

Center *for an* Urban Future

LONG ISLAND'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

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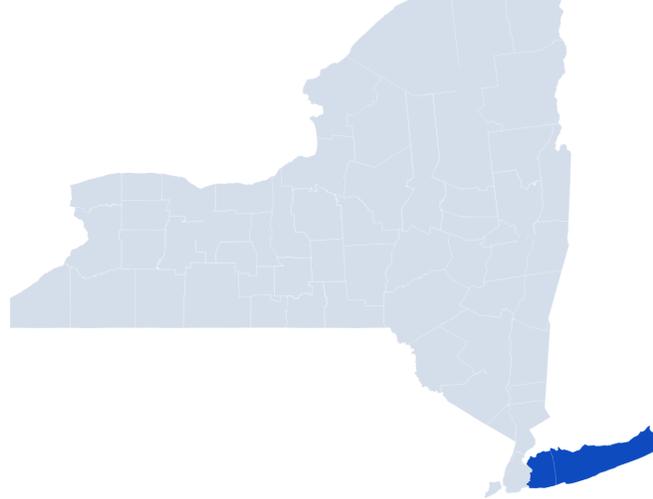
Thomas Vecchione

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Regional Arts Profile

Long Island



DESPITE ITS DIVERSE CREATIVE COMMUNITIES, HUNDREDS of arts institutions, and rich artistic legacy, Long Island has often been overlooked as a focal point for arts and culture. But over the past decade, as resident artists and upstart venues have multiplied, Long Island has emerged as the second-largest arts and culture sector in the state, after New York City. Artists across various career stages have flocked to the region, in turn enlivening once-quiet towns, boosting tourism, and sustaining thousands of jobs, even when their own financial survival is precarious.

“The creative economy is already generating significant activity and prosperity,” says Lauren Wagner, executive director of the Long Island Arts Alliance. “We’re not building potential: it’s already here. The challenge now is ensuring it receives the recognition and support it’s earned.”

From 2014 to 2024, the number of independent artists, writers, and performers working on Long Island nearly doubled, from 1,760 to 3,324, whereas the under-65 population declined by 1 percent. During the same period, the region also experienced a 3.9 percent increase in the number of resident artists and design workers. They include a growing number of craft and fine artists, whose populations increased by 36.8 percent and 16.2 percent respectively.

Long Island artists have been showing their work in galleries, outdoor parks, and communal art centers to reach diverse audiences and expand community access to arts and culture. Christian Scheider and Wunetu Wequai developed Padawe, a video and virtual reality storytelling experience featuring Shinnecock Nation members. The Tiny Collective—including Sage Cotignola, Jeffrey Espinoza, Audreiana Lesty, and Christophe Lima—created 12 public murals with assistance from Suffolk County youth. Brianna Hernández curated two exhibits at Ma’s House & BIPOC Art Studio, the Shinnecock Reservation’s first communal art space.

Harper Bella and Jose Tutiven launched the Long Island Public Arts Festival, featuring large-scale installations, community mural making, and live music in Babylon’s Phelps Lane Park. Filmmaker Hunter Begun introduced

younger audiences to Shinnecock elders’ artwork and stories by creating a social media archive. Marcia Odle-McNair displayed her paintings and mixed media works in the solo exhibition *Reflections on Abstraction* at the Uniondale Library, and the group exhibition *Our Journey*, featuring work by members of the Long Island Black Artist Association, at Westbury Arts.

Arts events and initiatives like these have been quietly transforming communities throughout Long Island, driving foot traffic to small businesses, attracting day-trippers to festivals and galleries, and enhancing quality of life for residents, according to Odle-McNair. “We decorate storefronts in eye-catching and attractive ways. We install murals and sculptures and play music to create an artistic vibe in places where people then want to gather. There’s a movement of money and ideas, which supports a healthy economy and community. We keep Long Island dollars on Long Island,” she says.

The arts has also become a crucial source of jobs. From 2014 to 2024, cultural sector employment surged 25.7 percent, from 6,771 jobs to 8,511 jobs, easily outpacing overall job growth of 5.4 percent. The 8.5 percent increase in arts employment above pre-pandemic levels also helped Long Island recover from the COVID-19 crisis. The number of acting jobs is up 46 percent from pre-pandemic level, from 387 in 2019 to 564 in 2024.

Additionally, artists have helped fuel a surge in tourism to Long Island. Tourism spending increased 18 percent from 2019 to 2023, reaching a record \$7.5 billion, more than any region outside of New York City. The Hamptons International Film Festival attracts a global crowd each October, for instance, while the two-day Charles Dickens Festival in Port Jefferson draws an average of 25,000 people during the holiday season.

But artists’ impacts go well beyond economic growth. In Huntington Station, artist and arts educator Anu Annam teaches many teens who are navigating challenges like discrimination and a lack of belonging. Through their member-

ship in the BIPOC Queer Long Island community and as founder of SEA of Visibility, an arts-based organization designed to fight stigma against mental illness, Annam hopes to create a more supportive and welcoming environment for young people.

“Some people leave Long Island after high school and then stay away because of bad experiences they had here,” Annam says. “We want more young people to feel like they want to stay here.”

Long Island’s population has become more diverse over the past decade. Black, Hispanic, and Asian residents now make up 38.1 percent of the population, compared to 22.5 percent in 2012. Arts institutions and organizations reflect this shift. Ma’s House & BIPOC Art Studio, founded in 2021, hosts 114 resident artists of color each year through its residency program, according to founder Jeremy Dennis, a photographer and member of the Shinnecock Indian Nation.

The unrelenting rise in cost of living further threatens the ability of artists and arts organizations to stay on Long Island. The average annual salary of arts and culture workers is \$49,329, a little less than half the region’s average salary. Many performers, for instance, have yet to rebound from the pandemic and are increasingly being priced out. The total number of Long Island-based dancers, musicians, and singers remains 8 percent below the 2019 level. Meanwhile, many arts councils and cultural services organizations are operating on shoestring budgets and volunteer labor, according to Liz Mirarchi of Babylon Citizens Council on the Arts, which has just two full-time employees.

Support from New York state is critical to the continued growth and diversity of Long Island’s arts and culture sector. Annam, for instance, has received several teaching grants from the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA). But even as Long Island makes up 14.8 percent of the state’s

population, it received just 2.8 percent (\$2.5 million) of NYSCA operating funding in FY 2025, a smaller amount than six out of the 10 economic development regions. Similarly, Long Island received just 0.9 percent (\$70,000) of New York State’s funding from the National Endowment for the Arts in FY 2025.

Because Long Island artists and arts organizations don’t see their region represented in the annual list of NYSCA or NEA grantees, many assume they can’t win and don’t apply—a negative-feedback cycle that prevents the region from taking full advantage of available public funding.

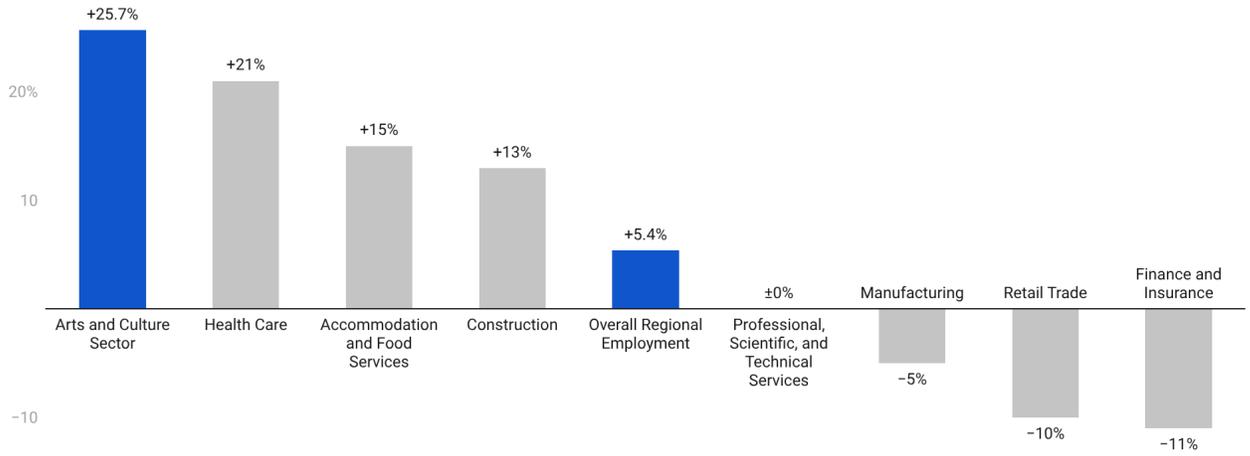
New York State’s Regional Economic Development Council (REDC) grants have become another important source of funding for arts and culture organizations, but there is potential to direct more of that funding toward arts and culture in future years. In FY 2025, almost 12 percent of Long’s Island’s REDC grant funding (a little more than \$3 million) went toward eight arts and culture projects, including a jazz fest run by the Tilles Center for the Performing Arts in collaboration with Jazz at Lincoln Center, an exhibit at The Heckscher Museum of Art, and several historic preservation projects.

The full potential of arts and culture on Long Island has yet to be realized, but already the sector has become a critical source of economic momentum and regional pride. Stacey Sikes, former vice president of government affairs and communications at the Long Island Association, an organization that amplifies the voice of the business community on Long Island, says that the arts are now fundamental to Long Island’s identity and prosperity.

“Our strong diverse arts sector on Long Island is part of what makes our region such a great place to live and is one of the defining characteristics of the Long Island experience,” says Sikes.

Long Island's arts and culture sector thrives

Change in jobs, 2014 to 2024 (%)

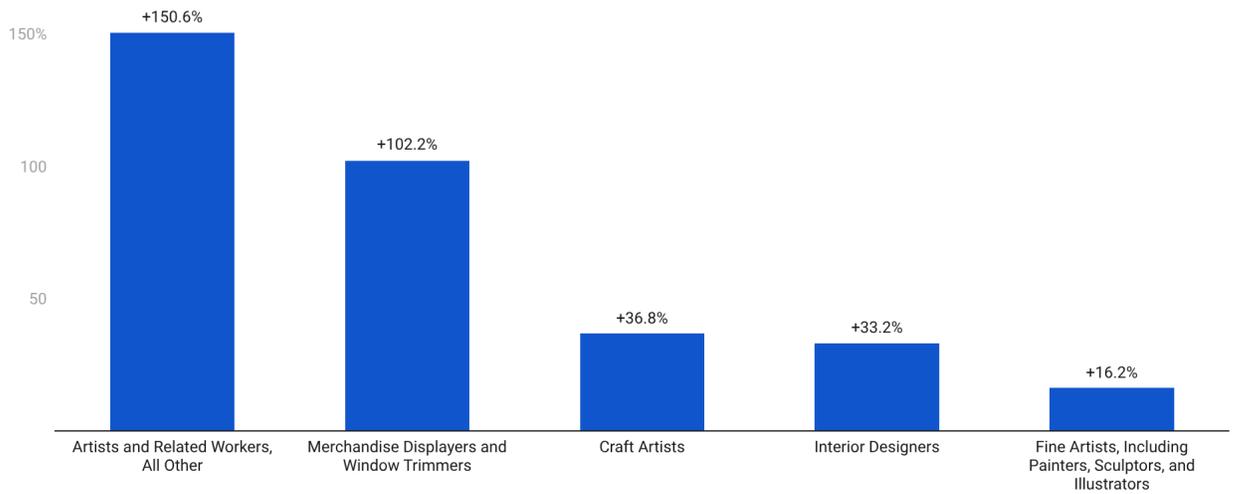


Arts and culture sector totaled 8,511 jobs in 2024

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

Several artist disciplines grow on Long Island

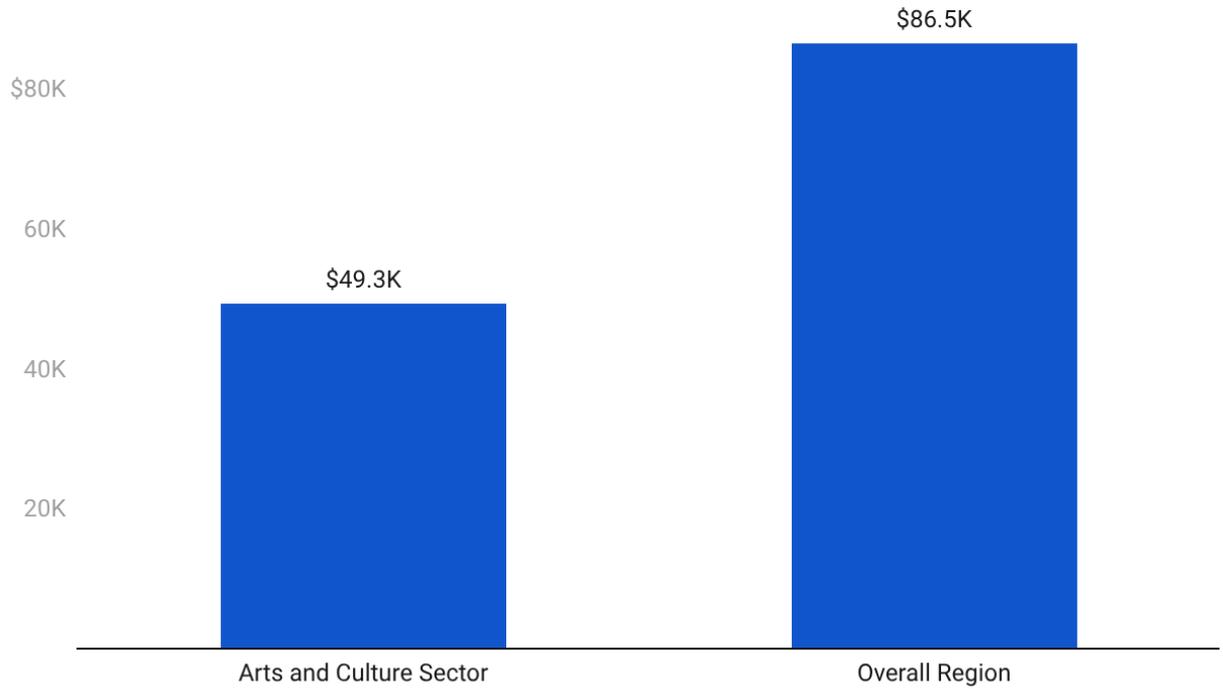
Change in jobs, 2014 to 2024 (%)



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

Arts and culture workers on Long Island earn far less than the private-sector average annual wage

2024

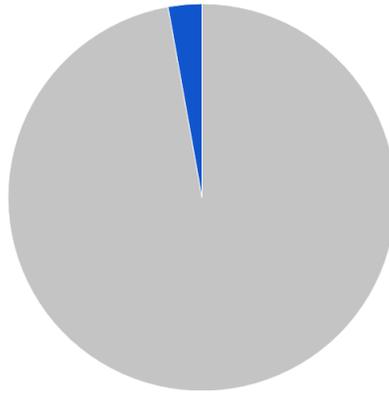


Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. • Created with Datawrapper

Long Island receives disproportionately small share of New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) funding

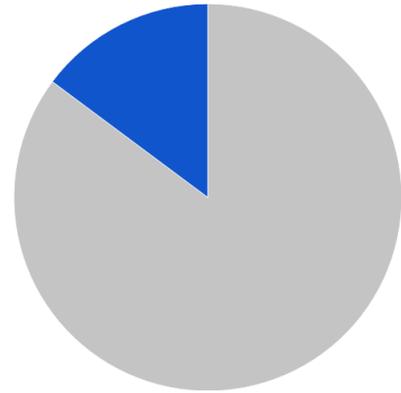
Long Island received 2.8 percent of statewide funding despite making up 14.8 percent of the state's population

■ New York State
■ Long Island



Share of statewide NYSCA funding

Long Island:
2.8%



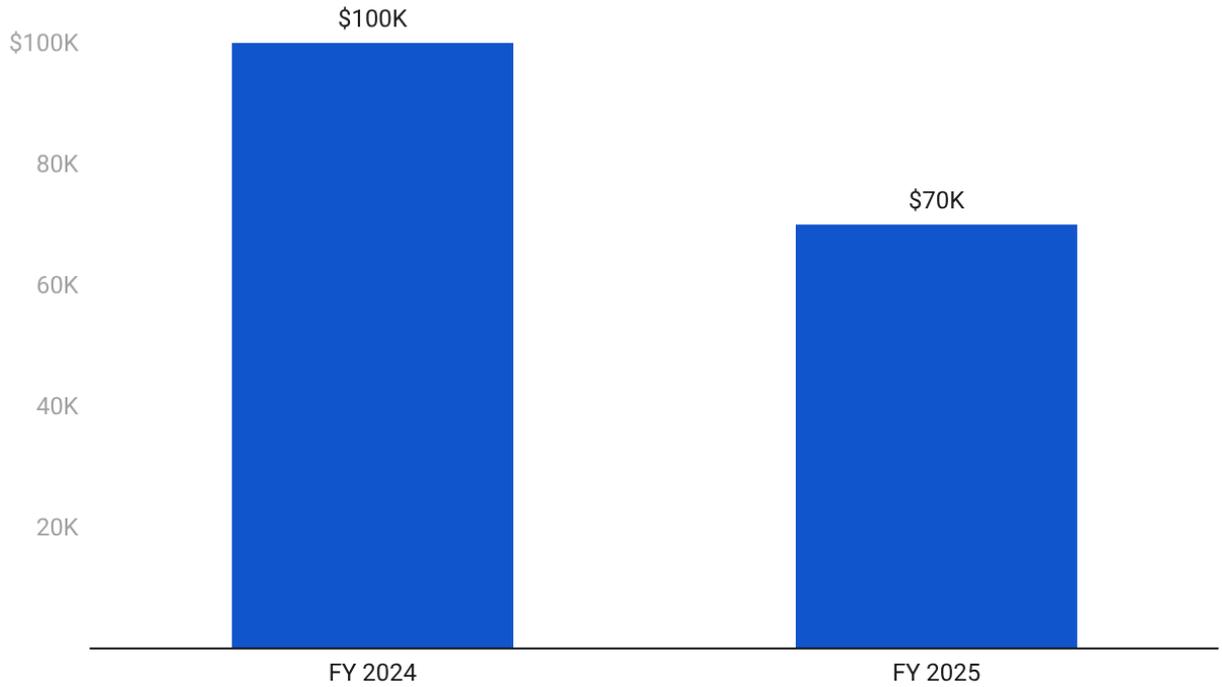
Share of state's population

Long Island:
14.8%

FY 2025 operating grants

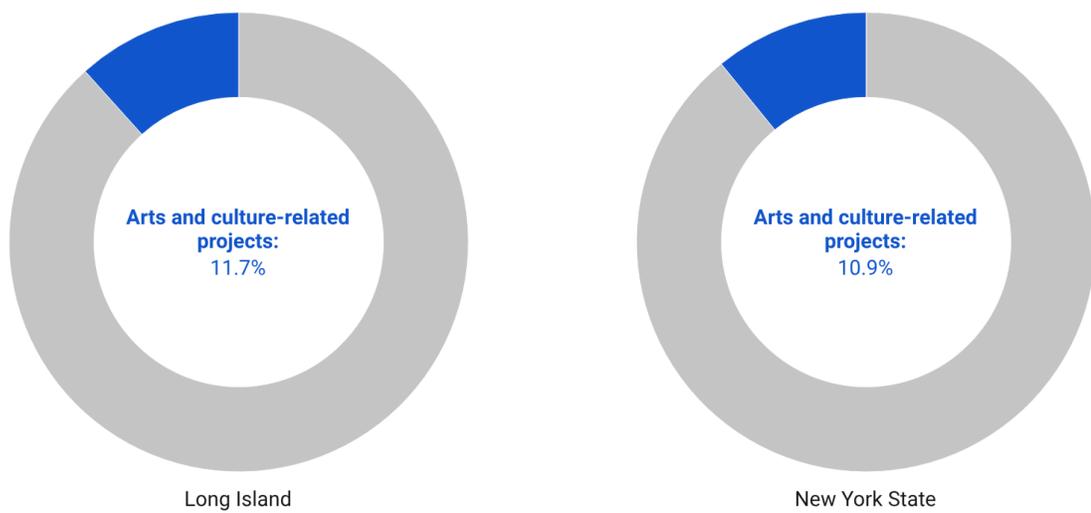
Source: Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from New York State Council on the Arts, available from https://www.nysca.org/grant_app/org_search.cfm • Created with Datawrapper

National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding to Long Island fell 30 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

On Long Island, 11.7 percent of FY 2025 REDC awards went to arts and culture-related projects



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

Long Island'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