

Northwest Connecticut Arts Council
CULTURAL ASSESSMENT REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
2013-2014

INTRODUCTION

After 10 years serving the area, the Northwest Connecticut Arts Council invited people from all sectors of the region and surround towns to “Tell US Like It Is” regarding the current state of the cultural environment in the region. This was done so that the Arts Council might better understand the needs of the cultural community, the views of the general public in all sectors.

*The mission of the Northwest Connecticut Arts Council is to **promote** the arts and cultural resources of Northwestern Connecticut as integral contributors to the quality of life in the region, to **assist** all artists and cultural organizations in their efforts to thrive, and to **inform** the general public about, and **give access** to the arts and culture of the region.*

OVERVIEW

This Cultural Assessment Survey was primarily directed at the 25 towns that are served by the Arts Council. These towns included Barkhamsted, Bethlehem, Burlington, Colebrook, Cornwall, Falls Village/Canaan, Goshen, Hartland, Harwinton, Kent, Litchfield, Morris, New Hartford, New Milford, Norfolk, North Canaan, Plymouth, Salisbury/Lakeville, Roxbury, Sharon, Thomaston, Torrington, Warren, Washington, and Winsted/Winchester. We welcomed part-time residents (weekenders) and people from surrounding towns to participate in the survey as well, with their views of the cultural environment of this region.

The northwestern corner of Connecticut is known for its rolling hills and New England charm. Often called the Litchfield Hills, the region hosts part of the Appalachian Trail which crosses through Litchfield County's forested hills and over the Housatonic River, famous for some of the best trout fishing in the East, and many different varieties of wildlife. The region's towns are primarily rural in nature, with each town holding great pride in its local history.

Participation in the Cultural Assessment Survey was directed at three main sectors of the community:

1. Artists/Artisans/History Professionals (visual, performing, literary, film and fine crafts)
2. Cultural Organizations (performing groups, museums, galleries, art associations/leagues, theaters, historical societies, organizations offering arts instruction, libraries, non-cultural venues offering cultural programming)
3. General Public (residents, business people, news media workers, public officials, educators)

There were 581 responses to the survey. Of these:

- 38.7% were artists or heritage workers
- 12.6% represented cultural organizations/businesses
- 48.7% were members of the general public
- 83.5% had a primary residence within the 25-town service area served by the Arts Council
- 7% were residents of more distant locales but had weekend residences in NW CT
- 10% had a primary residence in other CT municipalities or in nearby towns along the border of Massachusetts or New York

KEY FINDINGS

1. The Field:

Approximately 200 cultural organizations have been identified, and additional organizations new to the Council are discovered regularly. As discovered in the original survey, this sector is very active in our region, providing various cultural programming in a wide variety of venues. Our rural region utilizes both traditional cultural venues as well as non-traditional venues such as places of worship, schools, town halls, assisted living centers, inns, vineyards, restaurants and retail shops.

There were many more professional artists, artisans and heritage workers who responded than amateurs in this area, so the viewpoints shared are largely from those who truly depend on a healthy economy and environment supportive of arts and heritage fields.

2. The Market: The members of the Cultural Community (both individuals and representatives of cultural businesses) primarily use free promotional outlets to market their work. They also described their market is local and regional and, for the most part, felt positive about the prospects for their business.
3. Education: Based on the responses from the Educational Sector of the survey, the arts and heritage resources are not being fully utilized by all schools in our area. Responders identified a variety of barriers that prevented more utilization of arts in their schools: funds, manpower and time, among them, and a inconsistent views regarding the value of these resources.
4. Business: There is a disconnect between how the business sector views the value of culture in their community and the way they see how that value directly and indirectly affects business.
5. Public Officials: It was unanimous among those in public service who responded that the arts and cultural programming and institutions were recognized as assets for communities.
6. News Media Representatives: We received very few responses from this sector, but it was clear that the news media is experiencing stresses related to their internal resources and how that affects their ability to report about cultural in the region.
7. General Public: We received twice as many total responses to this survey than we did when it was conducted in 2004. All survey respondents helped us to draw the following conclusions or affirmed the following understanding:

a) Where people go to experience culture:

The largest municipality in our region, Torrington, remains the most frequented for cultural programming and entertainment by responders. This is most likely due to the region's largest professional performance venue, the Warner Theatre. The city also is home to many other venues with cultural offerings including the Warner's Center for Arts Education, the Nutmeg Conservatory for the Arts, Joyful Noise and their choral education program, Artwell Gallery & Community Center's exhibits and workshops/classes, University of Connecticut at Torrington/Litchfield County Writers Project, Torrington Historical Society, the Torrington

Library and several new enterprises: Connecticut Academy for the Arts (CAFTA), the Morrison Artists Collective, Desultory Theatre Club, Five Points Gallery, the Singer Songwriter Network, Studio 59 concerts, and The Arts Desire.

Next most frequented is the town of Norfolk, the largest market draw for culture being credited to Infinity Music Hall. In addition, the town draws audiences to Norfolk Chamber Music Festival, the Norfolk Library, Norfolk Artists and Friends, the Artisans Guild, and the Norfolk Historical Society.

Kent and Litchfield were the next most frequented CT towns in our region, and each has very active libraries and historical societies, the Kent Singers, as well as several art galleries (Morrison Gallery, Ober Gallery, Good Gallery, PS Gallery, the Artists Path gallery, Bantam Fine Arts, Ella's Limited, the Kent Art Association, and a few pop-up galleries such as The Factory, Cargocollective, and Livwill Art), several private schools and churches that offer concert series. The galleries and the Art Association are known to draw a significant number of attendees several times a year.

New York City, the Hartford area, and Massachusetts were also ranked high on the list of where people usually attended cultural events.

Every municipality, save Plymouth, had some level of response regarding this question.

b) Cultural Offerings:

There are a vast number of varied cultural offerings in our region, as observed by survey responders and from data collected regularly through the Arts Council.

More responders attended film than any other cultural offering. In our region, we have five cinema houses (Torrington, 2 in Winsted, Bantam, and New Milford), as well as other venues that regularly present films, such as The Warner, CAFTA, all our libraries. In addition, people in our region frequent movie houses in nearby New York and Massachusetts. Film is a popular, accessible and affordable form of entertainment and culture, one that is introduced to children at a very early age. In our region and neighboring NY and MA, there are three venues that present high definition format screenings of The Metropolitan Opera broadcasts, as well as screenings of international theatre and dance productions.

The type of cultural offering that responders attended most frequently was art exhibits. An impressive number (92%) of respondents attended an art exhibit at least one time a year, with 25% of all respondents attending art exhibits seven or more times a year. This is likely accounted for because 1) there are many galleries, libraries, historical societies, art associations, and alternative venues that present art exhibits regularly; 2) these events often show the work of local artists who garner community support and interest; 3) these events are free and offer an opportunity to connect as a community; 4) opening receptions are usually in the early evening so attendees may take in an exhibit as part of an evening, augmenting it with dinner or a performance; 5) many exhibits are part of fundraising efforts for local causes.

Next in line of what responders attended frequently were films, concerts, and festivals/fairs – all with equal ranking in the survey.

c) Information about cultural events:

The most common ways that responders learned about cultural events were through the mail, email, word-of-mouth, and newspapers/regional magazines, which surprisingly is fairly traditional. The use of social media, although certainly growing as compared with past surveys, was among the second tier of choices, together with emails from the NW CT Arts Council, websites of the event organizer, and radio. We sense a slow shift in this area, by observing that a handful of successful smaller cultural ventures are reaching their audience almost solely through social media and email.

d) Barriers to Attendance:

One of the top barriers to attending cultural programs was driving distances. Our rural region is large and sprawling, sometimes taking more than 45 minutes to travel from one end of the region to the other. There is only one major highway (Route 8 going north-south along the eastern part of our region), and there is no public transportation system. According to the demographics of the respondents, a large portion of attendees of cultural programming in our region are above the age of 55. During the winter months, older members of the cultural program audience tend to travel south to warmer residences, drive less frequently at night to programs, and/or drive less frequently due to winter road conditions.

Lack of free time and cost were other barriers. We surmise that respondents' lack of time is due to work hours or time devoted to child or family care. Cost is certainly a very real barrier in a recovering economy, although many cultural offerings are either free or very low cost.

Another barrier that is of note is the lack of awareness of what is going on in the cultural community, or the perceived lack of available information about cultural offerings. Clearly there is more to do throughout the entire region to address this.

KEY ISSUES

The Key Issues identified that respondents felt needed to be addressed are:

- **Promotion of the region's cultural resources, offerings, and events** (via marketing and regional events)
- **Coordination and nurturing of collaborative efforts** (events, marketing, operational services, opportunities)
- **Implementation of support services to artists and cultural businesses** (networking, workshops/seminars, advocacy, guidance/consulting)
- **Increase of access to funding**

In order for northwest Connecticut to improve the environment and the level of success for the region's cultural community overall, that community needs to share a vision of what an environment that supports success would look like and then work toward that in various ways. From the responses to this survey, the Arts Council has interpreted the responses, and proposes that the environment would:

- 1) have a growing number of **people who value the impact of arts and heritage** within our community and its impact on the various sectors of the region's population
- 2) have a growing number of **people who have a pronounced awareness of and participation in the various cultural offerings** throughout the region
- 3) have a growing number of **individuals and representatives from all sectors of the public invest in the cultural community** as customers, funders, volunteers and more
- 4) have **a community that attracts new residents, businesses and** visitors for reasons that include the strength of the cultural community's contribution to the region
- 5) have **a cultural community that believes in and invests in itself** through positive interaction on many levels

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve the environment for a successful cultural sector in our region, the recommendations to address the Key Issues identified through this survey are as follows:

1. Promotion: Position the cultural businesses, artists, and the various cultural events and programs whereby more residents and visitors, and even the cultural community itself, are engaged and participating more frequently, more broadly, and more regularly.

- **Greater awareness within the cultural community about its own assets, efforts, and activities.** *This is valuable* in order to increase the attention that these entities receive from the public. Greater awareness will build the combined effort for attention: reinforce each other's efforts through cross promotion, avoid duplication, encourage collaboration, etc. **How** do we increase awareness in this sector: networking, round table conversations, encouraging utilization of the Arts Council as a central source of information and a resource for gathering together on neutral ground?
- **Build on successful regional promotional vehicles for the region's cultural events and activities and resources/assets, and discover/develop new effective vehicles for promotion** to be used by

the Arts Council and shared with/introduced to our cultural constituents and other regional partners in various sectors, particularly the media, tourism, business sectors and municipalities. **How** – Evaluate the currently used vehicles promotional value. Collaboratively use those successful vehicles i.e. share use of, cross promotion, and avoiding duplication will build upon the currently used valuable promotional vehicles. Broaden the use by the Arts Council, various regional organizations, and the region’s cultural sector of new vehicles for promotion, such as social media, and other methods that emerge.

NOTE: Although the Arts Council seeks to provide a central source of information regarding Events and Cultural Resources, opportunities and activities for the region, other attempts to provide such things as events calendars, artist directories, etc. have emerged regularly within the region over the years. Although other organizations and town-centered websites use the Arts Council’s calendar, the Council needs to reach out to offer this tool for their use. Also, the Arts Council must embrace the fact that efforts to “recreate the wheel” will likely continue and should examine how to react to these duplications of services.

2. **Coordinate and nurture collaborative efforts** in order to broaden the reach and build greater awareness of recognition of the impact that arts and heritage have throughout all sectors of our population.

- **Partnerships:** Done in the right way, collaborative efforts can increase the number of stakeholders involved in the success of a venture. It can also address the commonly experienced lack of manpower for events, projects, shared services, and activities. **How** can the Arts Council nurture collaborative efforts: provide guidance and templates for successful partnerships, model this by being a partner in some instances, and introduce potential partners to one another?
- **Marketing:** Co-operative marketing can both conserve financial resources and provide a larger presence in the media. **How** - the Arts Council has begun, and can expand, co-op advertising in print and radio media, and can explore how this can be done on other marketing platforms as well (magazines, online ads, social media ads). We can also work more closely with the tourism bureau, jointly, to see what can be achieved collaboratively through their promotional efforts. Additional ways to market the region’s cultural assets efficiently and cost-effectively need to be explored through Council hosted Round Table discussions as well as through other avenues.
- **Events:** Collaborative events that feature multiple artists, multiple cultural organizations, and/or multiple cultural venues can potentially bring greater attention to a venture and to the region overall. It can also generate broader buy-in, ownership and pride throughout the community. **How** - It is important that collaborative events be well planned, that the partnerships be authentic (fully engaged partners), marketed effectively, appeal to a broad audience and feel inclusive. The Arts Council has observed that having a central, coordinating entity for such efforts positively impacts the chance for success. The Arts Council can be available to help guide the initial set up of collaborative events, or provide a Peer Advisor Network consultant to help for such efforts.

3. **Implement support services to artists and cultural businesses** in order to build the capacity of individual arts and cultural businesses/organizations to succeed.

- **Networking** avenues allow those working in the field to periodically connect to one another and gather so that they are informed about area-wide matters as well as what colleagues in the field are dealing with, and then relate this information to what they are doing. These networking opportunities can be specific to the discipline or field, or be cross sector – all of which can potentially benefit those involved. **How** – The Arts Council will continue to offer, and hopefully increase, the annual CultureMIX events which are open to those involved in the cultural community at any level. The Round Table conversations, which are usually interest- or discipline-specific, were started again in 2013, and the Council has several scheduled for 2014, with the intention of continuing them as those in the field wish. These Round Tables offer an opportunity for those with common interests throughout the region to share information and brainstorm about common issues, with the neutral party in the form of the Arts Council facilitating. The Council can also encourage more cross sector networking, by informing the field about such opportunities.
- **Workshops/Seminars** – For both individuals and organization representatives in the arts and heritage fields, workshops and seminars help increase their capacity to be successful in their cultural businesses. **How** - The Arts Council, in addition to other resources in the region and the state, provide these. The Arts Council specifically offers workshops and seminars in response to needs expressed by their constituents and needs that have been observed by Council staff and board. We also pass along other opportunities for webinars, workshops and other learning opportunities to our constituents via our weekly e-blasts and our website. The challenge comes with hosting these sessions with limited funding and manpower resources. This can be addressed through collaboration and fundraising.
- **Guidance and Consulting** – Often individuals and/or cultural businesses find the need for expertise in an area foreign to them or for a fresh perspective for a challenge they face, and outside guidance by someone with knowledge and training in the field or the specific challenge can meet those needs. Addressing such issues can be the key to more fully developing a venture or enabling it to more fully realize its potential. **How** – there are various resources within our region and the state that can be drawn upon for this, including SCORE, the Women’s Enterprise Initiative, and others. The Arts Council provides guidance in response to requests from constituents, and when instances call for more in-depth work for an organization, Connecticut’s Peer Advisor Network program (short-term, affordable consulting) is offered through the Council’s office. The Council can do more by making constituents more aware of the resources available to them.
- **Advocacy** – It is vital that constituents understand their role in advocating for their organizations and for the health and success of their field. They need to know that advocacy can make a difference in funding, in their business environment, the economy, and more. **How** – The Arts Council is currently an active partner with the CT Arts Alliance, and stays informed of various issues via the CT Association for Nonprofits, Americans for the Arts, the Northwest CT Chamber of Commerce and other sources. The Council should continue to share this information with its constituents via the e-blasts, but should explore doing more to educate about advocacy, either via workshops or Round Tables.

4. **Increase access to funding** – in our rural region where, comparatively, there are fewer large corporations that have the ability to contribute significantly and consistently to nonprofits, the need for funds remains very competitive. The limited funding sources curtail the development of certain organizations.

- **Government Funding:** On the state-level, the Arts Council and its constituents can advocate strategically for increased funding for culture overall, and for more funding opportunities to be directed to our region. **How** – The Council may want to explore ways of unifying the advocacy voice within the region, via “how to advocate” sessions, presentations explaining the ins and outs of our state’s budgeting and appropriations process, and through Round Tables.
- **Building the Case for Funding:** Often, constituents are not aware of how to obtain funding or how to present a convincing proposal. Each time they successfully approach businesses and foundations for support, they strengthen the fabric of philanthropy throughout the region. **How** - The Arts Council can continue to explore various ways to gather data (attendance, socioeconomic, economic impact, etc.) that supports the case for funding culture in our region. The Council can also help make accessible the types of workshops and seminars that will strengthen the ability of constituents to write strong grants and build their own cases for support.
- **Opportunities:** Although our region has fewer large corporate donors than more urban areas, there are some non-local sources and alternative funding methods, such as crowd-sourcing. **How** - The Arts Council currently shares information it receives about funding opportunities via e-blasts and social media posts. Opportunities for traditional and nontraditional funding could be more actively researched. There may also be better forums to more effectively share this information and/or the ways to unearth this information. This effort may be something that can be realized through volunteer help. The encouragement of more collaborative projects may also open up additional grant opportunities to constituents. The Council could also further explore the possibility of being involved in re-granting on behalf of the State or other funders.