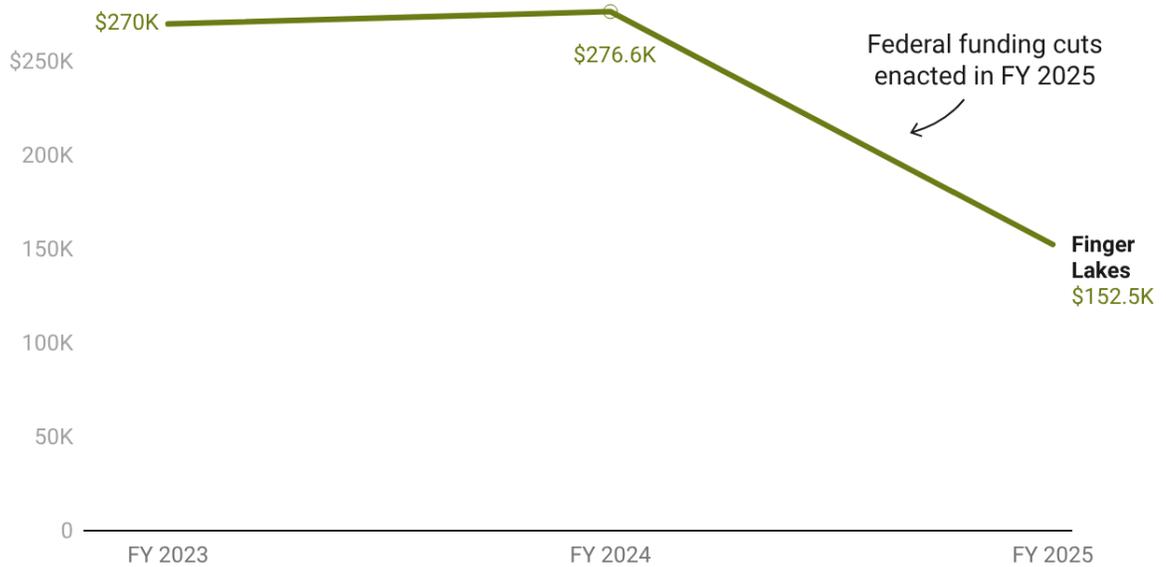
## New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) operating grant funding to the Finger Lakes has declined

After adjusting for inflation, operating grant funding is 27 percent lower in FY 2025 than in FY 2000



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the New York State Council on the Arts, available from [https://www.nysca.org/grant\\_app/org\\_search.cfm](https://www.nysca.org/grant_app/org_search.cfm) • Created with Datawrapper

## National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) funding to the Finger Lakes fell 45 percent in 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

# 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

**Finger Lakes'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](http://nycfuture.org/NYCreativeSpark)