



Cultural Districts Program

As authorized by H.B. 2208 of the 79th Legislature, the Texas Commission on the Arts (TCA) can designate cultural districts in cities across Texas. Cultural districts are special zones that harness the power of cultural resources to stimulate economic development and community revitalization. These districts can become focal points for generating businesses, attracting tourists, stimulating cultural development and fostering civic pride.

Goals of cultural districts

TCA recognizes that a thriving creative sector is a powerful economic development asset. Cultural district development is one strategy that helps a community boost their economies while realizing other cultural and civic benefits. The outcomes of cultural districts extend beyond the arts and benefit all members of a community. Goals may include:

Attracting artists and cultural enterprises to the community. Artists, cultural institutions and creative enterprises all contribute to a community's economic potential. Not only do they generate direct economic activity, but artists and creative entrepreneurs infuse communities with energy and innovation.

Encouraging business and job development. Cultural districts can create a hub of economic activity that contributes to the community being an appealing place to live, visit and conduct business. A thriving cultural scene helps an area to prosper when consumers drawn to cultural attractions patronize other nearby businesses. This can result in the creation of new economic opportunities and jobs.

Addressing specific needs of a community. Cultural districts are a highly adaptable economic development approach that allows a community to make use of unique conditions, assets and opportunities.

Establishing tourism destinations. Cultural districts are marketable tourism assets that highlight the distinct identity of a community and encourage in-state, out of state, and international visitors.

Preserving and reusing historic buildings. Some cultural districts are very involved in historic preservation. Adaptive reuse and rehabilitation of older buildings through preservation tax credits can result in structural and façade improvements. These rehabilitated buildings provide opportunities for affordable artist live/work space and new homes for cultural organizations.

Enhancing property values. Successful districts combine improvements to public spaces (such as parks, waterfronts and pedestrian corridors) along with property development. The redevelopment of abandoned properties,

historic sites, and recruiting businesses to occupy vacant spaces can contribute to reduced vacancy rates and enhanced property values.

Fostering local cultural development. The establishment of a cultural district provides a focal point for celebrating and strengthening a community's cultural identity. Cultural districts highlight existing cultural amenities and work to recruit and establish new artists, cultural industries and organizations.

Local challenges

Every cultural district is unique, but the following challenges can occur in districts large and small and in rural, urban and suburban areas:

- **Gentrification** is an unintended consequence of success. Displacement of existing residents can lead to the loss of a region's unique and authentic identity and diminish local support.
- **Staffing** and administration prove to be one of the most common challenges for local districts. Many districts are staffed as part-time or volunteer positions.
- **Financing** and securing funding for districts is one of the most difficult challenges a local district administrator faces. Even when creative partnerships are used to augment resources, funds for planning and promoting local districts can be difficult to secure.
- **Relevance to local residents** needs to be considered with equal respect to efforts that attract tourism. Districts face hardship when they do not have the support of their own community.
- **Long-term planning** contributes to the success of districts. Planning and evaluation of local efforts can be time consuming and demand extra resources but are crucial to sustaining a local district.

Success factors for cultural districts

The ideas below have been identified as common success factors among cultural districts, and may serve as indicators for potential success:

- A **unique and authentic identity** that highlights what is special about the district and the community is in place.
- **Community support** of the district is in place to ensure continued success.
- **Strategic partnerships** have been brokered that result in a variety of resources.

- Inclusive **cultural and strategic planning** has been completed that articulates a vision for the cultural district and the broader community.
- A district has sustainable **artist live/work spaces** that provide artists with a productive environment.
- **A local developer has committed to the cultural district** and understands the power of arts and culture in community and economic development.
- **Anchor institutions and special events** are in place and they are the cornerstones of the community and the district.
- **Artists are partners**, not products, and are valued as members of the community.
- **Artist recruitment is an organized effort** that shows how a community is willing to welcome new artists and facilitate their establishment.
- **Events and venues are accessible** to ensure that participation available to all of the community and visitors.
- **Clear signage** is in place so visitors and the community can recognize the boundaries. The signage can be enhanced with distinctive logos, maps and other visual materials.
- **A user-friendly website** with comprehensive information about the district is available for the community and for visitors.
- **Marketing and promotion** efforts are in place to attract visitors, potential residents and new businesses.
- **Strong amenities** such as restaurants, lodging and recreation bolster the efforts of the cultural district.

As community leaders recognize the role of creative arts and culture in sustainable economic development, cities and states are seeking new ways to amplify the positive effects of this sector.

Texas' Cultural District program has the potential to be a leading statewide catalyst for economic development. The willingness of communities to complete the application process that requires bringing together diverse local stakeholders, developing a detailed funding plan, and documenting strategies and tactics bodes well for long-term success. After reviewing the programs in other states and cities, a series of adjustments and recommendations emerged that would improve the competitiveness and viability of the Texas model. In addition, these changes should make it easier to encourage other communities to participate in the Cultural District program.

Source: Texas Commission on the Arts
www.arts.state.tx.us