ARTS, CULTURE, AND INFRASTRUCTURE

CHAPTER 3

ARTS AND CULTURE AS ESSENTIAL CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE

Introduction

Strong communities are not built through roads, buildings, and utilities alone. They are also shaped by the cultural experiences, creative enterprises, public spaces, and civic institutions that foster belonging, attract investment, and strengthen local economies. Across Colorado, communities are increasingly recognizing that arts and culture are not discretionary amenities—they are essential components of economic development, community vitality, and long-term resilience.

For local advocates, this represents an important shift in how arts and culture can be discussed with elected officials, business leaders, philanthropic partners, and residents. Rather than framing arts funding solely as support for cultural programming, successful advocacy efforts increasingly position arts and culture as investments in the broader systems that make communities prosperous and livable. This broader frame resonates because it connects cultural investment to priorities that communities already value: community health and wellbeing, downtown revitalization, workforce attraction and retention, tourism, entrepreneurship, quality of life, neighborhood identity, economic competitiveness, and public safety.

Throughout Colorado, communities have demonstrated that strategic investments in arts and culture can generate benefits well beyond the creative sector itself. Cultural facilities attract visitors and stimulate surrounding businesses. Creative entrepreneurs contribute to local economies while activating commercial corridors. Public art and cultural programming strengthen civic identity and encourage residents to engage more deeply in community life. Partnerships between arts organizations, chambers of commerce, business improvement districts, local governments, and economic development organizations have expanded opportunities for collaborative investment that benefits both the creative sector and the broader community.

This chapter explores how arts advocates can successfully position arts and culture within local economic development strategies. Drawing on examples from Boulder, statewide financing initiatives, and emerging research on cross-sector collaboration, it demonstrates that successful advocacy is rarely about making the case for the arts alone. Rather, it is about demonstrating how creativity helps communities achieve their broader economic, civic, and social goals.

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Arts and Culture as Civic Infrastructure

One of the strongest themes emerging from Colorado communities is the recognition that arts and culture function as infrastructure. While infrastructure is often associated with transportation systems, utilities, or public facilities, communities increasingly understand that cultural infrastructure is equally essential to long-term prosperity.

Cultural infrastructure includes both physical assets and civic systems that enable creativity to flourish. These include performance venues, museums, galleries, rehearsal spaces, artist studios, makerspaces, cultural districts, public gathering spaces, and the organizations that steward these resources. It also includes the policies, partnerships, financing mechanisms, and community networks that sustain creative activity over time.

Viewing arts and culture through an infrastructure lens changes the nature of advocacy. Rather than competing against other public priorities, cultural investments become part of broader conversations about community development. Investments in cultural facilities can revitalize commercial districts, activate underutilized buildings, increase tourism, attract new residents, and encourage private investment. Support for artists and creative businesses contributes to workforce development, entrepreneurship, and local business growth. Public art and cultural programming improve neighborhood identity while strengthening residents' connection to the place.

Across the case studies reviewed for this guide, several themes consistently emerge:

- Arts and culture are most successful when integrated into broader municipal planning rather than treated as standalone initiatives.
- Creative workers and cultural organizations should be viewed as contributors to local economic ecosystems.
- Tourism strategies are strengthened when authentic local culture becomes part of a community's identity.
- Long-term investments in cultural infrastructure often require coordinated partnerships among government, philanthropy, nonprofit organizations, and the private sector.
- Economic development strategies become more inclusive and resilient when artists and cultural organizations participate in civic planning.

This perspective provides advocates with a powerful narrative that resonates across political and organizational boundaries. Communities may disagree about artistic preferences, but they often share aspirations for vibrant downtowns, thriving local businesses, attractive public spaces, and strong civic identity. Positioning arts and culture as contributors to these outcomes broadens the coalition of supporters and creates opportunities for investment that might not otherwise exist.

Lessons for Colorado Communities

The experiences documented throughout this chapter suggest several principles that can guide local advocacy regardless of community size or geography.

1 Frame Arts as Civic Infrastructure

The strongest advocacy efforts connect arts and culture to broader public priorities including economic development, downtown vitality, workforce attraction, tourism, housing, education, and community health. When arts are presented as part of the infrastructure that supports thriving communities, they become relevant to a much broader audience.

2 Invest in Relationships Before You Need Them

Coalitions cannot be assembled overnight. Successful communities cultivate relationships among artists, businesses, nonprofit organizations, elected officials, educators, neighborhood leaders, and philanthropic partners long before a specific policy opportunity or funding campaign emerges.

3 Speak with a Coordinated Voice

Consistent messaging builds credibility. Communities that develop shared talking points, common narratives, and coordinated communications are better positioned to influence public opinion and policy decisions than organizations advocating independently.

4 Combine Data with Stories

Economic impact studies, benchmarking data, and research provide important evidence, but data alone rarely inspires action. Pairing quantitative information with compelling stories about people, neighborhoods, businesses, and community transformation creates a more persuasive advocacy narrative.

5 Think Beyond Annual Funding

Operating support remains essential, but communities should also pursue strategies that strengthen long-term cultural infrastructure through capital investment, financing tools, adaptive reuse, public-private partnerships, and creative placemaking initiatives.

6 Build Advocacy Capacity Within the Arts Sector

One of the clearest lessons from Boulder is that advocacy skills develop over time. Training leaders, cultivating volunteers, engaging residents, and creating opportunities for collaborative leadership all contribute to stronger, more resilient advocacy organizations.

CASE STUDY

Create Boulder Arts Funding and Visioning

Building a Coordinated Voice for Arts, Culture, and Community Development

COMMUNITY TYPE:
Urban / Regional

PRIMARY ADVOCACY STRATEGY:
Policy Change / Ballot Initiative / Coalition Building / Community Engagement / Creative Placemaking

KEY STAKEHOLDERS:
Arts Organizations / Local Government / Business Community / Residents / Philanthropy / Education Partners

TRANSFERABILITY:
Medium

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

The City of Boulder offers one of Colorado's strongest examples of how sustained advocacy, coalition building, and strategic communications can transform the role of arts and culture within local government. The city's experience illustrates that successful advocacy depends not only on compelling ideas but also on long-term relationship building, coordinated leadership, and persistent public engagement.

Rather than relying solely on individual organizations to advocate independently, Create Boulder has worked to convene artists, nonprofit organizations, business leaders, civic institutions, and community partners around shared priorities, particularly during major advocacy and policy initiatives. Several local conditions created fertile ground for their shared success with the Boulder community. Boulder possessed a well-established arts ecosystem, an active nonprofit community, engaged civic leadership, a strong tourism economy, a history of public investment in community amenities, and a strong municipal Office of Arts & Culture. These assets provided a foundation upon which advocates could build broader public support.

Beginning in 2014, Boulder arts advocates played an active role in helping build support for a dedicated sales tax for City capital projects that included arts and cultural investments, although most of the revenue supported broader municipal capital needs. The experience demonstrated how arts advocates can contribute to a larger civic coalition while securing meaningful cultural investment as part of a broader community funding strategy. The city's 2015 Community Cultural Plan further established arts and culture as integral components of municipal planning, while recurring City Council candidate forums helped cultivate elected officials who understood the importance of creative sector investment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, local arts leaders also learned to collaborate more effectively, developing a unified voice that strengthened future advocacy efforts. Most recently, the city updated and succeeded the earlier Community Cultural Plan framework with the Boulder Arts Blueprint, which was approved by the Boulder Arts Commission on March 25, 2026.

RECOGNIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

As Boulder emerged from the pandemic, community leaders recognized that significant opportunities existed to reshape the city's investment in arts and culture. An expiring municipal sales tax created the possibility of reallocating existing revenue without imposing new taxes. The establishment of a new Library District transferred substantial operating costs away from the City, freeing additional fiscal capacity. At the same time, Boulder prepared to update its Cultural Master Plan while acknowledging that its cultural affairs budget lagged considerably behind comparable cities.

Create Boulder combines community engagement with disciplined communications, research, economic impact data, benchmarking, endorsements from civic leaders, coordinated storytelling, media outreach, social media campaigns, public testimony, and grassroots volunteer engagement.

Rather than viewing these developments as isolated policy issues, Create Boulder framed them as components of a larger opportunity to strengthen Boulder as a creative, economically vibrant community. During the pandemic, the organization had already demonstrated its ability to mobilize relief funding, coordinate regional partnerships, and advocate successfully for artists and cultural organizations. Building on these successes, it expanded its focus from emergency response to long-term cultural investment and policy development.

ADVOCACY STRATEGY

At the center of Create Boulder's success is a simple but powerful principle: communities are more likely to invest in arts and culture when they hear a consistent message from a broad coalition of trusted voices.

City Council Candidate Arts Forums—organized with the Boulder County Arts Alliance and the Boulder Chamber—educate both candidates and voters about the economic and civic importance of arts and culture while helping cultivate elected leaders who appreciate the sector's contributions.

The organization's advocacy strategy extends well beyond public meetings. As needed, Create Boulder combines community engagement with disciplined communications, research, economic impact data, benchmarking, endorsements from civic leaders, coordinated storytelling, media outreach,social media campaigns, public testimony, and grassroots volunteer engagement. A trusted "kitchen cabinet" of advisors provides strategic guidance.

Perhaps most importantly, Create Boulder consistently frames arts investment in terms of community benefit rather than organizational need. Messages emphasize how cultural investment supports local businesses, attracts visitors, improves quality of life, strengthens neighborhoods, and contributes to Boulder's long-term prosperity. This broader narrative enables arts advocates to build alliances with organizations representing business, neighborhood development, and other community interests.

Building the Case For Cultural Infrastructure

While Create Boulder has advanced arts advocacy through communications and coalition building, its work has increasingly focused on raising awareness of Boulder's vibrant arts and culture offerings while also building support and laying the groundwork for future investments in cultural infrastructure. . Rather than viewing facilities simply as places where arts activities occur, Create Boulder has positioned them as long-term civic assets that support economic development, neighborhood vitality, and community identity. Through its Facilities Committee, Create Boulder has convened architects, developers, City staff, arts leaders, and community stakeholders to assess Boulder's existing cultural infrastructure and identify opportunities for growth. The committee's work reflects an important lesson for advocates: successful facility development begins long before a capital campaign or construction project. It starts with building relationships, understanding community needs, evaluating existing assets, and developing a shared vision for future investment.

The committee has focused on several interconnected priorities:

- Expanding access to performance and rehearsal venues.
- Increasing the availability of studios, classrooms, and creative workspaces.
- Identifying flexible spaces that can support community celebrations, cultural programming, and multidisciplinary events.
- Exploring opportunities for adaptive reuse of existing buildings before pursuing new construction.
- Developing long-term strategies for future cultural facilities that can serve multiple community needs.

This emphasis on adaptive reuse is particularly relevant for many Colorado communities. Vacant commercial buildings, underutilized civic facilities, former schools, warehouses, and retail spaces often represent opportunities to expand cultural infrastructure without the expense of entirely new construction. By framing these projects as investments in neighborhood revitalization and downtown activation, advocates can engage economic development organizations, business districts, and municipal planners alongside traditional arts supporters.

CONVENING COMMUNITY AROUND A SHARED VISION

In 2022, Create Boulder took a significant step by organizing the Boulder Arts Complex Visioning Workshop. Rather than presenting a predetermined proposal, the organization invited national development experts, local practitioners, artists, and community leaders to imagine what Boulder might need over the coming decades.

The resulting recommendations extended beyond a single building project. Participants envisioned a coordinated system of cultural infrastructure that would strengthen the city's creative ecosystem while supporting broader civic objectives. Among the recommendations were:

- Establishing an umbrella organization to provide coordinated leadership and shared services for the cultural sector.
- Repurposing existing buildings to address immediate space shortages.
- Developing a longer-term vision for a major arts and performance complex capable of serving residents, visitors, and future generations.

Importantly, the workshop also demonstrated that visioning itself can be a powerful advocacy strategy. By engaging a broad cross-section of community leaders before decisions are made, advocates create shared ownership of future investments. The conversation shifts from whether arts facilities deserve support to how cultural infrastructure can best advance community priorities.

This collaborative approach has continued to influence projects such as the proposed Pearl Arts District, which integrates cultural facilities with housing, hospitality, and commercial development. Rather than existing as an isolated arts campus, the concept illustrates how arts infrastructure can become part of a larger mixed-use development strategy that strengthens economic activity throughout an entire district.

Results: Building Momentum Through Strategic Advocacy

The success of Create Boulder is measured not only by individual policy victories but also by its ability to strengthen the overall capacity of Boulder's creative sector.

Between 2020 and 2025, Create Boulder invested in programs that distributed approximately $875,000 in pandemic relief funding for artists and cultural organizations in partnership with Bonfils-Stanton Foundation, the Denver Foundation, Visit Boulder (Boulder's Convention and Visitor's Bureau), and the Boulder Office of Arts and Culture, while advocating for additional municipal investment. During one of the most disruptive periods in recent history, the organization helped stabilize Boulder's creative community while demonstrating that arts organizations could serve as effective partners in broader community recovery efforts.

Its advocacy also contributed to several significant public policy outcomes:

- Successful advocacy and supplementary support to restore City General Operating Support grants to previously committed funding levels during the pandemic.
- Allocation of a portion of Boulder's American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding to support arts and cultural recovery.
- Voter approval of the Arts, Culture & Heritage Tax, creating a long-term source of dedicated funding for cultural investment. This success has been a building block for future initiatives.

Perhaps equally important are the organizational outcomes that are less easily quantified.

Today, Boulder possesses a greater capacity for coordinated arts advocacy than it did a decade ago, particularly around major policy and funding opportunities. Relationships among artists, nonprofit organizations, businesses, elected officials, and community leaders became stronger through the Arts, Culture & Heritage Tax campaign. Those experiences demonstrated the sector's ability to organize and communicate with a coordinated voice when a shared priority creates sufficient urgency.   Business leaders increasingly recognize the creative sector as an economic asset rather than a peripheral community amenity. City leaders have become accustomed to considering arts and culture within broader discussions about economic development, community planning, and civic investment One tangible indication of this broader shift is the City's January 2026 reorganization, which brought the Office of Arts & Culture and economic vitality functions together within the new Culture and Economic Development Department.

Advocates, however, identified several important lessons from the Arts, Culture & Heritage Tax campaign. Failing to engage non-arts nonprofits, particularly health and human services organizations, contributed to late opposition to the Arts, Culture & Heritage Tax in 2023. The ballot language also proved too broad, leaving important questions about future spending unresolved. This underscores the importance of being as specific as possible in drafting the ballot language. Combined with reliance on an anticipated 2024 cultural plan to guide 2025 spending, that ambiguity reduced advocates' leverage when the City postponed the planning process to a bridge year. Boulder's experience also illustrates that coalition-building is not self-sustaining: relationships and coordinated advocacy capacity built during a major campaign require continued attention once the immediate urgency has passed.

These outcomes illustrate that effective advocacy, which will always be imperfect, produces more than funding. It builds trust, strengthens civic relationships, and creates the conditions necessary for future policy success.

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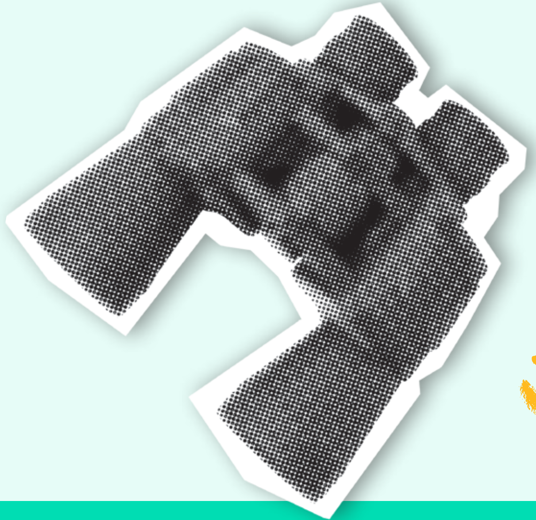


STATEWIDE CASE STUDY

Innovative Funding Mechanisms for Capital Projects

Financing Cultural Infrastructure Across Colorado

Not every community has the financial resources necessary to construct or renovate cultural facilities using local tax revenues alone. Recognizing this challenge, Colorado has developed a range of tools that can help municipalities, businesses, cultural organizations and communities assemble the capital needed for long-term investment. The Colorado Educational and Cultural Facilities Authority (CECFA), established in 1981, is one of the state's most significant—and often underutilized—tools for expanding access to affordable financing. Its statutory authority has grown beyond its original focus on higher education to encompass museums, libraries, galleries, performing arts organizations, botanical gardens, historical societies, charter schools, and other nonprofit institutions. CECFA enables eligible organizations to finance capital projects through low-interest, tax-exempt bonds; organizations remain responsible for repayment, while CECFA serves as the financing conduit rather than a direct funding agency.

Colorado has also developed grant and tax-credit mechanisms that can complement this financing infrastructure by helping communities address the costs and financial feasibility of revitalization projects. The Community Revitalization Grant program was a limited-time opportunity to use pandemic-related recovery funds to support "shovel ready" building projects that foster economic revitalization, placemaking and affordable housing for the creative sector. The program provided state support for capital projects that strengthen downtowns and other commercial districts through the rehabilitation, preservation, or adaptive reuse of buildings and public spaces. These one-time grants were quickly depleted and dozens of eligible and transformational projects remained around the state. In 2024, the state legislature passed the Community Revitalization Tax Credit, which transitioned the grant program into a five-year refundable tax credit to continue supporting infrastructure, housing, and economic revitalization projects through arts, culture and creative development. These tools demonstrate an important distinction in cultural infrastructure financing: grants and tax credits can help close capital gaps and attract investment, while financing mechanisms such as CECFA can provide the longer-term capital necessary to complete major projects.

COMMUNITY TYPE:
Statewide

PRIMARY ADVOCACY STRATEGY:
Coalition Building / Community Engagement / Creative Placemaking

KEY STAKEHOLDERS:
Arts Organizations / State and Local Government / Philanthropy / Education Partners

TRANSFERABILITY:
Medium

Why Cultural Facilities Financing Matters for Advocates

Since 1981, CECFA has issued more than $10 billion in bonds supporting museums, performing arts venues, educational institutions, sports facilities, libraries, and other community-serving organizations—demonstrating the scale of impact that financing infrastructure can have when communities understand how to leverage it effectively. Similarly, Colorado's Community Revitalization Grant program invested approximately $98 million in 59 capital projects and leveraged an additional $231.6 million in public and private funding, while the successor Community Revitalization Tax Credit will distribute up to $50 million in tax credits available through 2029 to stimulate further investment in creative-industry infrastructure.

Emerging Strategies for Colorado Communities

While every community has unique assets and challenges, the case studies featured in this chapter reveal several common strategies that are reshaping how Colorado communities think about arts, culture, and economic development. Rather than focusing solely on organizational sustainability, successful communities are increasingly investing in systems that enable artists, cultural organizations, businesses, and residents to thrive together.

Support Creative Entrepreneurs and Small Businesses

Artists are entrepreneurs. They operate small businesses, generate local economic activity, purchase goods and services, activate commercial districts, and contribute to the identity of Colorado communities. Yet traditional economic development programs do not always recognize creative workers as an integral part of the local business ecosystem.

Communities can strengthen their creative economies by integrating artists and creative businesses into existing entrepreneurship initiatives, small business development programs, workforce training efforts, and business attraction strategies. Partnerships with chambers of commerce, downtown development authorities, business improvement districts, and economic development organizations create opportunities to ensure that the creative sector is represented alongside other industries.

Expand Affordable Creative Space

Across Colorado, access to affordable space remains one of the greatest challenges facing artists and cultural organizations. Rising real estate costs, redevelopment pressures, and competition for commercial property threaten the long-term sustainability of local creative ecosystems.

Rather than viewing this solely as an arts issue, many communities are exploring creative space as an economic development strategy. Temporary activation of vacant storefronts, adaptive reuse of existing buildings, shared creative workspaces, maker spaces, and mixed-use developments all represent opportunities to increase access while contributing to downtown revitalization.

Connect Arts to Tourism and Place-Based Development

Colorado communities increasingly recognize that authentic cultural experiences strengthen tourism and distinguish places from one another. Visitors are drawn not only by natural amenities but also by festivals, museums, performing arts, public art, historic preservation, and opportunities to engage with local creative communities.

Integrating arts and culture into destination development strategies creates benefits that extend beyond tourism. Investments that improve the visitor experience often enhance quality of life for residents as well, reinforcing community identity while generating economic activity.

Build Cross-Sector Coalitions

Perhaps the strongest lesson emerging from the case studies is that effective advocacy rarely occurs within the arts sector alone.

Communities that have achieved lasting policy and funding success have intentionally built relationships with:

- Business leaders
- Economic development organizations
- Health and human services organizations
- Chambers of commerce
- Downtown associations
- Local governments
- Philanthropic organizations
- Educational institutions
- Tourism organizations
- Neighborhood associations
- Community-based organizations

These partnerships expand both political support and public credibility by demonstrating that cultural investment advances shared community priorities rather than serving only a single constituency.

Expanding the Narrative: Arts, Health, and Community Well-Being

An emerging body of research suggests that arts and culture contribute to community well-being in ways that extend far beyond economic development. Increasingly, public health organizations recognize that creative participation influences many of the social determinants of health by strengthening social connection, reducing isolation, supporting emotional well-being, encouraging civic participation, and helping communities respond to collective challenges.

The research summarized for this guide identifies several areas where arts and culture can make meaningful contributions, including mental health, social cohesion, community resilience, public participation, and health communication. Rather than treating health and culture as separate policy domains, these findings encourage communities to explore new partnerships between artists, cultural organizations, health systems, and public agencies.

Tasha Golden, Jill Sonke, and Alexandra Rodriguez's "An Evidence-Based Framework for the Use of Arts and Culture in Public Health" (2025) identifies seven mechanisms through which arts participation contributes to individual and community well-being:

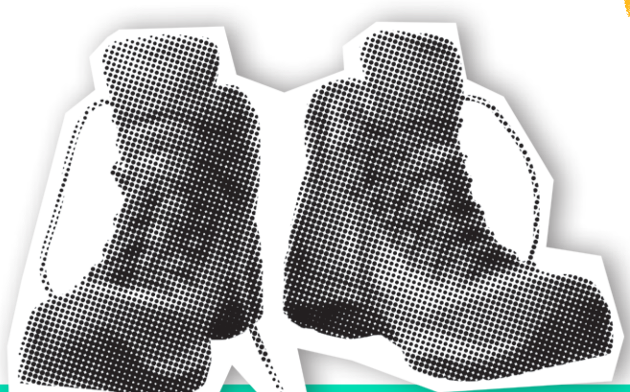
- Strengthening self-efficacy.
- Creating opportunities for personal and cultural resonance.
- Providing meaningful aesthetic experiences.
- Fostering emotional engagement and empathy.
- Creating opportunities for expression and for individuals to feel heard.
- Supporting meaning-making.
- Encouraging experiences of self-transcendence.
- Contributing to wellness as well as physical and mental health.

For local advocates, this research broadens the conversation about why arts and culture matter. Economic development remains a compelling narrative, but it is not the only one. Communities increasingly value investments that improve mental health, provide opportunities to older residents (including creative aging), reduce social isolation, strengthen civic trust, and foster resilient neighborhoods. Arts and culture contribute to each of these goals.

Several practical opportunities emerge from this work:

- Co-locate arts activities with health and social services.
- Include artists in the design of community health initiatives.
- Partner with public health agencies on community engagement and communication.
- Incorporate cultural organizations into cross-sector planning efforts.
- Develop shared outcomes that reflect both health and cultural priorities.

These partnerships not only expand the reach of arts organizations but also position creativity as an essential component of community well-being rather than an optional enhancement.



Common Challenges

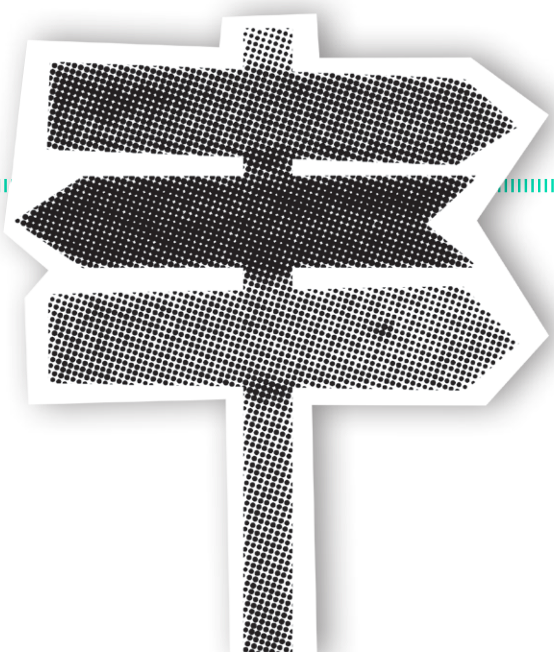
Communities pursuing arts advocacy frequently encounter similar obstacles. Recognizing these challenges early allows advocates to respond strategically rather than reactively.

Public skepticism about arts funding. Some residents view arts investment as discretionary spending. Advocates can respond by consistently connecting cultural investment to measurable community outcomes including economic activity, neighborhood revitalization, tourism, education, and public well-being.

Fragmented leadership. Competition among organizations can weaken advocacy efforts. Establishing shared priorities and coordinated communications helps build trust while presenting policymakers with a unified voice.

Short-term thinking. Capital projects, policy change, and relationship building require sustained effort. Communities that establish long-term visions while pursuing incremental victories are often better positioned for lasting success.

Late coalition building. Several lessons emerging from Colorado emphasize the importance of engaging partners outside the arts sector early in the advocacy process, particularly organizations working in business, education, human services, public health, and neighborhood development. Waiting until a campaign is underway limits opportunities to build authentic partnerships.



Resources Advocates Need

As communities develop local arts advocacy strategies, the following resources can strengthen planning and implementation:

- Local economic impact studies.
- Community cultural plans.
- Candidate forum materials.
- Public opinion research.
- Ballot language and campaign communications.
- Municipal ordinances supporting arts and culture.
- Facility feasibility studies.
- Community engagement tools and survey instruments.
- Creative economy reports.
- Tourism and destination development plans.

Advocates Try This!

Identify one community priority that already enjoys broad public support—such as downtown revitalization, workforce development, tourism, public health, or neighborhood vitality. Convene representatives from the arts sector, local government, business, and community organizations to explore how arts and culture can help advance that goal.

Rather than beginning the conversation with a request for arts funding, begin with a shared community challenge. Ask participants to identify where artists, cultural organizations, and creative businesses can contribute unique value. The resulting partnerships are often stronger, more durable, and more likely to generate long-term public investment because they are grounded in shared outcomes rather than organizational interests.

Successful advocacy begins not by asking communities to support the arts, but by demonstrating how the arts help communities achieve what they value most.