



COLORADO CREATIVE DISTRICTS

AN INTRODUCTION FOR START-UP DISTRICTS

The concept of the arts as an economic driver for the State of Colorado is relatively recent, and was reflected in HB 11-1031. Colorado Creative Industries, a part of the Office of Economic Development and International Trade, was directed by the Legislature to develop standards for Creative Districts, to assist communities wishing to build a Creative District, and to certify Districts that meet the standards. This Introduction is meant to help potentially interested communities get started with building their Creative District.

COLORADO CREATIVE DISTRICTS

AN INTRODUCTION FOR START-UP DISTRICTS

Where to start?

There is a logical sequence of activities that should be considered for any entity contemplating becoming a designated Creative District. This includes taking a critical look at the assets and resources available in the community and determining if there is broad and deep enough support to even begin the journey. Take stock of these elements:

WHO – how many people are currently engaged in the conversation? Is this the dream of one or two individuals, or is it a shared vision among many? Does that circle of influence include artists? Does it include local businesses? Are local elected and appointed leaders aware of the interest and are they involved in any way, and do they see it as a sound strategy? Are there enough people to sustain what could be an 18 – 24 month effort before it's even feasible to apply to be a Candidate Creative District? Is there an existing organization that has similar enough goals to help with the effort or will it require an entirely new entity to be created?

WHAT – does the group have a shared vision about creativity and the arts as an economic driver and organizing principle for their community?

WHEN – has the group thought about timing and the amount of time and effort that will be required to establish a Creative District? Is there a willingness to commit to an undertaking that may take months to get started, and perhaps years to come to full fruition?

WHERE – has the group identified boundaries that make sense, given the existing density of creative business and activity? Is it a neighborhood, a corridor, the entire downtown? The legislation

IT'S ABOUT RHYTHM!

“There is a rhythm in life that is reflected in Art. That same rhythm should be reflected in any endeavor to establish a Creative District. To go through the process of forming such an entity without following a logical sequence of steps may result in a cacophonous failure!”

Dr. Flo Raitano
CCI Professional
Advisory Network
Advisor

specifies “contiguous” assets, so an area that is gerrymandered to include a single outlying organization – however important that organization might be – might not be workable.

WHY – has the group identified what makes the community unique, as well as the benefits that might accrue from establishing a Creative District? The benefits are not only economic and cultural. They are social – they bring neighbors together in a shared experience with bonds that may well last longer than the event or festival. And because a Creative District engages other community systems such as transportation planning, historic preservation, even safety issues, the benefits may be comprehensive: is the group aware of the potential scope of what planning for a Creative District may involve? And do they understand that such benefits are the results of true collaborations in which everyone “gets a little, but gives a little” in order to fulfill a shared collective dream?

Members of the group may wish to do some initial research. A little internet browsing may provide many great examples of what is possible. It would be valuable to visit some of Colorado’s Creative Districts to explore what’s happening there. And Colorado Creative Industries encourages prospective Creative Districts to review four print resources: the City of Pueblo’s *The Soul of Pueblo* (on the CCI website); Tom Borrup’s *The Creative Community Builder’s Handbook: How To Transform Communities Using Local Assets, Arts & Culture*; Charles Landry’s *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators*; and the Amherst Wilder Foundation’s *The Collaboration Handbook*.

CCI has identified standards for a thriving Creative District (see Section II). These include: articulating the elements that make a community unique; engaging local government; integration with other community systems, as mentioned above; a density of creative businesses and experiences; sound management and planning; and ongoing community buy-in. CCI requires that Certified Creative Districts track indicators of impact – “values reporting.” These standards and activities are interrelated. This document provides some ideas about the processes that lead to the successful meeting of CCI standards in crafting a Creative District. They are typically undertaken simultaneously. Each community’s actual path, and sequencing of activities, will be as varied as Colorado’s communities are.

Any community which aspires to build a Certified Creative District should begin these processes on its own. If a community is selected to be a Candidate Creative District, CCI will provide 30 hours each year of a consultant, or consultants, to further assist with the development of the infrastructure needed for Certification.

The Community’s Unique Story

Who are you? This is the foundational question a core group needs to think about, and invite others in the community to think about collectively. It is CCI’s conviction that a local or a visitor needs to know that the place they are in is like no other. Its history is unique. Its architecture is of interest. People know the stories that have made the place what it is today. There may be a special style Its style is unique. It is essential to talk about a community’s “sense of place” at the very beginning of its quest to build a Creative District.

40West, the Creative District in Lakewood, recognizes that it wouldn't be there without the culture of the automobile in the 1950's. Transportation - U.S. Highway 40 - really built that place, and now motels, shopping and entertainment capture that era in a delightful, contemporary way. There's the Hubcap exhibit, for instance, where artists are given hubcaps to transform into works of art. There are signs and billboards that call to people in automobiles. In the spirit of building transportation, there is strong collaboration with the Regional Transportation District in creating art and a sense of festivity for the light rail station. And – don't forget the airplanes! – there's a plan afoot to announce the Creative District to air travelers via paintings and signage on rooftops since the flight path into Denver International Airport passes over 40West.

Ridgway discussed its heritage and realized that before the ranching and recreation cultures that define it today, the Utes populated the area. In story circles exploring their town's story, the Creative District team joined with Ute people still living there to investigate the history of Ridgway from the Ute perspective. A moonlight bicycle ride to important community places, led by a Ute elder, and bringing Ute dancers to participate in the annual ranch heritage celebration are two subsequent activities.

CCI provides Creative Districts with access to Story Mapping software, enabling a community to collect, capture and tell its story. Clicking on a given address could let a visitor know the many layers of who used to be at that address, and why, and what happened there.

Why was this community founded? Who were the peoples who came here? Where are they now? Who were important individuals who helped make it what it is today? What was important to them? What is important to us? What do these insights suggest as far as creating an inclusive Steering Committee for our Creative District? Can we envision these insights translated into the colors and styles of public amenities such as parks, or gardens, or street furniture, or the colors we use on wayfinding signs? These are the earliest conversations that a Creative District might conduct.

Organizational Development

A solid foundation, constructed with deliberate forethought and patience will serve the aspiring Creative District and its community well beyond the initial planning phase. After the Creative District team has held some broad discussions, described above, it's time to think about some specifics, mentioned in no priority order. (All are addressed in some detail in the CCI webinar series, also available on the CCI website.)

Is there already an organization with a broad and inclusive enough mission to incorporate this effort into its own work plan? Such an entity may be an arts-oriented non-profit 501(c)3 (as was the case in Pueblo, CO), or a town government (as was the case in Ridgway, CO), or a Business Improvement District (as was the case in Lakewood, CO). If the group determines that the existing community organizations are not able to incorporate the goals and objectives of moving forward toward Creative District designation, then the next logical action is to explore the appropriate structure and function of the emerging Creative District coalition that would best suit the needs of the group and the community. This can be temporary; perhaps a given organization is willing to serve as an incubator for the District.

STAKE- HOLDER A BUSINESS DEFINITION:

“A person, group or organization that has **interest** or concern in an organization. Stakeholders can affect or be affected by the organization's actions, objectives and policies.”

(<http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/stakeholder>)

Or perhaps a workable initial arrangement is for several entities to create a Memo of Understanding, allocating responsibilities as needed. At this point, it is also helpful to start thinking strategically about potential governance structures and potential governing board members and what skillsets the budding Creative District coalition will need to move toward this structure. The intent is to incorporate a cross section of community interests to ensure broad community support for the efforts and activities of the emerging Creative District. And keep in mind CCI's expectation that artists will be represented in the leadership team,

In working through the Organizational Development phase, it is important to be mindful that there is no one single, correct way to structure the governance mechanism for an emerging Creative District. While there are good existing models around the state, the format and framework should be tailored to the size, complexity, and needs of that particular community and the intended Creative District.

Community Engagement

Without significant and meaningful community involvement and support, attaining designation as a Creative District is unlikely. This means more than informing local people about plans: it means that businesses (whether arts-related or not), property owners, and residents will have an opportunity to offer ideas and input. It means engaging both legacy residents and newcomers; owners and renters; people who are arts-lovers and people who may not be. It means making a serious attempt to mirror the community's demographics on the planning team. Well-designed opportunities for public engagement will pay dividends to the emerging Creative District and will likely result in identifying key partners, potential governing Board members, target markets, prospective supporters and possible funders.

CCI strongly believes that Creative Districts that remain attractive to locals and visitors alike understand, and can articulate and capture the unique heritage and style of its community. Often, doing this means gathering a group of culture-bearers or community historians together to talk about the community's history, its role in its region, why it attracted certain groups, and how it has changed over the years. These conversations may suggest ideas for signage, landscaping, branding, public art, even building color schemes as the community uses many avenues to tell its special story. CCI has provided tools on its website which may be helpful here.

Even those individuals who may be opposed to the effort must, at some point in the process, be included in the discussion. Outreach can and should both informal and formal. Informal outreach includes casual conversations over coffee, lunch, or a beer at a local craft brewpub about the initial concept and potential benefits of working to establish a Creative District in that town or neighborhood. It includes having a very open-ended and still informal discussion with key community leaders that can span the gamut from the Mayor to the local Chamber president to the CEO of the local economic development organization to owners of local art galleries and theaters.

More formal approaches will occur a little later in the process, perhaps after the organizational development phase is well underway and there is at least an initial framework in place. Hosting public forums with an external facilitator to begin to inform the broader public about the efforts and to engage their ideas, can be quite useful. These public forums and meetings can build a level of support and involvement and should be designed to capture (and answer, if possible) questions the general public may have about the process and the benefits of establishing a local Creative District. It's perfectly acceptable to not have all the answers, but it is not acceptable to ignore those questions that can't be answered right away.

Other formal outreach includes presentations to other local organizations, such as chambers of commerce, economic development corporations, business organizations, public meetings, the Rotary or Kiwanis, town council work sessions, restaurants or other places of entertainment and any other existing arts groups. CCI has found that non-profit groups – often understaffed and struggling for funding for their own activities – may wonder why they should add new demands on their time that may not, at first, seem central to their mission. The group should be prepared to discuss this.

Strategic Planning

A well-developed, thoughtful, attainable strategic plan is one of the critical elements that Colorado Creative Industries will expect to see before it certifies a Creative District. This is the document that will serve as the roadmap for the local coalition to achieve the mission, goals and objectives they have informally identified. The strategic plan should be generated early enough in the process, perhaps even while the organizational development and community engagement phases are still in progress, so as to be useful in outreach efforts. Community leaders and members of the public will want to know what it is that the coalition is seeking to accomplish and how they are going to actually get it done. At the same time, it is equally as important that early strategic plans should be viewed as works in progress. Once the organizational development phase is complete and a functional structure and governance framework are in place, it will be important for the members of the governing team to have ownership of the final strategic plan. That may well mean re-visiting the earlier drafts of the strategic plan and ensuring that the founding fathers and mothers of the concept and the coalition simultaneously feel that their work is valued while understanding that newer members, who may see the environment from a slightly different perspective, need to add their own ideas to the document.

Strategic plans are intended to serve as guides to those who will come later and as reminders to the original creators of their original purpose, mission, goals and objectives. They are not carved in stone. Strategic Plans should be considered evolving, dynamic and responsive guides for the governing body and the community. An annual review of the existing plan and periodic updates should be anticipated and adopted by the governing board as a matter of routine. A good strategic plan must contain a big-picture vision that suggests what “success” will look like, values that guide decision-making, and definitive action items, reviewed periodically. As objectives are met, and as the community grows and changes, the strategic plan must be amended to capture new opportunities – which may include setting aside goals and objectives that seemed vital at first but now seem less relevant

Colorado’s Creative Districts’ plans are available to be shared on the CCI website and may serve as inspiration for local planning. Still, each community must ultimately devise its own process and plan for it to be a relevant, living document, owned by its many stakeholders. A skilled coach can help design a meaningful local process can help facilitate meetings as only an objective outsider is able to do, and can ensure that there is strong participation and broad consensus about the value of the strategic plan and a clear understanding of the action steps that must occur to guarantee success.

CCI expects that Certified Creative Districts will also develop plans for marketing and promotion, constantly engaging new people, providing opportunity regularly for community input, considering financial sustainability and succession planning so that it can continue even after its initial visionary leaders or key elected officials leave the scene. These can be stand-alone plans, or sub-plans within the strategic plan, but CCI expects that they will be addressed. These may not be needed at first, but districts must recognize that this work lies ahead and CCI will expect that these will have been addressed when a Candidate Creative District applies to be certified..

Partnership Development

While partnership development is an activity that might be considered part of community outreach, it is far more than merely meeting with representatives of organizations and groups to inform them about what the creative district coalition is up to or to solicit more ideas. It requires active identification of organizations and individuals with access to or

WITH, NOT
FOR...

“A person working
alone has all the
power of social
dust.”

Saul Alinsky,
Community Organizer

BRAND COLORADO

“Colorado has a heart and soul like no other state. We launched the Making Colorado initiative to create and market a stronger Colorado brand. Together, we will define what Colorado stands for and how to convey that to the world to help ensure our communities, culture and environment are strong and vibrant for decades to come.”

Colorado Governor John
Hickenlooper

control over resources such as money, people, political connections and skills, or goodwill that could advance or augment the efforts of the coalition to establish a Creative District.

A common definition of a stakeholder is anyone or any organization which can facilitate or obstruct the accomplishment of the goals of a group or an organization. It is important to look at potential stakeholders as assets, especially those who can help the coalition advance its goals. But don't write off stakeholders who at first are resistant: it may be that over time, as they see the difference the district is making, they become supporters. It may be that district advocates find an argument that trumps their resistance: the attractive redevelopment of a blighted area or the transformation of unsafe alleys into inviting, safe public spaces are good examples. Districts may well find that previous doubters become very strong advocates. And even if this does not happen, dissenters are important so that the district advocates remember that a community is built on a process of give-and-take, and that it's important to listen carefully to concerns. To fail to listen to dissent can be a serious error.

Creative Districts must consider a wide range of potential partners. One Creative District invited winemakers, vineyard owners, craft brewers, orchardists and agrarians of all stripes to join their efforts under the slogan “From Our Hands To Yours.” They have actively sought to engage the mining interests in their region, recognizing that creativity is broadly defined and broadly supported. Cultural groups, historical societies and building preservationists make excellent partners as the creative coalition facilitates conversations about community cultural heritage.

CCI distinguishes between cooperation and collaboration, and *The Collaboration Handbook*, mentioned earlier, can be invaluable as the Creative District coalition determines whom to cooperate with, and whom to collaborate with. The latter is a more complex relationship, but it may also be a stronger and longer-lasting one

Marketing and Branding

It may seem desirable to undertake a branding effort and start a marketing campaign right away. But that may result in a costly misjudgment. Finding the right symbols, colors and slogans, and targeting the right people, come after conversations about uniqueness and heritage, perhaps after surveys, research and more.

It will be important to keep in mind that the group is working to brand and market the Creative District – not the entire community or region. Pressure to dilute the brand in order to represent the entire community may arise, and it is important to keep the efforts focused. Still, the Creative District is part of its community and branding efforts may be intentionally complementary to, or nested within, those of the broader community. For example, Ridgway's town council adopted a general wayfinding plan to help visitors locate public buildings or key community features; the Creative District's efforts to identify artists' studios or other creative businesses will fit within the Town's general plan.

Branding and marketing go hand in hand: the one captures the meaning of the Creative District; the other targets the people who will respond to that meaning. Attention must be paid to both. The CCI Professional Advisory Network (PAN) roster includes advisors who are skilled in these areas and eager to work with creative coalitions.

Funding

Renaming the Colorado Council on the Arts as Colorado Creative Industries, and moving CCI into the Office of Economic Development and International Trade represented the recognition that arts and culture are major economic drivers. A 2008 report, "The State of Colorado's Creative Economy," identified creative enterprises as the 5th largest economic cluster in the State of Colorado. Creative Districts are economic development tools for the larger community, region and state. This is a very different way of thinking from how a typical non-profit arts organization sees its work.

Communicating a Creative District as a business development plan helps make it attractive to potential investors. Finding and securing external funding is never an easy task. But Creative Districts have the advantage - the best of the non-profit and for-profit worlds as they create a fresh, contemporary place that responds to many local needs. Thus, they are in a position to speak to traditional arts funders, to business investors, and to local government in truly meaningful ways, using three different languages – for learning to speak the language of a potential patron is vital. What makes sense to a business person may not be what motivates foundations or local governments.

Elsewhere on the CCI website are short papers on how local communities can create taxing mechanisms like the Denver Metro Area's Scientific and Cultural Facilities District, Business Improvement Districts, Urban Renewal Authorities, and others. Stratified membership campaigns can both bring cash and buy-in for a Creative District. Local governments may delegate hotel-motel tax funds to assist Creative Districts as they attract visitors. CCI will expect that a Creative District will have a plan in place for securing operating funds and maintaining a staff, which could include sharing overhead and staff with some other entity such as a Main Street program (another excellent reason to spend considerable time devising strong local partnerships).

The Creative District coalition may be a program of another entity, such as a Business Improvement District, but it must keep a stand-alone budget, as well, so that anyone can understand the expenses and income specific to the District. In addition, the District should track its in-kind expenses/income in order to understand the real costs of running a Creative District. Especially in rural or underserved communities, communicating in-kind is a good way to communicate commitment – which speaks powerfully to funders.

Finally, as Dr. Flo Raitano, one of the consultants on CCI's PAN roster, says, "Never underestimate the ability of even the lowest income communities to come up with funding if there is broad public support and a will to make it happen!" And this, of course, ties funding to effective community engagement and planning. It's all related.

Data and Asset Analysis

The systematic collection of powerful stories and key data – what CCI calls "Values Reporting" – creates a powerful advocacy tool both locally and at the State level. Decision-makers locally need to know that their trust and tax dollars are well-invested. Legislators of the State of Colorado want to know that HB 11-1031 is doing what it was intended to do: provide beneficial economic and social impact in communities.

CCI has certain requirements: that Creative Districts track number of creative businesses and their employees, track visitorship, and track numbers of participating youth, for instance. CCI also requests Creative Districts log powerful examples of how the District is making a difference. In addition, Creative Districts are urged to identify areas of meaningful areas of impact locally, and track these – an example might be the reduction of reported crimes in the District in a place where safety is an important issue.

Communities participating in the Creative Districts program must establish benchmark figures in the first year of their candidacy, and thereafter, track the same information annually. CCI does not require that all communities track visitorship, for instance, in the same way; but CCI does require that each community establish a meaningful way of marking visitorship in the Creative District, and use that same metric every year thereafter. In this way, Creative Districts will be able to demonstrate their impact to CCI, and CCI in turn will be able to demonstrate their importance to the State of Colorado.

Meanwhile, CCI is collecting assessor data from the Districts' counties, and will aggregate property value information with the locally-gathered information, annually, into a picture of the economic importance of the State's Districts.

Final Words

This introduction is intended to be just that – a guide, not a fail-safe Do-It-Yourself recipe for building a certifiable Creative District. The recommendations are based on decades of the authors' experience working with start-up organizations, direct observation of fourteen Colorado communities building Creative Districts in Colorado and consulting research and printed literature..

Ask questions, learn from others, refer frequently to CCI's published standards, think big and pay attention to details. CCI has deliberately opted for an approach identifies viable communities, designates them as Candidate Creative Districts for two years, and provides considerable technical assistance to them so that they may fully meet all of CCI's standards when they finally apply for

Certification. The Candidacy period involves access to CCI's consultant roster, access to Community Vitality Index data, twice-yearly convenings, and more.

In this way can we together grow a state in which – in the language of HB 11-1031 – we are “infusing the community with energy and innovation, which enhances the economic and civic capital of the community.”

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Florine Raitano of Dillon, CO, is a third generation native Coloradoan, born in Pueblo and raised in Denver. She was twice elected Mayor of Dillon, and served as the founding Executive Director of the Colorado Rural Development Council. She is also the principle of Rural Development Specialists, LLC, and has worked on assignments ranging from rural economic development projects in northeastern Colorado to rural community technology assessment projects for the State of Arizona, to tribal comprehensive community planning in Southern California. Dr. Raitano is currently working on transportation funding policy and strategic community development. She holds a BA in Psychology and a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine. In 2012-13 she was a consultant to the North Fork Creative Coalition as part of CCI's Professional Advisory Network of consultants.

Maryo Gard Ewell of Gunnison, CO Maryo Gard Ewell of Gunnison, helped design and manage the Creative Districts Program in Colorado. She teaches online for the MA in Arts Administration program at Goucher College, and for the Arts Extension Service, as well as in Extended Studies at Western State Colorado University. She has worked for community arts councils in Connecticut and for state arts agencies in Illinois and Colorado. She is a recent board member of the Gunnison Arts Center and the Community Foundation of the Gunnison Valley. She received the Selina Ottum Award from Americans for the Arts for outstanding community arts development leadership in 1995. She holds an MA in Organizational Behavior and an MA in Urban & Regional Planning.