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Center *for an*
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SOUTHERN TIER'S
CREATIVE
SPARK

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SOUTHERN TIER'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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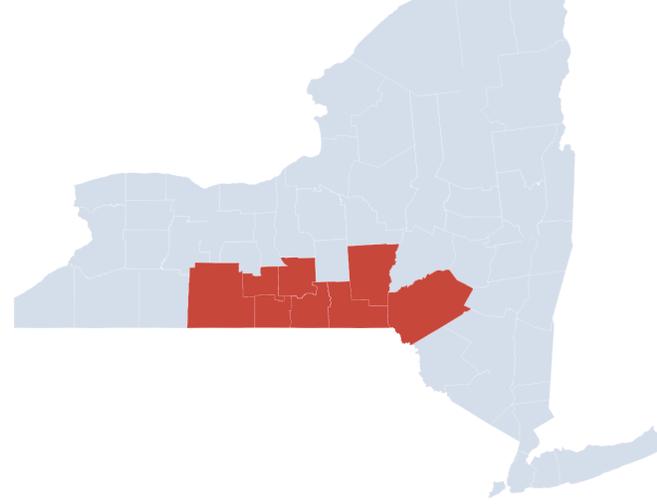
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Regional Arts Profile

Southern Tier



WHEN ORGANIZERS LAUNCHED THE LUMA PROJECTION

Arts Festival in Binghamton, they expected a modest crowd of 2,000 people. Instead, 20,000 showed up. A decade later, more than 40,000 people return each year to watch as downtown historic buildings come alive with massive light projections and awe-inducing illusions.

The festival engages residents from all neighborhoods of Binghamton: students from public schools design their own projections, with the most creative submissions selected and cast onto a building.

Beyond bringing the community together, the festival acts as an economic catalyst, generating \$2 million in economic impact over the course of the weekend alone. “Downtown Binghamton is being revitalized by artists,” says founder Joshua Bernard Ludzki. “LUMA is not just art—it’s a rebranding and tourism exercise that gets people to Binghamton, visiting restaurants and shops, and seeing the city as a destination.”

The story of LUMA reflects a broader trend across the Southern Tier. Even as the region has grappled with the loss of manufacturing jobs, population decline, and shrinking employment overall, the arts have quietly become a driver of renewal, even when artists themselves are often financially struggling. From 2014 to 2024, employment in the arts and culture sector rose 14.5 percent, while total employment fell 4.6 percent. The number of resident artists and design workers climbed 24.9 percent, up by nearly 300, despite a 3.1 percent population decline.¹

Across the Southern Tier—from Broome to Tompkins County—independent venues and cultural organizations are providing new community spaces for the arts to thrive. In Ithaca, a new DIY concert organization formed by Ithaca College students called Unknown Stage is putting on performances of regional bands wherever possible. In Addison, a village of fewer than 1,600 residents, the Moe-Town Music Venue hosts local and national bands, with campgrounds that turn concerts into extended community gatherings.

At the same time, established institutions are experimenting with new ways to reach younger and more diverse audiences. The Corning Museum of Glass, which welcomes over 500,000 visitors annually, has found global visibility through hosting and producing the Netflix competition *Blown Away*. In Binghamton, Tri-Cities Opera—now in its 75th year—is reinventing opera for new audiences through its “Pocket Opera Project,” transforming student stories into 15-minute original works composed by Binghamton University students and performed by known theater lyricists.

Many individual artists in the Southern Tier are also thriving. Corning photographer Chris Walters’ series *The Tradition Bearers*—a collection of portraits celebrating Southern Tier residents—was exhibited in libraries throughout the region and was funded by the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA). Folk-rock band Driftwood now tours across the country. Young Binghamton musician Rowan Drake recently signed a major record deal.

Arts education programs at local schools, the region’s universities, and nonprofits are helping build the next generation of creatives and consumers of art. In Ithaca, at the Southside Community Center, artists Annemarie Zwack and Terrance Vann worked with the Black Girl Alchemy program to create murals honoring civil rights trailblazers. And the Community Unity Music Education Project (CUMEP), which has been providing free and low-cost arts, academic, and human rights classes to kids for 20 years, finally reached a major milestone by establishing its 501c3 status. A 45-minute drive south from Ithaca, Community Arts of Elmira is newly offering a competitive training program for fellows to study music history theory and coding to make original audio samples.

These creative sparks are fueled further by targeted state investment. In FY 2025, the Southern Tier received \$3.7 million in New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) non-capital funding, enabling Ithaca’s Cherry Arts to offer free rehearsal space to artists and for *Running to Places*

Theatre Company to provide free participation in their theater programming to students across Tompkins County. State capital grants enabled the Goodwill Theatre in Johnson City to secure nearly \$5 million to transform an 1899 firehouse into a two-stage facility expected to welcome 45,000 additional patrons each year. In addition, the area will soon be home to 24 new murals: NYSCA chose the Southern Tier to site just under half of 56 murals it is funding across New York State through its new Cultivating Havens for the Arts through Regional Murals (CHARM) program.

New York State's economic development programs are also recognizing the role and power of the arts in economic revitalization, but insufficiently. Only one of Round 15 Regional Economic Development Council (REDC) grants was directed towards arts and culture projects in the Southern Tier in 2026: \$400,000 to promote the 75th anniversary of the Corning Museum of Glass. In previous years, more funding went to the arts—including a \$500,000 REDC grant that enabled Discoveries in Sculpture, Inc. to renovate Binghamton's historic Randall House into gallery and educational space. In 2025, the Downtown Revitalization Initiative program awarded \$292,000 to the Roxbury Arts Center to expand year-round arts programming, and \$101,000 to the hamlet of Grand Gorge to convert an existing carriage house into a stop-motion animation studio. Through the New York Forward program, the Village of Groton received \$260,000 to expand the Groton Historical Building, enhancing exhibit space and improving accessibility.

Support from the state is even more important as federal funding contracts. From FY 2024 to FY 2025, National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding to the Southern Tier

dropped 83.9 percent from \$124,000 to \$20,000, while the number of grants fell from six to just one. Among the grant recipients that lost out on NEA funding in 2025 is Ithaca's Civic Ensemble, which lost its \$25,000 grant for its ReEntry Theatre Program, which invites people who were formerly incarcerated to create their own theater. And even before Trump took office, NEA funding to the Southern Tier had already fallen. In 2025, the Trump administration has already specifically targeted Ithaca's Civic Ensemble, cancelling its \$25,000 grant for its ReEntry Theatre Program, which invites people who were formerly incarcerated to create their own theater.² Even before Trump took office, National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding to the Southern Tier had already fallen 41 percent from FY 1998 to FY 2024, after adjusting for inflation.

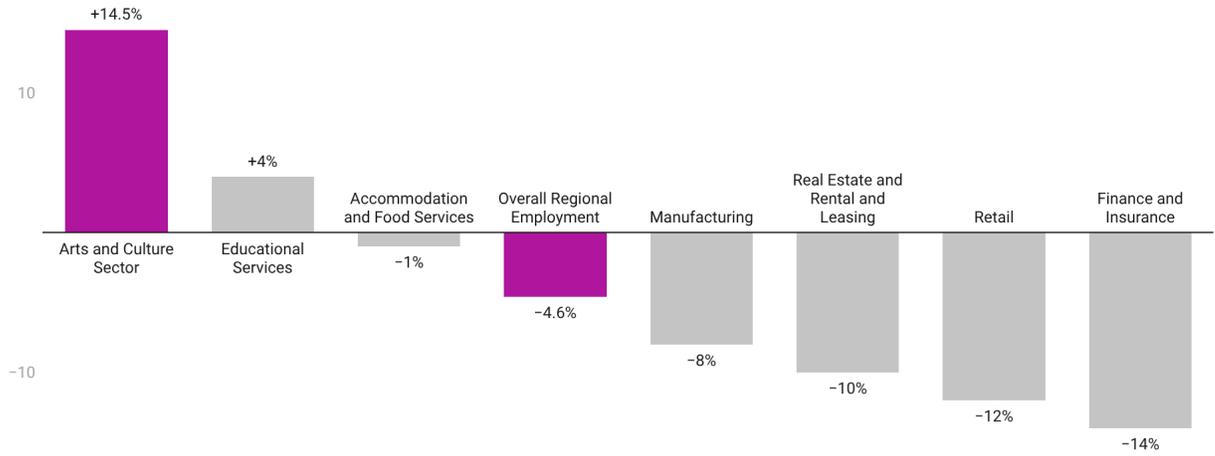
While the artist population is growing and new venues are opening, support is needed because progress is fragile. Fifty-nine percent of artists in the region surveyed by Creatives Rebuild New York say they do not have \$400 cash to handle an emergency. About 46 percent said they have an unmanageable amount of debt.

In Ithaca, The Downstairs, an intimate performance spaces for music, spoken word, and comedy opened to great excitement in 2020 below The Watershed, a popular bar. By the end of 2025, the venue had closed. In an online statement about the closing, owner Ashley Cake wrote about the many policies that made the venue reliant on wealthier customers and unsustainable in the long term, saying: "After 9 years in business I can no longer afford this community's decades-long divestment from affordability."³

1. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast.
2. Doe, Sheelagh. "NEA Grant Cancellations Hit Local Arts Spaces in Ithaca." *The Ithacan*, May 15, 2025. <https://theithacan.org/61698/life-culture/lc-features/nea-grant-cancellations-hit-local-arts-spaces-in-ithaca/>.
3. Ashley Cake, "Closing Statement to the Public," *The Downstairs Ithaca*, November 21, 2025, <https://www.thedownstairsithaca.com/closing-statement-to-the-public>.

Southern Tier's arts and culture sector grows as overall employment declines

Change in jobs, 2014 to 2024 (%)

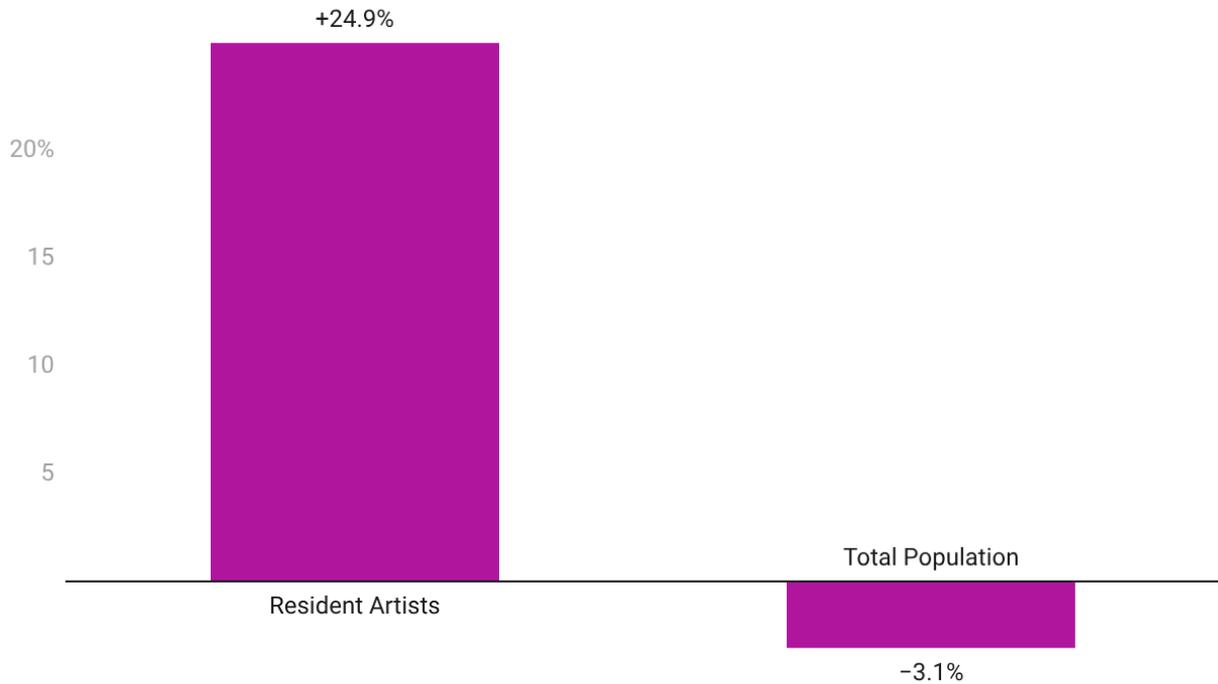


Arts and culture sector totaled 1,612 jobs in 2024

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

Southern Tier's art and design workers grow by nearly a quarter while the overall population shrinks

Change in population, 2014 to 2024 (%)

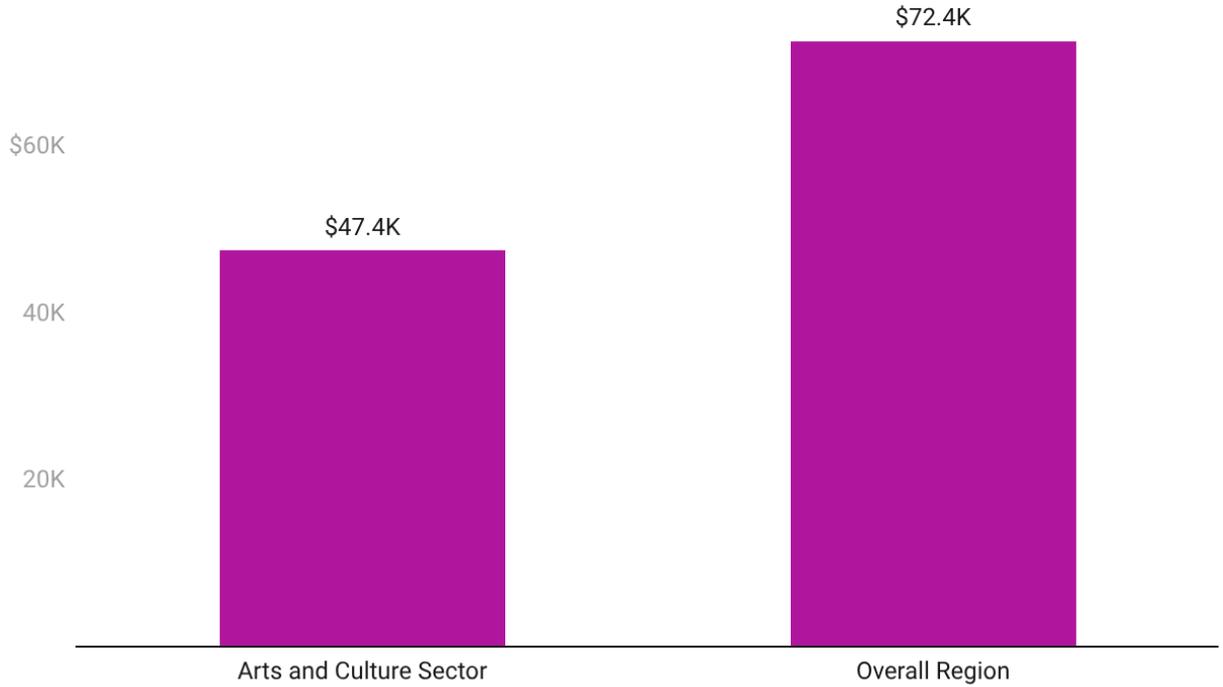


Resident art and design population totaled 1,301 in 2024

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

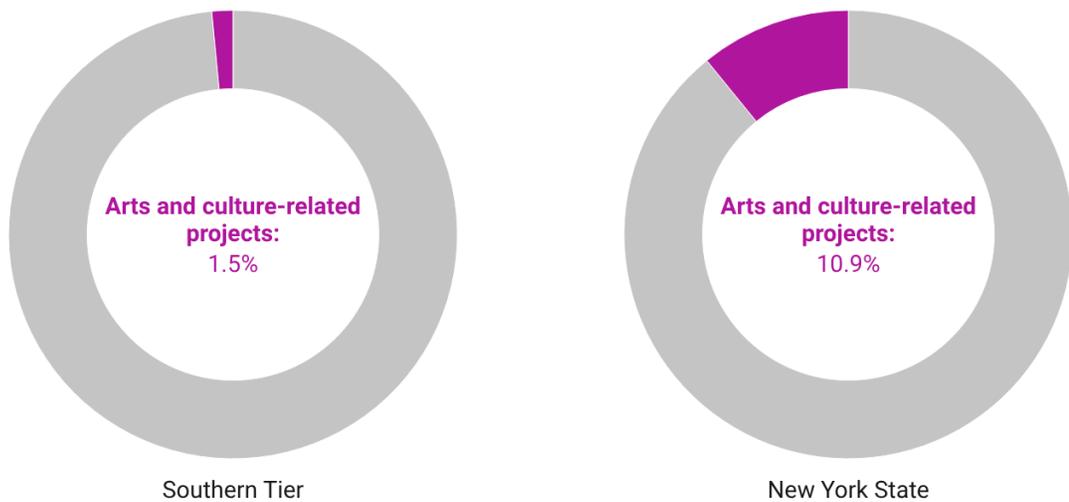
Southern Tier arts and culture workers earn a third less than the private-sector average annual wage

2024



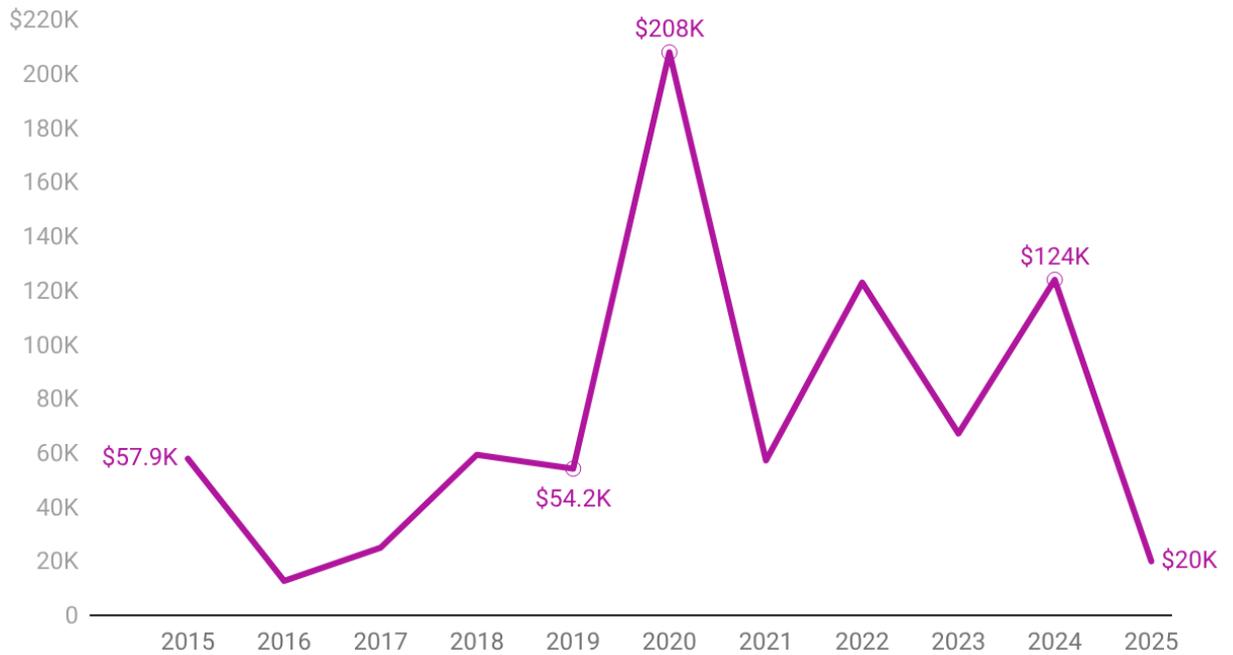
Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. • Created with Datawrapper

In the Southern Tier, only 1.5 percent of FY 2025 REDC funding went towards 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

Already modest National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding to the Southern Tier fell 84 percent 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

Southern Tier'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