



Indiana Arts Commission Cultural Districts

Is a Cultural District Designation Right for Your Community?

A decision-making guide for community leaders

Cultural districts can be important tools for downtown revitalization, tourism, creative economy development, and community identity. And designation can be a powerful lever. But it works best when a community pursues it for the right reasons with a clear picture of what it requires.

This guide is for community leaders who are considering whether cultural district designation makes sense for their community right now.

Local Designation vs. State Certification

A cultural district is a well-defined geographic area where arts and cultural assets are concentrated, visible, and rooted in the authentic character of the place. Designation — whether local or state-level — is a formal recognition of that identity, paired with a commitment to sustain and grow it.

Local Designation:

- Granted by your municipality through an ordinance or resolution.
- Reflects your community's own commitment to recognizing and investing in its creative assets.
- A good starting point even if state certification is years away — it formalizes intent, signals political will, and can attract local investment.
- Required first step before applying for IAC state certification.

State Certification:

- Granted by the Indiana Arts Commission after a formal application and review process.
- Affirms that the district meets statewide standards across five dimensions: arts identity, leadership, community development, economic development, and planning.
- Connects your district to IAC funding, statewide recognition, and the Indiana Cultural Districts Consortium.
- Requires a four-year renewal cycle and ongoing demonstrated community impact.

What a Cultural District Can Do for Your Community

Cultural districts produce outcomes across multiple areas of community life.

- **Downtown and commercial vitality:** A defined creative district with a recognized identity attracts foot traffic, activates storefronts, and reduces commercial vacancy. It supports the case for public investment in streetscapes, infrastructure, and programming.
- **Talent and resident attraction:** Communities increasingly compete for people, not just businesses. Workers and families — especially younger adults — choose places with a distinct, authentic character. A cultural district is evidence of that character. It signals that a community invests in quality of place, not just quality of employment.
- **Tourism differentiation:** A state-certified cultural district gives your community a specific, promotable identity within the regional tourism landscape. It is the difference between "come visit our town" and "come to the place known for X" — and that specificity is what drives destination tourism.
- **Cross-sector alignment:** Successful cultural districts bring organizations together that often work in silos: arts and culture, economic development, downtown organizations, tourism, and municipal government.
- **A competitive framework for investment:** Certification creates the structure that funders and investors need to see: a named managing entity, a long-range plan, and baseline data documenting the district's impact. This can help communities become more competitive for state and federal grants, private sponsorship, and philanthropic investment.

Is Your Community Pursuing This for the Right Reasons?

Designation tends to produce meaningful outcomes when communities pursue it as a strategy — not a symbol. The table below can help your leadership team have an honest conversation about your motivations.

Designation tends to work well when...	Designation is not the right first step when...
You have authentic creative assets — artists, organizations, spaces, traditions — that already define a place in your community, and you want to build on them intentionally.	Your community is looking for a branding exercise or a way to signal creative energy without a commitment to sustaining it.
You want to align cross-sector partners — arts, economic development, municipal	The arts community is working in isolation, and you're hoping designation will bring

government, tourism — around a shared identity and plan.	other sectors to the table without doing that relationship-building work first.
You're ready to name a management entity and commit staff time and operating resources to running the district over multiple years.	No one has discussed who will manage the district after the designation is granted — there's no organization, staff, or budget identified.
You see designation as a tool that supports a broader economic development, tourism, or quality-of-life strategy your community is already pursuing.	Designation is the strategy — you're hoping it will create momentum that doesn't yet exist, rather than formalize and amplify momentum that does.
Your community leadership — including elected officials — understands what designation involves and is ready to make a formal commitment through a resolution or ordinance.	You're pursuing this primarily because a neighboring community did it, or because it sounds like a good idea, without a specific community goal in mind.

What the Commitment Actually Looks Like

Communities that successfully sustain a cultural district — at either the local or state level — typically share the following characteristics. Be honest about which of these are in place and which need development.

- **A management entity with real capacity:** Someone is responsible for the district — not as a volunteer side project, but as a named organizational function with staff time allocated. This might be a downtown development organization, arts council, economic development corporation, or dedicated nonprofit.
- **A cross-sector coalition:** The arts community cannot sustain a cultural district alone. Successful districts have active engagement from local government, economic development, tourism, business associations, and community organizations. Building these relationships before designation makes the district far more durable.
- **A long-range plan:** Designation without a plan is a label. IAC state certification requires a 3–5 year Cultural District Plan. But even local designation is stronger when it's backed by a planning process that involved artists, residents, and civic leaders.
- **Municipal commitment:** Elected officials need to understand and support what the district is doing. Local designation is a formal municipal act. State certification requires ongoing municipal partnership. A district that operates without city hall's active awareness is vulnerable to leadership changes and funding gaps.
- **Sustained operating resources:** Cultural districts are not self-funded. Plan for ongoing costs: staff time, programming, marketing, signage, events, and match

funds for grants.

Next Steps

1. Pursue local designation first if you don't have it. Work with your city council or county commissioners to pass a resolution or ordinance formally recognizing the district. IAC staff can provide guidance on what this typically looks like.
2. Download the [IAC Community Readiness Workbook](#). This self-assessment tool walks your team through the five certification dimensions and helps you identify where to focus your preparation. Available at in.gov/arts.
3. Contact IAC staff before you apply for state designation. We are available to review your workbook, answer questions, and help you understand your readiness at any stage.