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Center *for an*  
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**NORTH COUNTRY'S  
CREATIVE  
SPARK**

# Center *for an* Urban Future

**NORTH COUNTRY'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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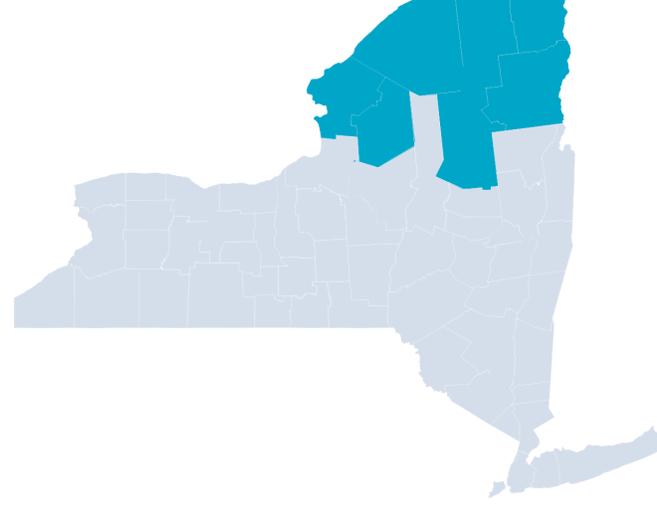
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# Regional Arts Profile

## North Country



**WHEN MEGAN CHARLAND RETURNED TO THE PLATTSBURGH** area in 2020, she quickly got to work expanding opportunities for local artists. After 16 years working in arts administration in New York City and Rochester, she wanted to bring her experience back to the rural North Country. In her first year as artistic programming director of the Strand Center for the Arts, Charland grew education programming by 300 percent, partnering with local artists to offer unexpected new classes, like knife forging.

“This area was starved for this type of programming,” Charland said. The increased enrollment, combined with revenue from the Strand’s 900-seat theater, made it possible to grow the team. Today, as executive director, Charland has expanded the team—hiring SUNY Plattsburgh graduates and promoting several part-time employees to full-time staff. Most of the staff are artists, and there are many more like them. “Whenever we post a position, I receive dozens and dozens of applications,” Charland says. “It is a statement of how many want to stay in the area and work here. They don’t want to leave.”

That desire can be felt across the North Country, the state’s largest—but sparsely populated—region. The number of resident art and design workers increased 45.5 percent from 2014 and 2024, while the overall population decreased 4.5 percent. During that period, the arts and culture sector grew by 29.1 percent, up 184 jobs, while overall employment decreased 2.9 percent, a loss of 5,363 jobs.

A few hours west of Plattsburgh, in downtown Watertown, the volunteer-led HarmoNNY Performing Arts Community is “gearing up to hire,” says co-founder and president Joseph Foy. The 200-seat live performance venue and musical instrument lending library opened in January 2025 following renovations to a blighted building, funded by a 2018 Downtown Revitalization Initiative grant. Watertown has lacked venues for many years, confining musicians to bars and restaurants and leaving theater companies scrambling for space, according to Foy, a musician and Watertown native.

HarmoNNY’s inaugural winter performance series featured a regional pop-punk band, an internationally touring blues artist, and the Little Theatre of Watertown’s production of *The Vagina Monologues*. The punk band got HarmoNNY’s biggest crowd yet—about 100 people, mostly Foy’s 20-something peers. “It was a reminder that our community is more diverse in terms of taste than we like to say it is,” Foy says. He occasionally visits friends in Rochester and feels drawn to the numerous opportunities for artists in that city. “Every time I’m there, I think, ‘Wow, this is nice. I would move here.’ And every time I come back to Watertown, I think about the things that it could be, and why would I want to move?”

Despite often struggling financially themselves, artists from the North Country have been demonstrating their wide-ranging talents in galleries, classrooms, and music studios throughout the region. Winosha Steele’s curation of work by regional Black artists earned PBS coverage. Carrie Hill, an Akwesasne Mohawk basketmaker, contributed black-ash and sweetgrass pieces to a permanent exhibition at the Adirondack Experience Museum, located in the heart of Adirondack Park. The producer G Hanz released his sixth album in four years, an instrumental hip-hop project layered with pop, R&B, and trap sounds. Erin Dorney developed an anthology of creative writing by North Country teenagers and distributed 3,000 poems through her poetry vending machines. Producer Benn Rymon and Joint Commission recently launched bi-monthly hip-hop sessions at Old Soul Design Shop to encourage new artists in Plattsburgh.

In local schools, Gretchen Koehler presented *Fiddling With Traditions*, a multi-media educational program on Northern New York’s cultural heritage, to all grade levels of students, and also presented it at Traditional Arts in Upstate New York (TAUNY), a nonprofit folk arts organization in Canton. Koehler’s program provides “first-time exposure for a lot of rural students who don’t have much art in their lives,” says Joshua Vink, executive director of TAUNY.

Yvette White was named 2025 First Peoples Fellow at Craigardan, a nonprofit artist residency program and food justice organization, on the heels of her award-winning painting of missing and murdered Indigenous women, *Lost and Followed*.

Roughly 70 resident artists and scholars stay at Craigardan in Elizabethtown each year, ranging from writers to ceramicists to fiber artists to legal and rural studies scholars. The weekly Apple Barn Series invites the public inside Craigardan, regularly attracting audiences of 20 to 30 people, a significant crowd for Elizabethtown, which has a population of only 660 people.

“We have the brightest and most creative people coming to Elizabethtown each summer,” says Michele Drozd, co-founder and executive director of Craigardan. “We can leverage their expertise to help further enrich and educate the local community.” Those opportunities are becoming more important now that both SUNY Potsdam and Clarkson University have begun phasing out arts and humanities majors, according to Vink, who was laid off from his position leading the Arts Management program at SUNY Potsdam.

Tourism remains an undeniable force for economic development in the North Country. The Adirondack Park, the largest publicly protected area in the contiguous United States, attracts more than 10 million visitors each year. From 2017 to 2023, tourism spending increased 33.5 percent in the Thousand Islands and 62.5 percent in the Adirondacks. But the region’s growing reputation for arts and culture has increasingly been attracting new visitors or extending park visitors’ stays, according to some leaders of arts organizations throughout the North Country. “We have regional tourists coming to our area as a result of TAUNY,” Vink says. “Roughly 15,000 people come through our doors each year.”

Following recent coverage in *The New York Times*, out-of-towners began flocking to The Mill, a live music and contemporary art center housed in a former grain mill in Westport, according to co-founder Catherine Haskins.<sup>1</sup> “Every weekend, people who have heard about it are traveling 40 to 90 minutes to see what we’re doing. We have people traveling from New York City to Montreal who stop in Westport on the way back because they read the article.”

In other North Country cities, organizations see missed opportunities to weave arts and culture into tourism marketing. “Watertown likes to call themselves the gateway to the Thousand Islands, but the thing is, people don’t stop in Watertown, except maybe to get gas,” says Foy. “There is a

way to tap into the tourists that we see, because Watertown is doing great things, but we drop the ball on how to do that.”

Plattsburgh doesn’t attract as many seasonal visitors as places like Lake Placid and Saranac Lake, but “a lot of us are actively trying to change that,” Charland says. In 2022, she started the Lake City Arts Fest, an annual street festival featuring live music and artist demonstrations that has grown each year. “We want that to be a tourist destination,” she says. “That’s a great way for us to showcase our city and the artists who live here.”

But for cities and towns across the North Country, capitalizing on the tourism potential of arts and culture could become more difficult in the coming years, if proposed federal funding cuts trickle down. “We’re all petrified about what the administration is going to do to state and federal funding,” Drozd says.

In 2025, National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding for the North Country disappeared completely, one of two New York regions to receive no grants that year. Furthermore, many federal COVID-19 relief grants that helped TAUNY and other local organizations survive have also ended, according to Vink.

New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) gave 31.4 percent less in arts and culture aid to localities in FY 2025 (\$2 million) than it did in FY 2023 (\$2.8 million after adjusting for inflation). Further cuts would threaten school programming, historical research, and administrative staff who run the TAUNY Folkstore, a source of income for roughly 200 North Country artists.

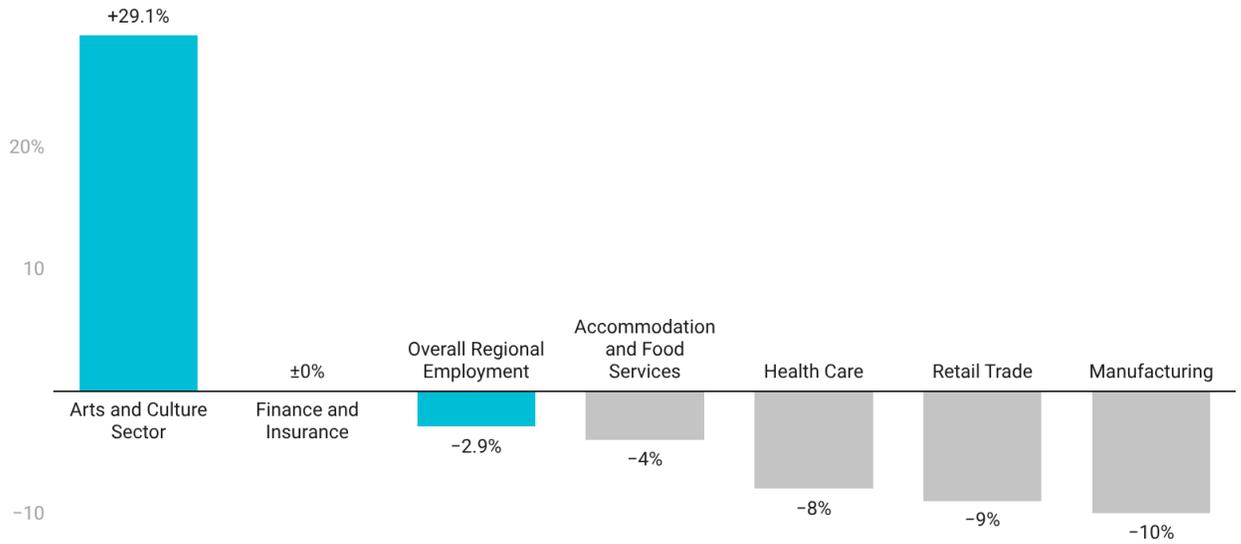
Still modest but promising is that, in 2025, the area’s Regional Economic Development Council (REDC) designated a greater percentage (24 percent) of its funding to arts and culture projects (\$3 million) than any other region in the state. At the center of this is \$1.5 million to help the Lake Placid Center for the Arts (LPCA) fully renovate its 50-year-old facility and to expand programming to reach more people, as well as large grants to restore and market Fort Ticonderoga.

While Drozd praised NYSCA’s capital projects fund, which is helping Craigardan complete its new campus, she is concerned about how future cuts may prompt local philanthropic funders to redirect support from the arts to basic needs. “It’s so often forgotten that arts and culture is also important to quality of life, education in the arts, bringing people together, reminding people what humanity looks like. That, for me, is the biggest challenge here in the Adirondacks,” she says.

1. Richard Scheinin, “A New Venue Beckons Jazz Musicians and Beyond to Upstate New York,” *The New York Times*, August 14, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/14/arts/music/the-mill-venue-westport-new-york.html>.

## The North Country's arts and culture sector grows, while other sectors shrink

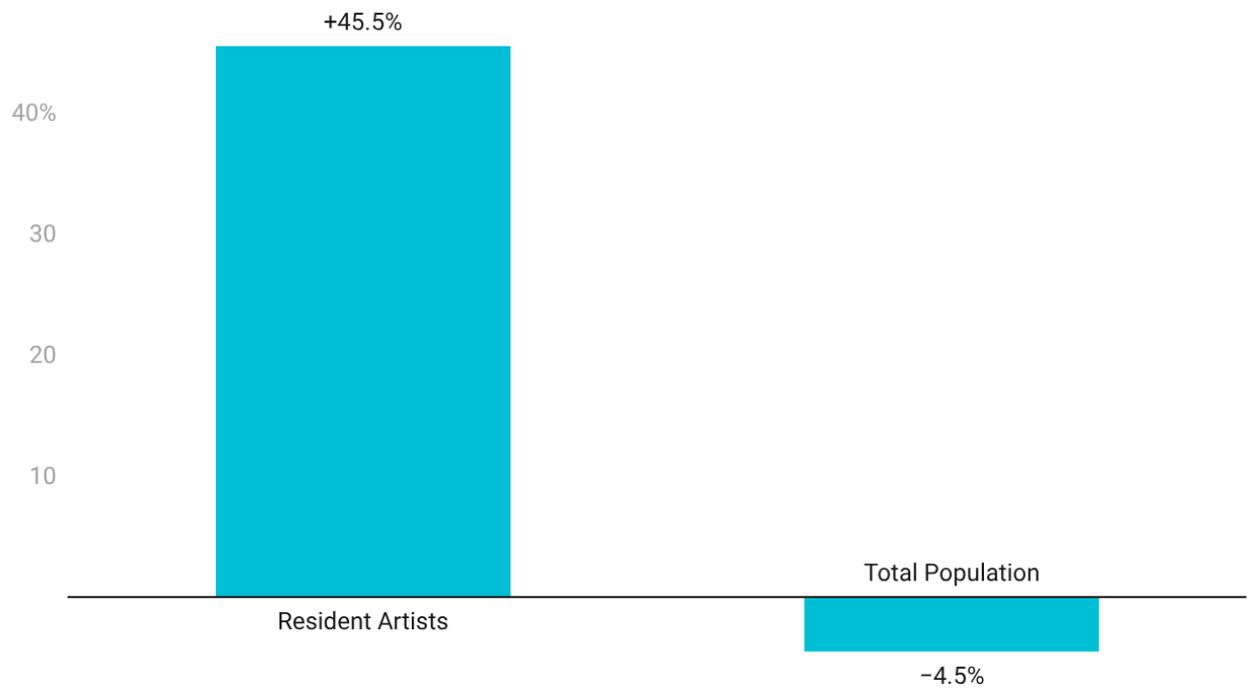
Change in jobs, 2014 to 2024 (%)



Arts and culture sector totaled 816 jobs in 2024

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

## While the North Country's population declines, its resident artist population flourishes

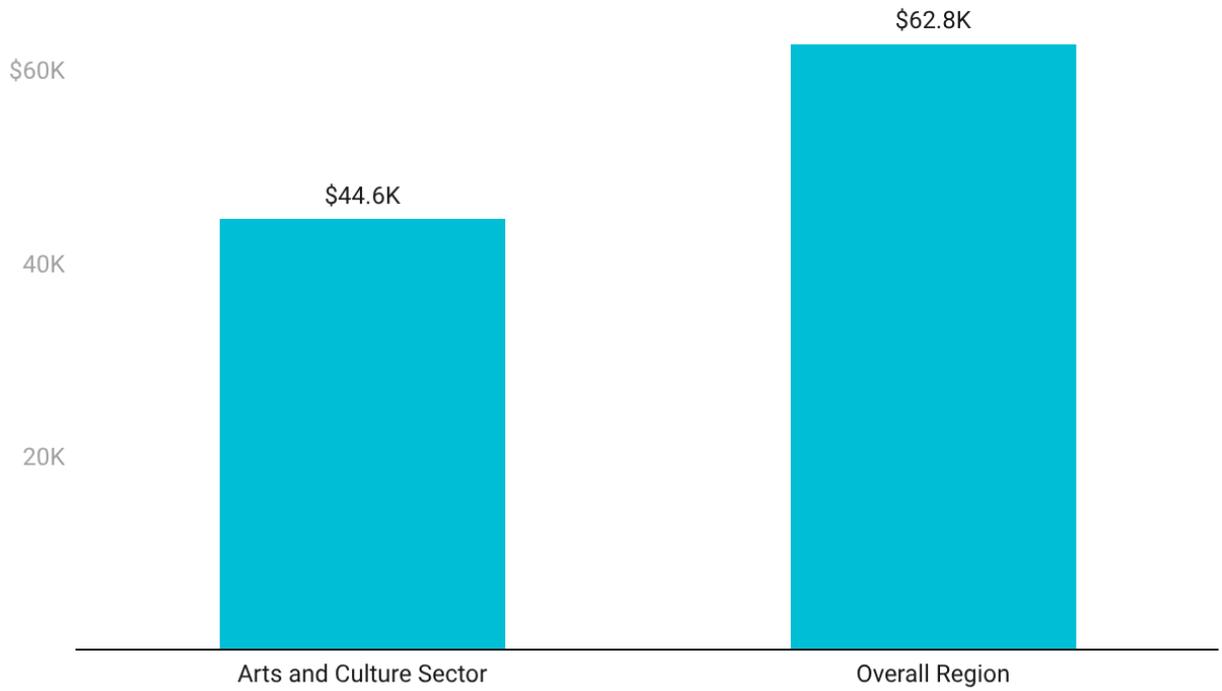


Resident artist population totaled 582 in 2024.

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

## Arts and culture workers in the North Country earn less than the private-sector average annual wage

2024



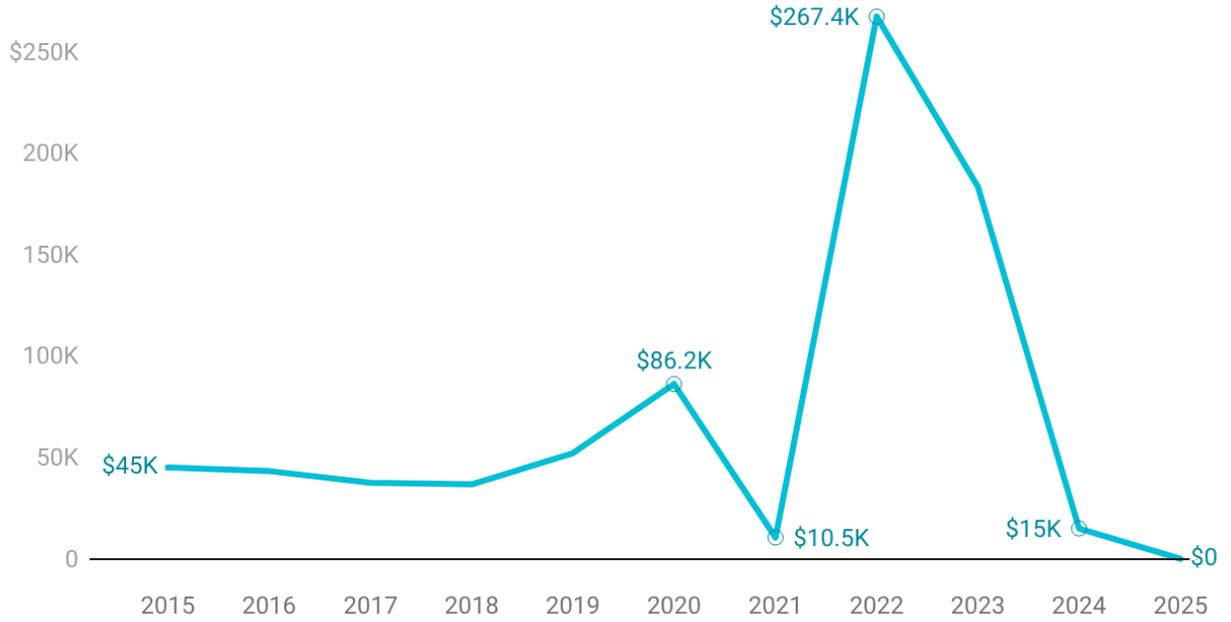
Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. • Created with Datawrapper

## In the North Country, a quarter of FY 2025 Regional Economic Development Council (REDC) funding went to arts and culture-related projects—the highest of any region



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

## Modest National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding to the North Country disappears completely in FY 2025



Historical awards are inflation-adjusted to FY 2024

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

**North Country'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)