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Center *for an*
Urban
Future

MID-HUDSON'S
CREATIVE
SPARK

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MID-HUDSON'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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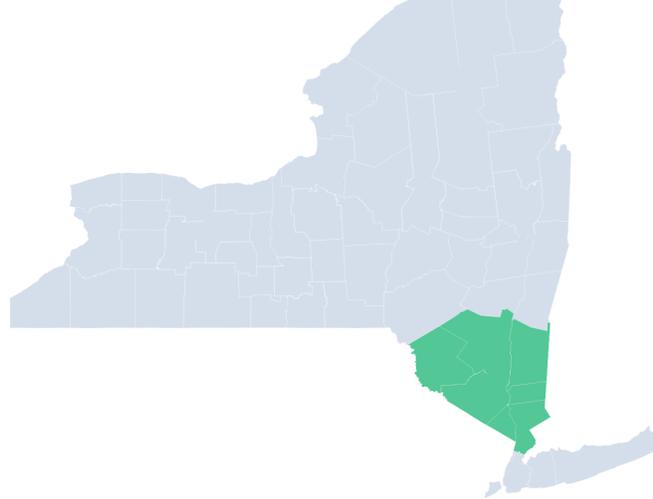
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Regional Arts Profile

Mid-Hudson



UPSTATE ART WEEKEND IS A CONNECTIVE ANNUAL festival that animates the Hudson Valley and Catskills, with locals and visitors from New York City and other states driving from small galleries to landmark museums across 10 counties in the region. The festival began in 2020, with 23 venues participating, as an effort to support the region's arts culture and to bring people together during the pandemic. By 2025, festival participation exploded to 155. The event has grown so popular that, in 2026, there will be a second celebratory weekend of open studio tours a month before the festival. And Bloomberg Connects has funded a self-guided digital tour of 16 arts institutions that coincides with peak leaf-peeping season.¹

The weekend's growth and expansive lineup mirrors an increasingly vibrant and prosperous arts and culture scene across the Mid-Hudson Valley, from Beacon to Newburgh, and Liberty to Hudson. Even when artists are struggling financially and arts funding has been cut, established cultural institutions, grassroots arts groups, and entrepreneurial artists are devising new ways to engage their communities and attract visitors to the region, which saw tourism spending increase by 36.7 percent from 2017 to 2023.

Over the past decade or so, more artists have started calling the Hudson Valley home. While the overall regional population grew 4.9 percent over the last decade (gaining over 100,000 residents), the region's resident artist population doubled that pace, up 11.5 percent over the same period, from 7,602 to 8,479.² Among those growing disciplines include merchandise displayers and window trimmers (+89.6 percent, or 623 total), craft artists (+57.9 percent, or 135 total), fine artists (+56.2 percent, or 277 total), and interior designers (+45.1 percent, or 288 total).

The number of venues is also growing. Participating venues in Upstate Art Weekend include new collaborations, such as The Campus, which transformed an abandoned Claverack school into a space for six Manhattan galleries³; upstarts like N/A Project Space, inside a renovated garage in the New Pal-

tz woods⁴; and pandemic-era efforts like PeepSpace, a compact artist-run gallery in Tarrytown.

The arts and culture sector also fueled job growth in the Mid-Hudson region. From 2014 to 2024, the sector added 2,343 jobs, an increase of 33.7 percent—outpacing regional employment growth of 8.1 percent. Fine arts schools alone added 720 jobs, up 38.9 percent in a decade.

Mid-Hudson artists are earning recognition beyond the region, creating work that has a powerful impact on their communities, and highlighting the experiences of underrepresented groups. Highland Mills artist Taij Kumarie Moteelall wrote and developed *Jahajees Rising*, an original TV series highlighting gender-based violence and transformative justice in New York City's Indo-Caribbean community. Douglas Shindler, a painter and photographer, and Guyanese-American photographer Michael Davis co-founded The Black Library, a community art space celebrating Black history and culture in Monticello, housed in a historic bank building renovated by the artists. Violinist Gwen Laster of Beacon was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship grant for music composition in April 2025.⁵ Sphynxx, a social activist and visual artist working with salvaged materials, curated Queer Conscience, an exhibit exploring the LGBTQ+ experience, for 2024 June Pride Month at Bethany Arts Community in Ossining.

Musicians Christopher Dean Sullivan, Craig Harris, Mala Waldon, and Baba Neil Clarke formed a jazz ensemble that deepened their ongoing collaboration with TRANSART, a Kingston-based organization focused on African arts and culture. The ensemble facilitated Music Futures, a six-week summer youth music program at Cunneen-Hackett Arts Theater in Poughkeepsie, and performed in schools, local venues, and at neighborhood pop-up concerts.

"A place like here in the Mid-Hudson Valley, there's a need for what I do," says Sullivan, a bassist who has lived and performed in the region for over 35 years. Sullivan is a regular at the annual Jazz in the Valley festival, which draws hundreds of people to the banks of the Hudson River in

Poughkeepsie each August. As a full-time artist, Sullivan often travels to perform and applies for various grants. But during a recent two-year partnership with TRANSART, funded through the Creatives Rebuild New York artist employment program, he had space and time to complete his first solo album, *Earth Magic: Artisan of the Bassic Foundation*, to be released through FMR Records later this year.

New York State funding, including through the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) and the Mid-Hudson Regional Economic Development Council (REDC), plays an essential role in fueling the region's dynamic arts and culture sector. Dia Beacon, the contemporary art museum, is expected to make eight additional acres of outdoor space freely accessible to the public in 2026, a landscape design and stormwater resilience project using \$1.3 million in tourism capital funding through the Mid-Hudson REDC.⁶ In 2025, in round 15 of REDC funding, 10 of the 53 grants that went to the Mid-Hudson region went to arts and culture projects, including funding a marketing campaign for Storm King Art Center, covering event and marketing fees for the Ashokan Center's Winter and Summer Hoot festivals, and construction of Choice Films's new film and television production studio in the town of Montgomery.

In FY 2025, the Mid-Hudson region was awarded \$7.3 million in NYSCA funding, making up 8.3 percent of NYSCA's statewide budget. With the rapidly expanding artist population in the Mid-Hudson Valley, the importance of continued NYSCA support cannot be overstated, particularly as the cost of living

in the region soars, making it increasingly challenging for full-time working artists from Westchester County to Sullivan County to keep up. Home prices in every Hudson Valley county have reached record highs, and 37 percent of Mid-Hudson renters are cost-burdened (spending more than 30 percent of income on rent and utilities)—more than any region in the state except for New York City.⁷ About 61 percent of Mid-Hudson artists surveyed by Creatives Rebuild New York said that they could not cover a \$400 cash emergency.

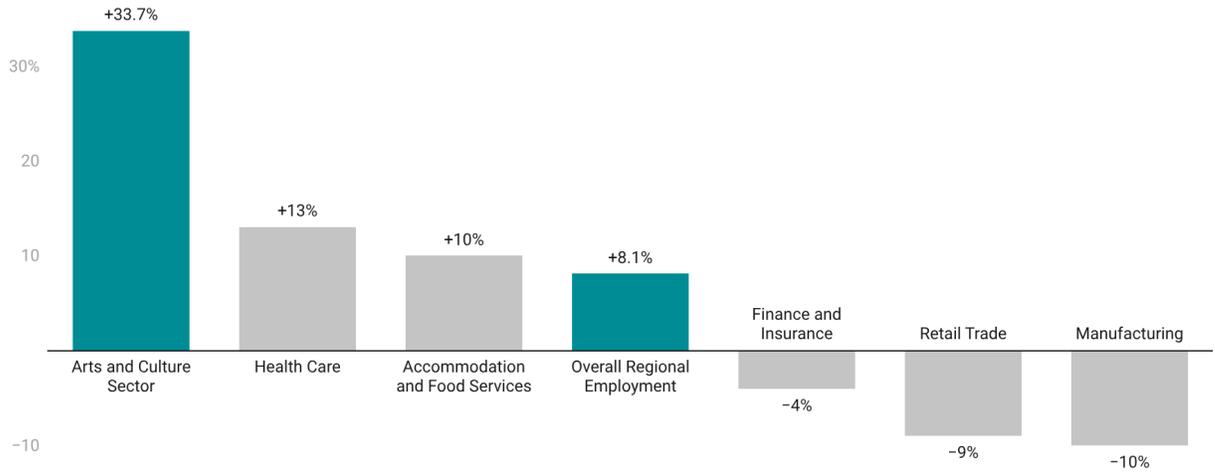
At the same time, serious uncertainty surrounds other sources of arts funding for artists and arts organizations. National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding to the Mid-Hudson region dropped 47.7 percent in just one year, from \$735,000 in FY 2024 to \$384,500 in FY 2025. Directives from the new presidential administration have left several grants at stake. The Art Effect learned in 2025 that a \$20,000 NEA grant had been rescinded for Arts Bridge, their program that helps first-generation college bound students create an art portfolio, complete college and financial aid applications, and negotiate scholarship support.

"That to me is really concerning, when we start rolling back programs that provide access to our most challenged families that we've pulled opportunities away from historically," says Nicole Fenichel-Hewitt, executive director of The Art Effect. "It's going to be really hard for us to support young people in the way that we need to in our community to make sure that they can move forward successfully in life."

1. "Celebrating Upstate Art Weekend 2025 With Founder and Fashionista Helen Toomer," *Inside+Out Upstate NY*, July 8, 2025, <https://insideandoutupstateny.com/celebrating-upstate-art-weekend-2025-with-founder-and-fashionista-helen-toomer/>.
2. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast.
3. *The Campus Upstate* (arts venue website), accessed February 22, 2026, <https://www.thecampusupstate.com/>.
4. *NA Project Space* (gallery website), accessed February 22, 2026, <https://www.naprojectspace.com/>.
5. Andrew S. Chiarenza, "5 Questions: Gwen Laster," *The Highlander Current*, June 20, 2025, <https://highlandscurrent.org/2025/06/20/5-questions-gwen-laster/>.
6. "Landscape Project," *DIA Art Blog*, accessed February 22, 2026, <https://www.diaart.blog/landscape-project>.
7. *WRGB 6-16-25 Presentation* (Hamer) (PDF), *New York State Homes and Community Renewal*, June 16, 2025, <https://hcr.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2025/06/wrgb-6-16-25-presentation-hamer.pdf>.

Arts and culture sector outpaces regional job growth in the Mid-Hudson region

Change in jobs, 2014 to 2024 (%)

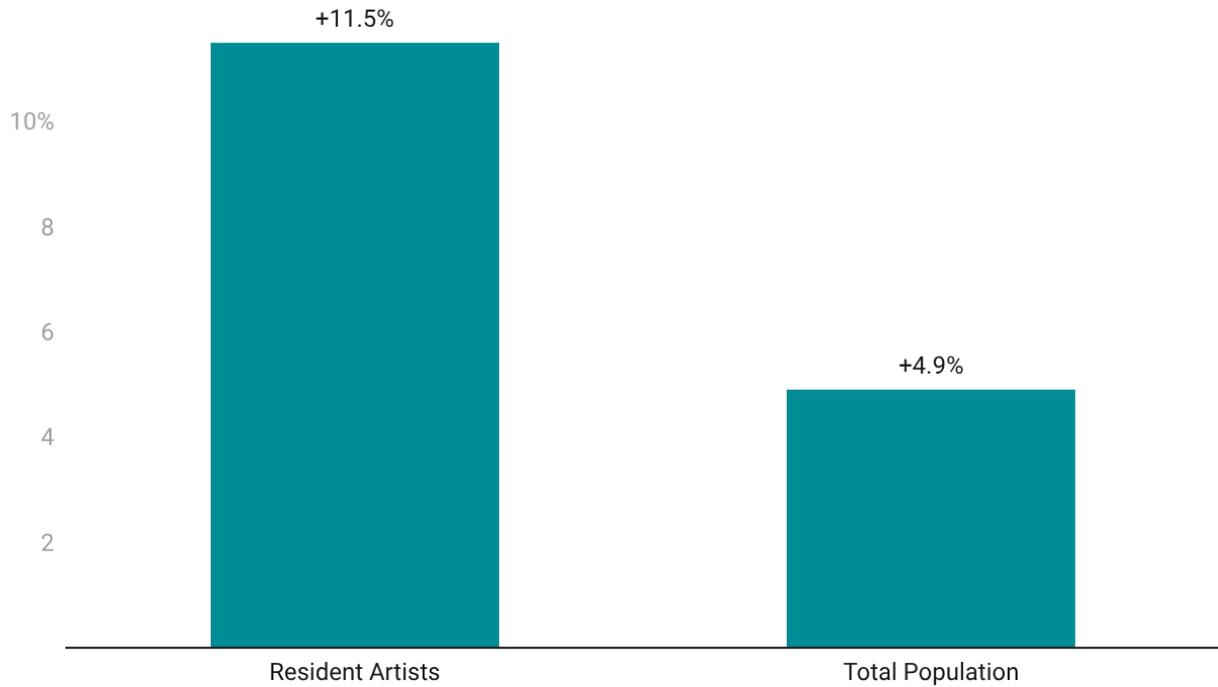


Arts and culture sector totaled 9,299 jobs in 2024.

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

In the Mid-Hudson region, growth in the resident artist population outpaces overall population growth

Change in population, 2014 to 2024 (%)

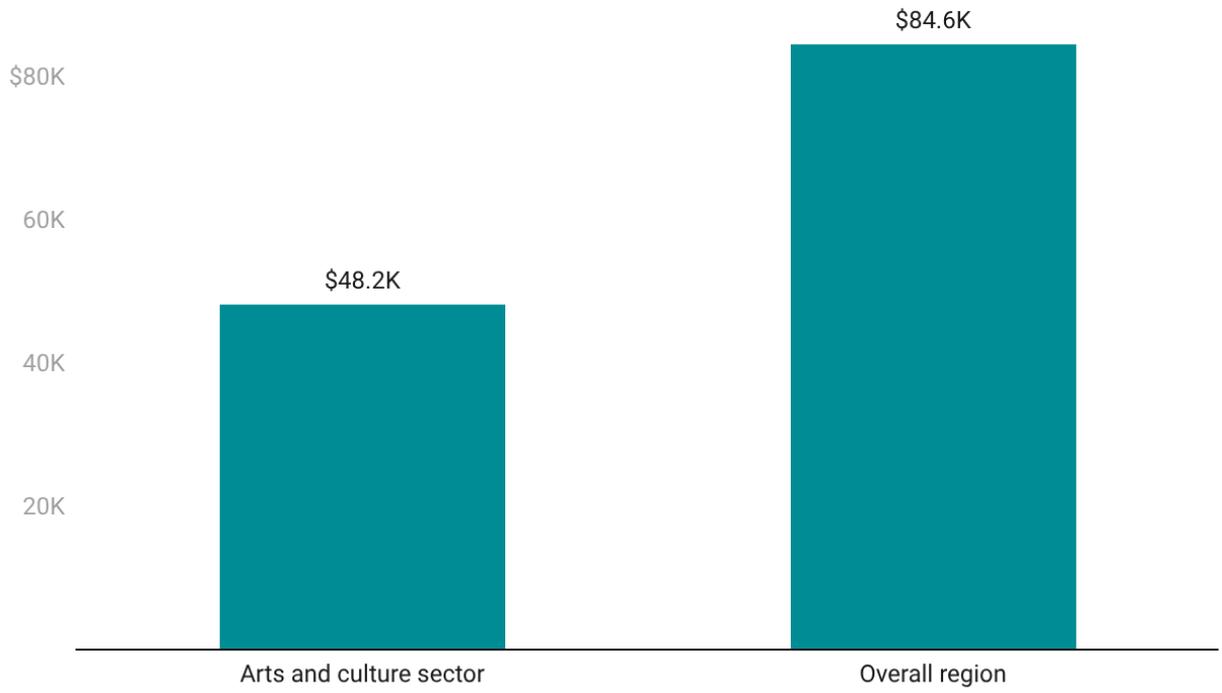


Resident artist population totaled 8,479 in 2024.

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

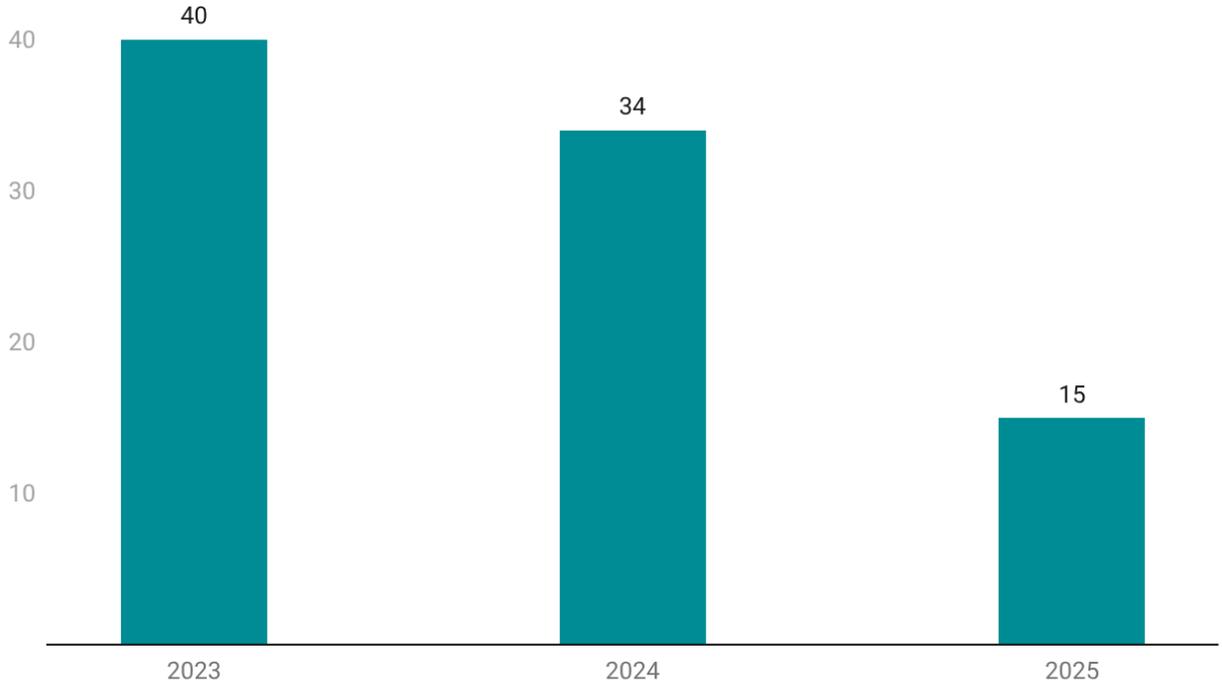
In the Mid-Hudson region, arts and culture workers earn far less than the private-sector average annual wage

2024



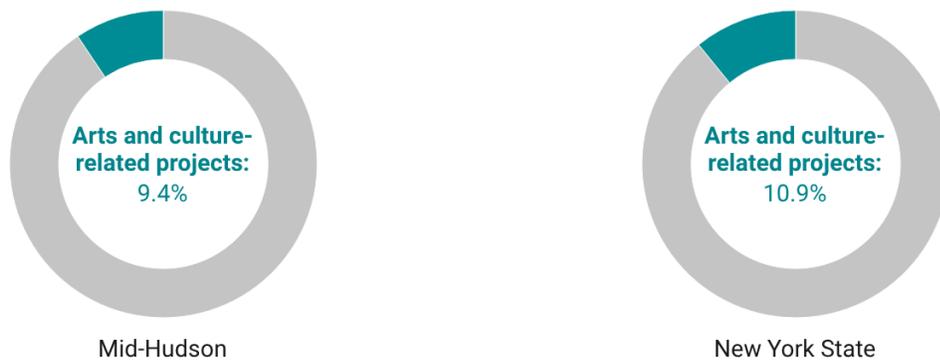
Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. • Created with Datawrapper

Total National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grants to the Mid-Hudson region fell by over half 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

In the Mid-Hudson region, 9.4 percent of FY 2025 REDC funding 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

Mid-Hudson'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