



# Pennsylvania Creative Industries

Powered by Pennsylvania Council on the Arts

## 2027–2028 Creative Districts Program Guidelines

**Letter of Intent Form Due:** June 12, 2026

**Application Opens:** November 30, 2026

**Application Closes:** January 15, 2027

**Performance period:** July 1 to June 30 each year of the five-year designation period

---

### Table of Contents

- [About Pennsylvania Creative Industries](#)
- [Creative Industries Defined](#)
- [About the Creative Districts Program](#)
- [Program Features](#)
- [Eligibility](#)
- [Funding Amount](#)
- [Funding Restrictions](#)
- [Crediting Pennsylvania Creative Industries](#)
- [Creative District Designation Process](#)
- [Creative District Designation Step-By-Step](#)
- [Foundational Activities Overview](#)
- [Foundational Activities Tools](#)
- [Creative District Program Timeline](#)
- [Required Application Materials](#)
- [Application Review Process](#)
- [Appeals Process](#)

### About Pennsylvania Creative Industries

Pennsylvania Creative Industries is the new flagship brand of the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, a state agency. With this name, the Council aims to elevate the creative sector's visibility, engage broader audiences, foster collaboration across disciplines, and underscore creativity's vital role in innovation, economic growth, and community vitality.

In 2025, our Council adopted a new strategic plan with the **mission** to empower, connect, and amplify creatives and creative industries and their contributions to Pennsylvania's communities, economy, and workforce. Our **vision** is that Pennsylvania becomes the national leader among states for creative communities, talent, and industries.

To maximize impact and align with state community and economic development goals, Pennsylvania Creative Industries invests resources in five key areas:

- **Asset Development** (e.g., creative organizations, entrepreneurial ecosystem, technical assistance, regional networking)
- **Workforce Development** (e.g., creative skills, career awareness, and employment pathways)
- **Community Development** (e.g., creative placemaking, engagement with local governments, and networking for practitioners)
- **Visibility** (e.g., promotion of creative industries, products and services, and of the contributions and opportunities within our commonwealth's creative sector)
- **Policy** (e.g., creation of policies that promote and foster relevancy and opportunity for creative industries, within governmental and non-governmental agencies and businesses)

## Creative Industries Defined

Creative industries encompass individuals, organizations, and businesses that generate goods, services, and intellectual property through creative work. This includes advertising, architecture, performing and visual arts, design, crafts, music, media and film production, publishing, and digital games. Innovation, technology, and creative expression unite these diverse sectors.

In 2023, our commonwealth's creative industries contributed \$30B to Pennsylvania's economy and supported nearly 190K jobs. Learn more [here](#).

## About the Creative Districts Program

### What is a Creative District?

A Creative District is a walkable, geographically defined area by a municipality that is characterized by a high concentration of cultural facilities, creative businesses and entrepreneurs, artists, and culture bearers. Creative districts promote and benefit from a community's unique assets, enhance residents' quality of life, and attract visitors, talent, and investment.

The **Creative Districts Program** supports communities in transforming walkable, culturally vibrant areas into centers of economic growth, local identity, and inclusive revitalization. By investing in creative assets, the program fosters entrepreneurship and small business development, retains and attracts talent and visitors, advances a community's development and revitalization goals, and strengthens long-term planning.

## Program Features

- **Grant Funding:** Access to support for activities including, but not limited to, activities that address key elements of the district such as district management, planning, promotion, programming, public art, community engagement, and creative organization or small-business development, attraction, and retention.
- **Statewide Promotion:** Inclusion in official, branded marketing campaigns that boost visibility and tourism.
- **Technical Assistance:** Guidance and tools to help assist with mapping, planning, and implementation.
- **Peer Learning and Networking Opportunities**
- **Recognition & Branding:** Formal designation that elevates local identity and community pride.

- **Support for Planning, Evaluation & Sustainability:** Resources and support to develop a 5-year action plan, with encouragement for continued reflection, progress tracking, and adaptive planning over time.
- This is a **reimbursement-based grant program**, which means grantees must first incur and pay for eligible expenses, then submit an invoice/final report with required documentation, such as receipts, invoices, and proof of payment to receive funding.
- Grant awards may be subject to the National Endowment for the Arts' (a federal agency) General Terms and Conditions-Appendix A:  
[GTC-PARTNERSHIP-FY25-PLUS-6-25-25-FINAL.pdf](#).

## Eligibility

To be eligible to apply for Creative District designation:

- **Interested organizations must submit a completed Letter of Intent Form (LOI) via ESA by Friday, June 12, 2026, by 5PM.**
- **Applicant organization must be a Pennsylvania-based 501(c)(3), 501(c)(6), or unit of local government.** Nonprofit applicants must be registered as a Pennsylvania Nonprofit Corporation with the Pennsylvania Department of State Bureau of Corporations and Charitable Organizations and be in compliance with all required annual report filings.
- If the District Coordinating Organization (DCO) is not a municipality or a local entity that serves as the community and economic development organization, the district must include at least one partner that fulfills this role. Eligible partners include a community development corporation; a municipal or county planning or community and economic development department; or a designated Main Street management organization, Business Improvement District (BID)/Downtown Improvement District (DID), Local Development District (LDD), or Redevelopment Authority, among others. This partnership must be documented through a Letter of Commitment submitted with the application, as outlined in the Letter of Commitment guidance provided with the Foundational Activities materials.
- Note: Fiscal agents or fiscal sponsors are not . The applying organization must be the selected District Coordinating Organization, the legal entity responsible for District management, grant administration, and reporting.

## Funding Amount

- Anticipated grant amount up to \$50,000 per year for 5 years
- 1:1 match is required (up to 50% can be in-kind; at least 10% of the match must come from the local government).

## Funding Restrictions

- Activities that occur outside the performance period.
- Activities that have a religious purpose.
- Payments to lobbyists.
- Cash prizes and awards.
- Benefit activities.
- Hospitality expenses (e.g., receptions).
- Competitions.
- Performances and exhibitions that are not available to the public.
- Activities for which academic credit is given.

## Crediting Pennsylvania Creative Industries

Grantees must prominently acknowledge Pennsylvania Creative Industries funding in promotions, flyers, programs, media announcements, press releases, websites, social media that relate to this grant, by utilizing approved logos, branding, and materials. Pennsylvania Creative Industries will provide said materials to the grantee.

## Creative District Designation Process

To be eligible to apply for Creative District designation, a community must submit the Letter of Intent Form (LOI) by the stated deadline and participate in a pre-application meeting with PA Creative Industries staff. This initial meeting will provide an opportunity to discuss any existing local plans, answer questions, discuss community readiness and available resources and toolkits that can support the community's efforts.

Note: Some communities may have undertaken planning or other foundational-type activities prior to the launch of the Creative Districts program. Previously completed plans or related work **may be considered** and will be reviewed **on a case-by-case basis** to determine alignment with program goals and requirements.

## Creative District Designation Step-By-Step

### 1. Explore Feasibility & Form an Advisory Committee

- Assemble a working group of local stakeholders and partners to ensure the exploration of a Creative District reflects community priorities and perspectives.
- If needed, use the **Guiding Questions** to structure early conversations.
- If the community decides to move forward toward designation, individuals from the working group can transition into a more permanent **Advisory Committee** to support ongoing district development.

### 2. Designate a District Coordinating Organization (DCO)

- Identify the organization that will serve as the District Coordinating Organization (DCO) if the proposed Creative District receives designation.
- The DCO will submit the Letter of Intent Form (LOI) via ESA no later June 12, 2026, by 5PM.

### 3. Submit Letter of Intent Form

- An interested community begins by the DCO submitting a completed **Letter of Intent Form (LOI) via ESA**. Deadline: June 12, 2026, by 5PM (Note: PA Creative Industries staff will not accept late submissions).
  - **New to ESA?** Register **through** Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development's (DCED) grants management system: <https://grants.pa.gov/>.
  - Note: You must register for a Keystone Login in order to apply through the grants management system. You may register here if you have not already: <https://keystonelogin.pa.gov/Account/Register> - should this be "you must have registered"
  - Please note that the Commonwealth uses ACH to make grant payments. Register for ACH Authorization at the following link, if you have not already done so: <https://www.pa.gov/agencies/pennvest/programs-and-services/financing/ach-authorization-change-form>
  - Read and comply with the checklist for applicants and grantees: [grants management checklist for applicants and grantees as of 7.17.25.pdf](#)

#### 4. Connect with PA Creative Industries Staff

- After submitting the LOI, schedule a virtual pre-application meeting with staff to discuss the designation process and answer questions.

#### 5. Conduct a Community Asset Mapping Project

- Identify the community's assets in the areas defined in the **Asset Mapping Guide**.
- Document both established strengths and emerging opportunities.

#### 6. Define the District Map and Boundaries

- Establish clear, walkable geographic boundaries for the proposed Creative District.
- Include the creative assets and other key community resources located within those boundaries.

#### 7. Develop a 5-Year Action Plan

- Develop a **5-year Action Plan** outlining goals, strategies, partnerships, and anticipated outcomes in the following areas – Management & Governance, Community Engagement & Partnerships, Creative Economy & Small Business Support, Placemaking & Programming, Branding & Marketing, and Sustainability & Resource Development.

#### 8. Complete and Submit the Foundational Activities Workbook/Application in ESA

- Communities complete the required Foundational Activities and submit the finished **Foundational Activities Workbook** along with all required application materials via ESA.

#### 9. PA Creative Industries Staff Site Visit (If needed)

- Agency staff may conduct a site visit to better understand the district's readiness and context.

#### 10. Panel Review & Recommendation

- Panel reviews all applications and recommends proposed Creative Districts for designation to be approved by Council.

#### 11. Designation Begins

- Official Creative District designations take effect **July 1, 2027**, pending passage of the state budget and Council approval.

### Foundational Activities Overview

PA Creative Industries staff are available throughout the process to support communities as they complete the required Foundational Activities. Staff can talk through each step, review existing community work, and help you think through plans and possibilities. While guides, toolkits, and worksheets are provided to help communities move through each activity, you are not required to use these materials. If you prefer to use your own tools or locally developed resources, please discuss them with the Program Director before beginning the activities to ensure they meet the program's expectations. At the end of the process, **communities will submit their completed Foundational Activities Workbook as part of the application.**

### Foundational Activities Tools

#### Advisory Committee:

- Advisory Committee Guide
- Advisory Committee Worksheet
- Advisory Committee Recruitment Flyer

#### Community Asset Mapping:

- Asset Mapping Guide
- Asset Mapping Worksheet

- Asset Mapping Inventory Spreadsheet

### **Geographic Mapping:**

- Geographic Mapping Guide
- Geographic Mapping Worksheet

### **District Coordinating Organization**

- District Administrator Organization Letter of Commitment Template
- District Partners Organization Memorandum of Understanding Template
- Local Government Resolution Template

### **District Action Plan:**

- Action Plan Guide
- Action Plan Template

## **Foundational Activities Workbook**

## **Glossary of Terms**

## **Other Resources**

## **Creative District Program Timeline**

- **Letter of Intent Form Deadline:** June 12, 2026, by 5PM (see LOI Form submission instructions)
- **Applications with the Completed Foundational Activities Workbook Submitted:** January 15, 2027, by 5PM
- **Site Visits:** February 2027
- **Panel Review Period:** March/April 2027
- **Panel Convenes:** May/June 2027
- **Council Approval:** July 2027 Council Meeting

## **Required Application Materials**

- Completed Foundational Activities Workbook.
- DCO Commitment Letter.
- Most recently completed audited financial statement, compilation, or review (including any management letters) (if applicable).
- Most recently submitted IRS Form 990 tax filing (if applicable).
- Letters of Support from at least three community partner organizations (nonprofit, business, local government). – should this elaborate on the partnerships and should they be required – should we indicate a required or optional from legislative
- A passed local government resolution pledging support for the project and committing to provide at least 10% of the required match must be submitted with the application.

## **Application Review Process**

- Proposals will be reviewed by a committee based on the review criteria below with considerations for geography and reach. Committee recommendations will be presented to the Council, Pennsylvania Creative Industries' governing body.

- Council will act on recommendations and has final authority in the awarding of grants. Applicants will be notified about the status of their proposals. Selected proposals will be notified via email with next steps outlining the grant award process.

#### **Review Criteria:**

##### **Completion and Quality of Foundational Activities**

- All required activities in the Foundational Activities Workbook are complete and clearly documented.
- The materials demonstrate an understanding of the Creative Districts program and a shared vision among partners.
- The selected District Coordinating Organization shows a stable track record and alignment with the proposed district's goals.

##### **Community Engagement and Partner Commitment**

- Documentation shows meaningful engagement with artists, cultural organizations, local government, businesses, and residents.
- Partners demonstrate clear support for the district's development and long-term vision.

##### **Capacity of the District Coordinating Organization and Advisory Committee**

- The District Coordinating Organization's Commitment Letter and financial documents demonstrate operational capacity to manage district activities, partnerships, and long-term planning.
- The District Coordinating Organization and Advisory Committee show the ability to steward a Creative District and administer any grant funds awarded.

## **Appeals Process**

The Council recognizes that errors may occur in the application process. The Council is committed to acknowledging any errors and responding to rectify the effects of an error. The appeals process enables applicants to identify these errors and omissions and bring them to the attention of the Council. Appeals may result in a change in the determination of eligibility or the award amount if the applicant can satisfactorily document that an error or omission occurred through no fault of the applicant. Appeals are awarded only if the error or omission had a substantial effect on the evaluation of an application or on the determination of an applicant's eligibility.

Appeals are not intended to provide the applicant with an opportunity to challenge the qualitative assessment of the application. Missing the published application due date or failure to submit required information or documentation are not grounds for appeal.

Applicants considering an appeal should contact the applicable [program director](#) for advice and guidance. The appeal must be made in writing (hardcopy letter) to the Council's [Chief of Staff](#) within ten business days of the date of the notification of the award status from the Council. Appeal letters should identify the error or omission and the effect such error had on the Council's application review process. If the appeal is supported, funds will be awarded only if they are available.

*Grants under this program are processed under the authority of the act of January 25, 1966 (P.L. 1542 (1965), 71 P.S. Section 1530.1 et seq., as amended, and 58 Pa. Code §301.32.*

## **Questions?**

- For questions, concerns, and issues with Keystone Login call: (877) 328-0995.
- For technical and login questions, contact the Enterprise eGrants Customer Service Center: (833) 448-0647 or [egrantshelp@pa.gov](mailto:egrantshelp@pa.gov).

- For questions about grant application content and required attachments, contact Sarah Merritt, Senior Director of Community Development: [skmerritt@pa.gov](mailto:skmerritt@pa.gov) or (717) 787-1521