

Arts, Culture, and Library

Context

New Haven teems with cultural vibrancy. The arts can play a crucial role in creating economic health, building community, and fostering equity and inclusion. However, the City lacks a coherent vision for its arts and culture policy. Although the City includes a number of very strong arts organizations, the better-resourced institutions are predominantly white-led and cater to largely white audiences; those led by people of color often struggle on the margins. An equity framework, combined with a comprehensive and inclusive cultural-planning process, is needed to address this disparity.

Among the pillars of the City's cultural life is the New Haven Free Public Library. Through the historic Ives Main Library and branches in Dixwell, Fair Haven, the Hill and Westville, the library reaches deep into our City's neighborhoods, touching lives, meeting needs, and fostering a sense of community. In 2018, with extensive community input, the library created a five-year strategic framework that guides its efforts; and in 2019, it was awarded a National Medal for Museum and Library Service. Despite this recognition, the library's success is more fragile than it looks and should not be taken for granted. We recommend that the City double down on the excellent work of our library system to ensure its stability and enable it to flourish.

First 100 Days

Recommendation 1: Prioritize expanded cultural inclusivity in the arts.

Initiate the process to draft and adopt an equity, diversity, and inclusion framework to guide



decision-making. Draw on the Connecticut Office of the Arts' READI (Relevance, Equity, Access, Diversity, Inclusion) principles in creating the framework.

Recommendation 2: Announce a comprehensive cultural-planning process.

Begin drafting a proposed plan for the City to implement and advance that is reflective of New Haven's diverse perspectives. A guiding principle of this plan should be the prioritization and elevation of local talent. The Americans for the Arts group offers a basic approach and rationale: "The cultural planning process assesses the current community culture and creates an implementation plan to achieve a community's vision. Cultural plans act as mirrors for a community—they are, ideally, a reflection of the community's culture that they serve." We could learn from regional models like Boston Creates and Creative Providence.

Recommendation 3: Abolish library late fees and launch a policy review of late fees.

Many libraries across the country have abolished late fees in recognition of the inequities that these fees engender. People with unpaid fines often fail to pay them because they do not have the disposable income to do so. Unpaid fines mean they cannot check out additional books. In October, Chicago became the largest system to abolish late fees. Earlier this year, the American Library Association passed a resolution calling for all libraries to abolish fines. The New Haven Free Public Library has experimented with both amnesty days and suspending late fees for the summer. A policy review would not only take into account lessons from these experiments, staff perspectives, and revenue implications but consider alternative methods of keeping books and videos available for all library users.

Two Years

Recommendation 1: Undertake a comprehensive review of the Department of Arts, Culture, and Tourism.

Consider the structure of the department and its role; its proper place in the organizational chart of the City; the optimal place where it should be housed (physically); and the value of giving it a formal relationship with other City agencies, including those overseeing libraries and parks.

Recommendation 2: Increase the role of art, artists, and the creative process in the work of City departments that create and manage our built environment.

In various City departments—City Plan; Economic Development; Parks, Recreation, and Trees; Transportation, Traffic, and Parking; Public Works;

and the Livable City Initiative—prioritize the following objectives:

- Advocate for and/or help to implement “tactical urbanism,” defined, courtesy of Wikipedia, as “low-cost, temporary changes to the built environment, usually in cities, intended to improve local neighborhoods and City gathering places”;
- Install public art;
- Encourage for-profit developments to include a voluntary percentage of their budgets for publicly visible art projects; and
- Create avenues for collaboration among City departments, artists, arts organizations, and the Proprietors of the New Haven Green to promote and encourage arts and culture in the Lower Green.

Recommendation 3: Create free and affordable community spaces for artists and cultural groups to rehearse and perform.

Lack of access to spaces to rehearse and hold community workshops or concerts is a systemic challenge for individual artists and smaller, less-resourced organizations. The City can identify spaces such as schools, libraries, and community centers that can be made available at low or no cost and create a streamlined mechanism for allowing artists easy access.

Recommendation 4: Assess library staffing needs and competitiveness.

At every level, library salaries are not competitive with those in surrounding towns and related industries, with many salaries unchanged for more than ten years. Entry-level professional staff often leave for higher-paid positions in surrounding communities. An IT manager is also needed to support all the branches. The Elicker administration can launch a review of existing staff needs and salaries in the

library system, phase in essential new positions, and increase salary ranges over time to ensure that the City hires and retains talented and committed staff.

Recommendation 5: Share information about arts and cultural events.

Create more effective communication channels about arts and cultural happenings throughout the City.

Long Term

Recommendation 1: Expand direct investment in equitable arts programming.

Strengthen the Mayor's Neighborhood Cultural Vitality Grant Program to provide direct support for large-scale, grass-roots events poised to grow. Given the City's budget constraints, identify external resources to double the overall funding allocated to support artists and events. Create different levels of funding and different kinds of funding to enable local events like the Pride New Haven celebration, the Dia de los Muertos Parade, the Freddy Fixer Parade, the Westville Village ArtWalk, and the Quinnipiac Riverfest to grow through deeper involvement by and investment from the City. The annual Holiday Tree Lighting and Market could be expanded to include seasonal ice skating on the Green, as with Winterfest Hartford. To deepen the bench of local leaders in the arts, the City could add a category for funding fellowships for artists.

Recommendation 2: Support public cultural events by addressing the high cost of City services, and streamline the permission structure for events large and small.

A consistent message from institutions of all sizes is the prohibitively expensive cost of securing extra duty officers; permits for street closures, vendors, the Health Department, and the Building

Department; set up and cleanup; stage rentals; insurance, and more. For large events, police and permit fees can amount to more than half the operational cost. The process is also unnecessarily time-consuming. There is concern regarding high police and fire overtime costs for community events; yet we believe these investments are worthwhile. The City can consider mitigating these prohibitive costs via external funding sources that enable waived fees, sliding scales, and insurance coverage, or an arts and culture funding pool to cover expenses. In addition, it can develop a less burdensome permit application process.

Recommendation 3: Phase in a 1% allocation for libraries.

Raise the library's allocation from approximately 0.77% to 1% of the General Fund, an increase of roughly \$1.5 million dollars, to be implemented in phases as the City's fiscal status improves. Current per capita funding for the library (\$32.43) is well below that of other cities in Connecticut (\$45.73), as well as below the statewide average (\$47.35). Chronic underfunding of the library and its infrastructure needs, as well as the central importance of libraries, make this a critical investment for our community.

Recommendation 4: Extend library hours.

The number one request of library patrons is additional hours. Branch libraries are closed on Fridays, and all libraries have very limited evening hours. When funding reaches 1%, additional staff can provide expanded library hours.

Recommendation 5: Expand young people's engagement with the arts.

Facilitate partnerships among district and school leadership, art and music teachers, youth programs, artists, and arts institutions to increase learning opportunities during and outside school across the visual and performing arts.

Recommendation 6: Enhance outside funding for cultural projects.

The Department of Arts, Culture, and Tourism can strategically pursue increased direct investment through grants, sponsorships, and collaborations. While cultural planning will facilitate the success of these efforts, the pursuit of funding can begin right away.

Recommendation 7: Invest in library infrastructure.

Although the libraries are essential parts of the municipal infrastructure and well placed throughout the City (with the notable exception of the East Shore), the buildings need maintenance and periodic renovation to ensure that they meet community needs. A review of the existing structures of all libraries besides Stetson (a new structure is already planned) could help set priorities. As a first step, a renovation of Ives, the main library, is needed to more effectively organize the space.

Recommendation 8: Explore including a Board of Education representative on the Library Board.

Many library programs serve the same population as the public schools. A shared representative could strengthen collaboration.

Recommendation 9: Facilitate residents' engagement with Yale's rich artistic and cultural offerings.

Yale University has incredible resources, which are often not accessible to New Haven residents. The City can work with Yale to identify, promote, encourage, and facilitate opportunities to connect Yale's cultural institutions, thought leaders, and artists with New Haven residents, especially students and artists.



Photo: Tom Breen