

Building Strong Partnerships With Local Government

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Across Colorado, creative districts are working towards a common vision: to ensure that Colorado's communities become places where the creative industries and their partners thrive and have access to the support, services and opportunities they need to ensure long-term success. creative district work cannot be done alone; the path to success requires them to think creatively about how they work with others.

Among the most important relationships a creative district can and must nurture is that with local government. This partnership is critical to the sustainable and effective performance of a district, and can open up opportunities for districts to be stronger and to grow. The following article provides important ideas and resources to help guide creative districts in building a successful relationship with their local government.

Why are Partnerships with Local Government Important?

Creative district organizations are growing in number, and in importance, playing increasingly critical roles in revitalizing communities and commercial districts and bringing a strengthened local economy through innovation and creative investment. No more simply informal organizations of the creative types, creative districts are home to traditional and emerging artists of all types – from painters and sculptors, to designers, to multi-media and technology developers. Together, these individuals are changing the face of these places and spaces through investment and their commitment to improve their neighborhoods for all. Through the creation of innovative nonprofits, they are getting involved in everything from changing the nature of the public realm, to encouraging creative economic development. They are building community and engaging youth. Their important role in community development cannot be denied.

Creative districts come at their role with vision and creative thinking, but getting things done on the ground requires the support of the local government. The creative industries have often proved an effective driving force of revitalization, particularly in communities challenged with otherwise difficult local economies. Creative districts bring together classic revitalization strategies with an added emphasis on the potential role of the creative industries as the driver of change. A creative district – by its very nature – is a place that provides communities with the possibility of getting together, mutually inspiring each other and testing new ideas and approaches to bring change. To be successful in their work, however, creative districts must establish a strong working relationship with their local government in order to:

- Raise awareness of the creative district and the issues it faces
- Build support for the creative district's program and work
- Allow the government to see the difference the creative district makes in the community
- Increase access to information and support

Building a Strong Partnership

Governments and the private sector are increasingly working together within creative districts to provide services and infrastructure through a variety of mechanisms, including informal and voluntary cooperation, special districts, contracts and joint ventures. Governments are increasingly seeing the benefits of strategic partnerships and allowing the local stakeholders to be more actively involved in decision-making and

service provision. All governments are realizing that they do not have sufficient budgetary resources to help solve critical community issues alone. Starting with the end in mind (i.e. what is the goal of the creative district, and what is the vision for the area) and engaging in a results-driven process is critical to the success of a strong partnership with the local government.

Here are some important considerations that creative district organizations should keep in mind in developing a partnership with the local government:

- Develop a broad, inclusive vision for the creative district and the **results** desired
- Bring together **accountable partners** in achieving the creative district's agenda
- Promote the use of timely, relevant and reliable **data** and other information to assess the creative district's needs, make decisions, monitor progress and ensure accountability
- Develop an **action plan** that is aligned with the creative district's vision and needs to ensure implementation of effective strategies
- Ensure **sustainability** and the ability to realize desired projects programs through clear financing strategies, strategic alliances and supportive public policies

Following this framework puts the creative district organization "in the driver's seat" for the district itself. It will be important to demonstrate that the creative district is the champion of a bigger vision – one that is well supported by a diverse group of stakeholders, including creatives themselves, business and property owners and the local residents. The agenda cannot be that of one individual, or of a small group of people working to meet their own needs. Successful creative districts, and partnerships, occur when there is a big vision and a clear strategy for how all the stakeholders can participate in realizing it, and benefit from its success.

How to Work with Local Government

The success in building a strong relationship between the creative district organization and local government is really all about – at the end of the day – communication and transparency. It will be the creative district's job to make sure that the vision always remains at the forefront, and that the conversations about how the vision is achieved are aligned. The following provides some tips for how to develop and maintain a successful working relationship with the local government:

- **Communicate:** Remember that it's important to establish and maintain good working relationships with individuals in all different departments, at all different levels and with both elected officials and staff, and to keep all of them continuously informed of the creative district's activities and anticipated impacts in the community. Do not assume that various departments communicate or coordinate well with each other, or that elected leaders are always aware of the discussions being held at the staff level.
- **Understand the Government Structure:** Different local governments work in different ways and have different processes for vetting and approving activities, and even bringing them up for discussion. Some local governments can be classified more as top-down, whereby the staff only acts or approves matters that the elected officials champion. Other local governments, meanwhile, are more bottom-up, meaning that strong staff leaders can propose ideas and initiatives and champion them through the local political process. Either way, it's important to identify key decision makers, and there are unique strategies to work with both:
 - *To work with top-down local governments:*

- ✓ Demonstrate to elected officials the benefit of getting behind the creative district – identify clearly what they and their constituents stand to gain.
- ✓ Make it easy to say “yes” but do not get discouraged if it’s a “no” on the first try – in other words be prepared in the sell, by making a clear case for why something is needed, how it will work, how it will be funded, how long it may take, and what the end result and impact will be. Don’t come with just pieces of the puzzle.
- ✓ Tell a story (i.e. pull at the heartstrings) – create a compelling presentation that links to something emotional and isn’t just an ask for money.
- ✓ Never underestimate the power of a well-written thank you note.
- *To work with bottom-up local organizations:*
 - ✓ Identify empowered staff leaders within the local government, and create a method through which to stay in regular communication and get them involved in the creative district work. Provide trainings for these staff to ensure they understand the creative district and what the organization’s work is all about.
 - ✓ Get these individuals excited about the message of the creative district, the opportunities, and what can happen by working together.
 - ✓ Know what’s wanted from them, and make the ask – don’t assume they know what the creative district organization wants or needs, have a clear list of priorities and how they can best help. Make their decision easy to help the creative district.
 - ✓ Give them praise and public recognition for their support and assistance and for championing the creative district.
- **Leverage Resources:** Local governments can provide services, can communicate information to the local population, or can integrate local efforts with the needs of the creative district. In addition to that, local government may have long-established relationships with important local, statewide and national groups and can play a role in convening and facilitating discussions between the creative district and these other key representatives.
- **Show Return on Investment (ROI):** Local governments must demonstrate that they are wisely utilizing tax dollars and their government resources. To that end, it’s important that Creative District leaders help them understand that their contribution will leverage other contributions into the area, and that by taking on the responsibility for the creative district the organization is effectively championing important and necessary revitalization efforts on behalf of the local government. Providing data and information on positive impacts and the return the government might get for the investment is an important part of helping to get support from both staff and elected officials.
- **Keep the Message Fresh, Positive and Relevant:** Arts, culture and the creative industries can be a unifying force in any community. When positioned right, the creative district organization can be a fresh voice of opportunity and initiative, countering a lot of the NIMBYs and naysayers that the local government often has to deal with. Stay about the fray and focus on selling the positive aspects of how culture and creativity can transform the community.

Ensuring the Success of the Partnership

Early and often – these should be the guiding principles about how best to communicate with the local government. Good partnerships – and lasting ones – are those built on trust and transparency. They develop with the commitment of both parties at the table.

Relationship building takes time, but there are a few key principles that can help build the partnership and ensure it lasts:

- Fight the instinct to delay reaching out – it's always going to feel like more research or preparation is necessary, or that there's a better time. But don't wait – make everybody at the table feel as though they had a role in the creative district from the start, and that they are part of its evolution.
- Early engagement provides valuable opportunities to influence public perception and set a positive tone. Don't wait until there is a full plan and then present it for reaction – make all the stakeholders part of the development process.
- Be clear upfront that there are uncertainties and unknowns – the creative district isn't the answer to all the area's problems, but it may indeed create many new opportunities.
- Use early interactions as a predictor of issues and risks and generate ideas and solutions. Engagement opens up everyone's minds to the real challenges on the ground by exposing how different people see the space differently.
- Don't wait until there is a problem to work with the local government – engaging with government stakeholders from the start enables a proactive cultivation of ideas that can serve as "capital" during challenging times. Trying to initiate contact when in a challenging situation can create a lasting negative perception that is difficult to overcome. Reaching out to local government officials for assistance or as allies only after a problem occurs may be more difficult.

Finally, remember that effective engagement means beginning to end involvement in the process. Effective creative districts will involve the local government and others as active partners and participants and will share the glory as well. Connect all the partners together to work collectively and cohesively, and remember to be a better listener than a speaker. Ask questions don't just give answers – this invites stronger participation and engagement.