

# ARTS & CULTURE



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### BACKGROUND

When it comes to arts and culture, Hartford punches above its weight. Hartford is fortunate to have large and longstanding cultural institutions, such as the Wadsworth Atheneum, the Artists Collective, and the Bushnell Theater; innovative and intimate performing stages, such as the Hartford Stage, TheaterWorks, and Heartbeat Ensemble; a rich tradition of cultural events and festivals, from the nation's largest free festival of jazz to the West Indian and Puerto Rican parades and celebrations; and a community full of artists, musicians, and creators of all kinds.

Over the last decade, arts and cultural institutions experienced a decline in philanthropic funding, as the priorities of longtime funders changed — and the pandemic exacerbated that decline in many ways.

Today, many of our cultural institutions continue to face challenges from those changes and pandemic-related changes in habits, like fewer people going to theaters. It is important that the city continue to play a role both as a direct supporter of the arts and as a convener, fundraiser, and facilitator to ensure that art stays at the center of Hartford life.

## PARTNERSHIP WITH THE GREATER HARTFORD ARTS COUNCIL

Over the last eight years, the City of Hartford has worked to support and grow the artistic community in partnership with a range of organizations, including the Greater Hartford Arts Council. This partnership has focused primarily on maintaining and expanding the city’s calendar of cultural festivals, and more recently launching a broader effort to support artists throughout the Hartford community.

**LAUNCHING SUMMER IN THE CITY:** One of Mayor Bronin’s first priorities upon taking office was to put all of the city’s summer events under one banner, and finding philanthropic support to fund government services related to those events. The result was “Summer in the City,” a campaign to preserve and promote annual events including the Puerto Rican Day Parade, the Greater Hartford Festival of Jazz, the Black-Eyed and Blues Festival, the Taste of Caribbean Jerk Festival, the West Indian Independence Celebration, and the Riverfront Asian Festival. The city raised substantial funding, primarily from Raytheon Technologies, to support this initiative, including funding related government services like police, fire, and public works. More recently, Summer in the City has become a part of the broader Hartford Creates partnership.

**HARTFORD CREATES:** In 2022, the City and the Greater Hartford Arts Council launched Hartford Creates as the home for events that were under the “Summer in the City” banner — as well as a significant number of new public art projects, neighborhood arts activation, and all-season events.

- **Attendance & Support for Local Artists:** In its first year, more than 280,000 people came to arts and culture events under the Hartford Creates banner, including the traditional, large summer festivals and the new slate of smaller events held throughout the year. More than 1,300 local artists were funded for their participation in the full range of events.
- **Additional Programming:** The funding for all-season programming went to events of every size across the city, and through every medium of arts and culture, from picnics and symphonies to dance and puppet shows. Longstanding events like Paul Brown Monday Night Jazz received funding, but so did new events like a series of five street stages that brought more than fifty bands, dance troupes, and visual artists to downtown between May and September 2023. The Arts Council is also planning to host and promote “themed” weeks going forward to highlight different types of art.
- **Funding:** The City is funding Hartford Creates through an approximately \$4 million commitment from American Rescue Plan funding. Next year’s programming is funded, but future years are not.



## NEW CULTURAL EVENTS

Building on Hartford's existing cultural events, the city of Hartford took the lead in establishing two additions to the Hartford cultural calendar in order to create new opportunities for Hartford residents to gather and offer new attractions for visitors, as well.

**HARTFORD LIVE:** To help bring more vibrancy and activity to downtown in the wake of the pandemic, the city entered into a multi-year partnership with GoodWorks Entertainment, the company that owns and operates Hartford's Infinity Hall, to launch a free, new summer concert series. In 2022 and 2023, the Hartford Live series hosted performances by national and regional acts, including Guster and The Wailers, on Thursday evenings in August and September. In the 2023 season, the performances drew approximately 25,000 attendees across all of its shows.

- **Funding:** The City has set aside \$1.5 million in American Rescue Plan funding to support HartfordLIVE. There is about \$400,000 allocated for 2024 and \$200,000 allocated for 2025. The intention is for the Hartford LIVE concert series to become self-sustaining through a combination of sponsorship and ticket sales, and it is anticipated that the concerts will charge a modest admission fee in the years ahead.

**DOMINGO HARTFORD:** In 2022, Hartford launched DominGO, a new open-streets initiative to promote community wellness and connect neighbors with each other by bringing together local artists and entrepreneurs for street fairs. In 2023, DominGO ran once a month in June, September, and October, with one event in the Northeast neighborhood, another in Frog Hollow and a third in Parkville. Each event brought together food, music, and other programming from the local neighborhood — from cricket and drum band demonstrations to arts and crafts and Peruvian, El Salvadoran, and West Indian traditional dancing.

- **Attendance:** In its first year, more than 20,000 people attended the event series.
- **Funding:** The largest funders have been the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving and Hartford HealthCare, with significant in-kind support from the Police Department and the Department of Public Works. In future years, the City's vision is for DominGO to be integrated into the Love Hartford initiative and consist of smaller, block-party type events.



## LOVE HARTFORD

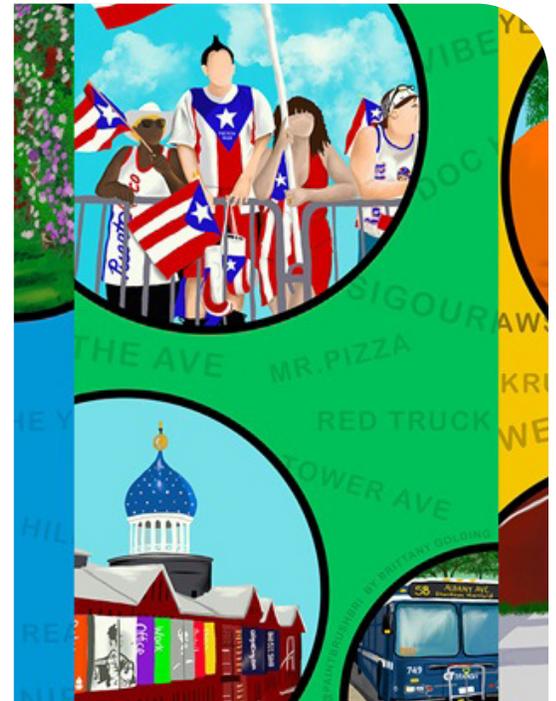
In addition to supporting and coordinating large events and an expanded partnership with the Greater Hartford Arts Council, the City has created opportunities for residents to engage in neighborhood beautification activities. It began in 2018 with a smaller initiative called Love Your Block. The primary funder of Love Hartford today is the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, and in 2023, they announced a three-year, \$300,000 commitment to the initiative. Components of Love Hartford now include:

**LOVE YOUR BLOCK:** The Love Your Block initiative provides micro-grants of up to \$2,500 for individual residents and up to \$25,000 to community organizations for projects aimed at beautifying or cleaning up specific neighborhoods in Hartford. Now in its fifth year, it has funded community clean-ups, garden bed installations, playscape beautification, chair and bench installation, mural creation, and other resident-led projects that improve the quality of life throughout the city.

As the program has matured, it has granted larger projects. This year, it funded a \$25,000 urban greenspace project at the Harriet Beecher Stowe House and a \$23,000 project at Heaven Skatepark to add ramps, repair cracks, and install permanent murals. Love Your Block in Hartford began with funding from Cities of Service, which supports similar programs around the country. After a successful first year in 2018, Hartford spun it out into the broader Love Hartford initiative.

**LOVE HARTFORD WEEK:** In 2021, Hartford launched “Love Hartford Week,” an annual campaign to strengthen civic pride through volunteerism and community beautification projects across the city. Throughout the week, the City organizes projects in every neighborhood in the city and matches projects with volunteers from community organizations and local companies.

**HARTFORD LOVE:** Launched in 2022, the hARTford Love initiative asked artists from Upper Albany and Clay Arsenal to come together and make their neighborhoods more beautiful. The project, funded through the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, has supported nine bus shelter art projects and 21 utility box art projects.





## CREATING A PUERTO RICAN CULTURAL CENTER

The City purchased the former Sacred Heart Church building, which is of historical significance to Hartford's Puerto Rican community, from the Archdiocese of Hartford in 2022, as part of the Archdiocese' consolidation plan. Mayor Bronin then created a task force composed of leaders of Hartford's Puerto Rican community to develop recommendations for the creation of a Puerto Rican Cultural Center. That task force recently issued a series of recommendations for the adaptive reuse of the church, and in November 2023, the City released an RFP to select a project planner for the first phase of the project. The City is also receiving technical assistance from Bloomberg Associates, the philanthropic consulting arm of Bloomberg Philanthropies. Bloomberg Associates has laid out a series of next steps over the next six months.

- **Funding:** The City Council approved \$500,000 from the FY2023 surplus for this project. Of that total, \$100,000 has been earmarked for operations and maintenance of the property at 24 Ely Street over a two-year period.

Another \$100,000 has been reserved for potential emergency repairs to the building. That leaves \$300,000 currently available to support the redevelopment planning process and future development phases.

## SUPPORTING THE ARTISTS COLLECTIVE

The Artists Collective has long been one of Hartford's most important cultural institutions. Over the past decade, however, it has run into a range of financial and management challenges. In 2021, Mayor Bronin convened a meeting with the Artists Collective, and they collectively decided that the Artists Collective needed to develop a recovery plan. Since then, the City has allocated approximately \$300,000 in American Rescue Plan funding to help the organization find and hire a permanent executive director and hire an accountant. The City has been in regular communication with the Artists Collective about the steps they need to take to rebuild.

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# RECOMMENDATIONS

Continuing to promote arts and culture is critical to Hartford's economic future and overall vitality as Connecticut's capital. The incoming administration should seek to support and invest in the events and partnerships that Hartford residents and visitors have come to love and expect, and it should consider the following as well.

- **PROTECT AND PROMOTE PERFORMANCE VENUES AND THEATERS:** Theaters and performing venues — large and small — are vulnerable and shutting down across the country. In October of 2023, Mayor Bronin convened a meeting with Hartford-based arts institutions to discuss ongoing challenges. One important role for the city may be to assist with the promotion and marketing of specific Hartford venues — and Hartford as a destination for arts, more generally. The city may also need to play a role in assisting arts institutions in advocating for financial support both from private philanthropic sources and from the State of Connecticut. Mayor Bronin has earmarked \$300,000 from the economic and community development reserve funds to support a marketing campaign that would launch in 2024, marketing the city as a whole, but with specific emphasis on Hartford's arts and entertainment venues.
- **CONTINUE FACILITATING THE CREATION OF THE PUERTO RICAN CULTURAL CENTER:** There is funding available for the next phase of developing a Puerto Rican Cultural Center, and the incoming administration should try to ensure that the City administration continues to play an active role in the process. Bloomberg Associates has written a memo that outlines initial next steps, which the incoming administration should review.
- **CONTINUE TO WORK WITH THE ARTISTS COLLECTIVE IN DEVELOPING A SOUND PLAN FOR SUSTAINABILITY:** Revitalizing the Artists Collective would significantly expand arts opportunities for young people in Hartford, and the organization would benefit from continued engagement and support from the incoming administration. It is important, however, that the Artists Collective develop a sound strategic plan and address the governance and management issues that led it into financial difficulty. The City should continue to work together with the Hartford Foundation to encourage and incentivize this necessary work.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS CONT.

- **FIND NEW WAYS TO SUPPORT LOCAL ARTISTS AND HIGHLIGHT HARTFORD'S DIVERSE CULTURES YEAR-ROUND:** As noted above, the Hartford Creates Program has helped to fund and support local artists. However, more can and should be done to give local artists the opportunity to display, perform, and share their work with the broader Hartford community. In addition, more can and should be done to ensure that celebrations of Hartford's diverse and rich culture are not limited to large festivals, but include recurring events such as the successful Salsa on Pratt.
- **ACTIVATE SPACES WITH ART:** While Hartford Creates works to activate spaces through new initiatives like the Street Stage initiative, more can and should be done to activate spaces (public spaces, vacant storefronts, vacant commercial buildings) with art and performances. This need not require large amounts of funding, but will require new partnerships and significant coordination.
- **EXPAND HARTFORD'S CALENDAR OF FESTIVALS:** In addition to the existing summer festivals, the City of Hartford and the Arts Council have set a goal of building two new large-scale festivals:
- A Gospel Festival, leveraging Hartford's deep and rich Gospel tradition, but also showcasing national talent; and
  - Restoring Hartford's historic "Fiddle Fest" with a new festival of bluegrass music.

In addition, GoodWorks Entertainment and the Hartford Athletic are both working on initiatives to bring large ticketed music festivals to Bushnell Park and to Dillon Stadium, respectively. Finally, the Mark Twain House has begun, with the city's encouragement, to consider ways that it might raise the profile of the Mark Twain House through a Hartford literary festival, built around the existing Mark Twain American Voice in Literature Awards.

The city will have opportunities to encourage, support, and facilitate each of these initiatives in the years ahead.