

# 2013-2017 Strategic Plan

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**ARTS**  
COUNCIL

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a creative state

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The nature of the Council's strategic planning in 2012 is very different than any that has gone before. For the past 45 years, the goal was to create a document that responded to constituent needs. In 2002, the need expressed was "to help constituents become more valued in their own communities." In 2007, the need was to "help constituents help themselves" with a greater emphasis on marketing and promotion.

Constituent needs continue to drive our decisions. However strategic planning no longer results in a prescription of what we will do for the next five years, but in a document that outlines an operational mind-set that allows everything the Council does to be considered in terms of our strategic goals. Our annual Work Plans and the specific tasks they contain are formally reviewed by staff and board twice a year and all opportunities that present themselves are filtered with an eye on their impact on our capacity and on our strategic goals (See Evaluation Logic Model, Appendix B). But from a practical standpoint every initiative, partnership opportunity, statewide or local project, or other idea that presents itself during the course of the year is immediately held up (in real time) against our strategic objectives and a decision made "to pursue or not pursue."

We believe this approach to strategic planning is both reflective of and responsive to the increasingly fast pace that is driven largely by changes in technology, communications, and social networking. A traditional static strategic plan document simply can't keep pace with the variety of opportunities that are generated on, it seems, a daily basis.

***Put another way, this Strategic Plan is designed to help people understand our behavior, to provide a context for all people—from our constituents to our collaborators, our supporters to our "authorizers"—to better understand how and why we shape our programs and services, and prioritize them the way we do.***

We are currently operating in a very challenging economic environment (See Environmental Scan, Appendix C). The recession was bad enough, but the additional burdens caused by Tropical Storm Irene, have resulted in a significantly lower State appropriation than we enjoyed 10 years ago—despite being level-funded for the last four years. Inflationary pressure has mandated a reduction in staff resulting in greater administrative burdens placed on those remaining.

Our continued dependency on Federal and state funding for the bulk of our funding is not only intrinsically risky, but also places us squarely in the sights of political elements who wish to remove public funding from programs they deem "non-essential." In this context, justifying our existence by saying we support artists, arts organizations, and arts education activities is simply not enough. We have to demonstrate in vivid ways exactly how publicly-funded arts programs and services not only lead to economic and social stability and recovery, but do so in ways that benefit all citizens, not just those that create, present, perform, or attend arts activities. We need to demonstrate that, far from being "non-essential," the arts may be one of the MOST essential ingredients that will lead our communities, our state, even our country, forward to complete recovery.

## **I] EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The research, forums, and focus group work done to prepare for this plan revealed that the Arts Council's mission and strategic goals were relevant and worth keeping. Within this context, however, there were several important suggestions that should help in guiding the Council's annual work plans:

- Given the lack of new resources, the Council should place an even greater premium on quality collaborations, especially in the area of marketing and communications
- The overarching message should revolve around developing arts- and community-engaged citizens by ensuring that all Vermonters, especially those in school (pre-K through 12) should be given adequate exposure to and instruction in the arts, despite the challenges facing arts education in Vermont (see Appendix A, “Developing an Explicit Vision...”)
- The Council should continue to broaden its outreach to and influence on policy-makers by using assessment tools that focus on outcomes (such as the degree to which organizations are valued by their communities), not just outputs (such as how much did arts organizations spend on marketing/promotion compared to their earned revenue)
- The field (i.e., constituents who look to the Arts Council for financial or technical support and guidance) is mature; its needs are very different than they were even 10 years ago. They continue to deliver high-quality artistic programs but they are anxious to explore new marketing and promotional ventures that will provide a greater benefit than a (relatively) small cash grant

The **Mission** of the Vermont Arts Council is *to advance and preserve the arts at the center of Vermont communities*. The Council accomplishes this mission through a variety of programs, initiatives, collaborations, and professional services designed to support constituents that create, present, perform, or provide educational services in the arts. The expectation is that they will offer multiple opportunities for Vermont citizens and visitors to participate in a diversity of high-quality artistic expressions. The Council also provides access to marketing, promotional, advocacy, and research services that promote a greater understanding of the importance of investing public dollars in the arts. **Increasing opportunities for participation** and **demonstrating the public value of the arts** are the two outward-oriented strategic goals of the Council.

The Council’s third strategic goal is to **improve its own operational capacity** so that it may continue to serve as the primary resource and advocate for the arts and cultural sector in Vermont, linking Vermont’s cultural resources to those of the other New England states and beyond. All of the Council’s programs and services are expected to relate directly to one or more of these three goals.

## II] FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Starting in 2013 and going forward to 2017, the following shall serve as a strategic guide for the Vermont Arts Council:

**MISSION:** The mission of the Vermont Arts Council is to advance and preserve the arts at the center of Vermont Communities

**VISION:** The Council envisions a future in which

- Vermont artists and arts organizations are recognized as central to life, education, and the economy of the state
- Vermont citizens value the arts as part of their lives, education and community
- Vermont is known regionally and nationally for producing civic-minded citizens whose curiosity about life, learning, and engagement in their communities is informed by their knowledge of and appreciation for the arts
- The Vermont Arts Council is valued for its support of art, artists, and arts organizations with resources and information, and for its impact on arts learning.

VALUES: The Council values those

- Who create and/or present art
- Who value excellence, diversity, and accessibility in all endeavors
- Who teach the artistic disciplines and those who teach through the arts
- Who sponsor/fund the arts and those who serve as the arts' advocacy champions
- Who share their resources (time, expertise, and money) in their efforts to improve the quality of life for everyone through the arts

STRATEGIC GOALS: Given the Council's operating environment and strengths (Appendices C and D), the work of the Council is guided and informed by the following core strategic goals:

- 1. (Participation) To increase opportunities for everyone to experience and/or participate in the arts through**
  - a. Grants and services to artists, arts administrators, arts educators, and communities
  - b. Collaborations that achieve synergies and savings in the creation, presentation, appreciation, arts learning, and promotion of the arts in Vermont
  - c. In-school and out-of-school programs that reach pre-K through 12 students (especially, but not exclusively) during these critical years of their formal education
- 2. (Public Value) To demonstrate the benefits of investing in Vermont communities through the arts to policy-makers and the general public by**
  - a. Participating in the research, documentation, and analysis of arts-based activities that improve the quality of life in Vermont communities particularly in the areas of revenue generation, tourism, school quality, public spaces, and health care/social services
  - b. Collaborating with State agency and private sector partners to infuse the arts into Vermont's "Brand Identity"
- 3. (Capacity) To expand and sustain the Council's capacity to serve its constituents by**
  - a. Advocating for increased public investment in the arts and culture from State and Federal resources
  - b. Expanding private sector support to underwrite "signature" initiatives and events
  - c. Embracing technology to expand the Council's marketing and promotional resources to constituents
  - d. Modeling and communicating best practices where access and inclusivity are concerned

Council resources are limited and our areas of engagement must be focused. Therefore we have identified 12 strategic activities, (three each for Artists, Arts Organizations, Communities, and the Council), that we believe will signal the success or failure of our strategic plan.

More than serving simply as Vermont's most significant arts grant-maker, we seek to be the hub of information about how the arts engage, enrich, and empower all people. We clearly must continue to support the creation and presentation of new, high-quality work. But we must also support artists' and organizations' efforts to improve their own marketing and promotional acumen. We must help arts organizations remain vital resources to their communities, especially where arts education, access, and inclusion are concerned. We must continue to find ways, despite current policies and financial constraints, to ensure that every child, especially those in the pre-K through 12 public school system, has adequate exposure to and training in the arts. We must continue to embrace new technologies that facilitate our grant procedures, that enable us to share information and resources, and that help us communicate to policy-makers the economic and social vitality that follow closely in the footprints of arts-enriched communities. When we achieve all this then we will see increased funding from the State,

broader and deeper collaborations with state- and statewide partners, and, most important of all, artists and arts organizations thriving in and being valued by their own communities.

The ultimate goal, as expressed by Council trustees at their Fall, 2011 retreat, of having Vermont become known (among many other things) as “producing civic-minded citizens whose curiosity about life, learning, and engagement in their communities is informed by their knowledge of and appreciation for the arts” is one that we may never receive any scientifically valid feedback on. However, we believe it is still as worthy an aspiration as those who express the value of Vermont in terms of the high quality of its skiing, artisanal cheese, maple syrup, and foliage.

Appendix B is a Logic Model that articulates the 12 strategies the Council will employ (and why), what we will measure when evaluating them, how they will be measured, and what kind of outcomes we expect in the near term, mid-term (two- to five-years), and long term. This logic model will evolve as knowledge from the Cultural Data Project and from our Evaluation Consultants is brought to bear. But it offers a solid platform from which we hope to move the arts in Vermont forward to 2017 and beyond.

### **III] EVALUATION**

Up to now, evaluation has been mostly concerned with inputs and outputs that allow us to review things we can count (tickets purchased, marketing dollars spent, tax revenue generated, students attending educational programs, and so on). While this data is important, it does not reveal how or whether the arts have changed how Vermont promotes itself; how teachers teach or students learn; how patient care at local hospitals is improved, and so on. This kind of data tends to be far more intuitive, anecdotal, and expensive to develop. In FY13 the Council will take a significant step forward in this area.

Using the Council’s Vision Statement (above) as a guide, we intend to develop a set of “Outcome Protocols” during FY 2013 with the assistance of Christine Dwyer of RNC Research that will guide our long-term “Outcome Assessment” agenda. For example, at its Fall 2011 retreat the Board reached consensus that producing an educated citizenry whose engagement in their communities was enhanced and informed by their knowledge of and appreciation for the arts was an incredibly important aspirational goal towards which we should strive. The challenge is, what metrics need to be put in place that will tell us whether we are making progress towards that vision? The first year of the plan will be devoted to establishing these tools.

In addition, evaluation of our own and constituent performance will be greatly enhanced as the Vermont Cultural Data Project (VtCDP), which went live in August 2011, delivers significantly more and better information about Vermont’s anchor cultural institutions. We expect that the combination of our Outcome Protocols and improved data coming out of VtCDP will provide us with a far greater understanding, over time, about what programs and services are the most effective, as well as serve to guide our arts marketing and advocacy efforts.

### **IV] OVERVIEW OF THE PLANNING PROCESS**

The 2013-2017 strategic planning process began in earnest at the beginning of FY 2012 (summer, 2011) with the appointment of three trustees to serve as the Planning Committee, chaired by Carlos Haase. At staff’s suggestion, the committee approved hiring Craig Dreeszen, who had created the Council’s plan back in FY02, not only because of his nationally-recognized expertise as a facilitator and planning consultant, but because his prior knowledge of our programs and services would, we felt, offer us deeper insight as to the progress we had made as an agency over the past 10 years. Mr. Dreeszen was tasked to oversee a constituent survey and facilitate staff and trustee planning retreats to consider the

survey's findings. We also hired one of his colleagues, Maren Brown, to provide additional facilitation for our public focus forums we held on Vermont interactive television.

Initial conversations with Dreeszen and Brown were held in July/August 2012; the survey was sent to 6000 Vermont citizen constituents in mid-September and the several-hundred replies were analyzed in mid-October to be presented and discussed at the Council's late October Board Retreat; two interactive television forums were run in 13 locations throughout the state in late September attended by a healthy representation of artists, educators, arts administrators, advocates, and philanthropists. Two separate trips, one in the south to visit districts hit by Tropical Storm Irene, and one in the north to visit one of Vermont's least served areas of the State (the Northeast Kingdom), specifically targeted legislators from those areas. Of those targeted, four met with us, and three others communicated with us by telephone. All seven of the legislators are members of our Legislative Arts Caucus.

Throughout the fall, during our program panel meetings, site visits, grant-seeker workshops, Cultural Data Project workshops, Arts Partnership grantees meeting, and individual constituent meetings, staff solicited input and feedback from constituents. By mid-December, the Planning Committee had access to a preliminary draft which evolved into a "First Draft" by the Board's mid-winter meeting. By April, 2012, a second draft was reviewed by committee and submitted to the full Board following which, at the Board's approval, the draft was made available, electronically, to all Council constituents for their comment.

In early June the Planning Committee made its final recommendations for changes and the Final Draft was placed before the Board for its full approval and adoption in June, 2012.

## **V] CONCLUSION**

The Council has much to be proud of and more to look forward to. It enjoys excellent relations with its state and national "authorizers," as well as with its key organizational and individual constituents. It has a strong web of intra-agency collaborations in place with more under development. It enjoys the flexibility of being an independent nonprofit, 501(c)(3) Corporation and the stature of a "State Agency." It has a good mix of long-standing staff and "new blood" with which to explore opportunities and evolve as circumstances require. And it is about to start planning for its (and the NEA's) 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, coming up in 2014-15.

But the nature of what is now considered a "mature" arts field has placed a new set of needs on all State Arts Agencies. "Participation" and "Public Benefit" goals tend to encourage a greater emphasis on outcomes such as Economic Impact, Social Services, and Educational Improvement. Collectively, our work now focuses on helping the public to understand that the role of the arts is not simply to create and present art, it is to improve the quality of our lives through the arts.

This is a new and difficult challenge which has been met, in some states, by folding the Arts Council under the wing of the State's Agency of Economic Development or Tourism. In Vermont, we feel our role has always been to show the value of the arts in communities, but that our legacy will be defined not so much by how the arts are marketed and promoted today, but in how the arts are appreciated and valued by our citizens tomorrow.

- For the Council's **Arts Education Vision Statement**, please see Appendix A
- For documentation of strategic activities that will be the focus of our **Strategic Goals Evaluation** efforts, please see Appendix B
- For an **Environmental Scan** that was created following the survey and interactive forums, please see Appendix C
- For a **SWOT Analysis** (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) prepared by staff and reviewed by the Board at its April 2012 retreat, please see Appendix D
- For an overview of the Strategic Plan timeline, please see Appendix E
- For the Statewide Interactive Forums report (including participants) facilitated by Maren Brown, please see Appendix F
- For the Statewide survey and analysis and Fall Board retreat discussion facilitated by Craig Dreeszen, please see Appendix G