



Pennsylvania Creative Industries

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Asset Mapping Guide

Across Pennsylvania, communities are rich with creativity, cultural heritage, and deep local pride—even as many continue to navigate the long-term effects of deindustrialization and underinvestment. Acknowledging those realities is important, but so is recognizing the resilience, talent, and commitment that have carried communities forward. Every place faces challenges, some shared and some unique, and naming them upfront creates space for more honest and productive conversations. The work ahead invites you to look at your community through a lens of abundance, focusing on the assets, talents, strengths, and opportunities that already exist.

What is an Asset?

Assets are the resources, strengths, and sources of value that already exist within a community and contribute to residents' quality of life — and many also draw visitors who are eager to experience what makes the place unique. They include the people, places, stories, histories, traditions, and institutions that a community values, takes pride in, or relies on. Assets can be cultural, social, economic, creative, environmental, or industrial—and they often overlap across these categories (see a full definition of assets in the Asset Categories section on page 3).

It can't be stressed enough that at the heart of every community's assets are its people. Their stories, talents, networks, and cultural practices form the foundation for everything else. People carry the knowledge, traditions, and relationships that give a place its identity and resilience.

Additionally, it's important to remember that assets aren't limited to these examples. They are broadly defined, because community members themselves are the experts on what matters most. Their lived experience shapes what they see as valuable, and those insights should guide the process.

Every single person has capacities, abilities, and gifts. Communities are built on the assets of their people.

– John McKnight, co-founder of Asset Based Community Development at DePaul University

What is Asset Mapping?

Asset mapping is the process of bringing a broad, cross-sector group of community members together to identify and document the community's strengths. Through shared input, the community builds an asset inventory that reflects local people, places, organizations, cultural resources, and economic drivers. While Creative District planning centers arts, culture, and creativity, it's equally important to identify assets outside the creative sector—such as schools, parks, businesses, community organizations, and civic institutions—because they all contribute to the district's vitality and support the creative ecosystem. This process should also consider assets both within the proposed district boundaries and throughout the wider community, since many important connections, partnerships, and resources exist beyond the district footprint. There is no single “right” way to conduct an asset-mapping project; communities can adapt the process to their needs, capacity, and context. A wide range of approaches and tools are available to support this work (see resource links at the end of this toolkit).

Why Asset Mapping matters?

Deep, intentional community engagement is key to a successful asset mapping process and is most effective when everyone has the opportunity to contribute, and when lived experience is honored as expertise. Asset mapping depends on community knowledge—it validates residents' perspectives, encourages multiple viewpoints, and makes space for assets that may have been invisible to others. It's important to remember that what residents view as community assets may differ from your own assumptions, and every voice brings valuable insight. Be ready to uncover assets you didn't anticipate or even know about and to learn about strengths in the community that may not be widely known.

Meaningful involvement has tremendous benefits: it opens early conversations about the project, invites people to participate in shaping their environment, and helps redistribute power by honoring their input. This builds trust, fosters a sense of ownership, and lays the groundwork for early adoption—an essential ingredient for successful community work.

Community doesn't just create abundance—community is abundance.

—Parker J. Palmer, author, activist, and educator

Take your time with this process. Use it as a moment to think deeply about the community and the full range of strengths it offers. This is also a chance to begin gathering ideas about a shared vision for the community's future.

Why is thinking from a place of abundance important?

A community is, first and foremost, a place filled with the people, stories, and assets/strengths that make it a home. Whatever brings individuals to live there, the

community deserves to be something its residents, neighbors, future generations, visitors, and everyone who experiences it can feel proud of.

Approaching this work from a mindset of abundance often requires new ways of seeing the place, so encourage the community to lean into that shift. Deficit thinking places people on the defensive, focusing their attention on what isn't possible and on the barriers in their way. When a community is framed through its shortcomings, trust erodes and momentum stalls, making it harder to move forward together. Abundance thinking sets the foundation for sustainable work by strengthening community identity and connectedness, fostering a culture of collaboration instead of competition, building momentum, and opening people up to thinking creatively about possibilities and opportunities.

Leading the Work

The asset mapping process should be led by the partners identified through the steps outlined in the Creative District Guidelines, the District Coordinating Organization (DCO) and the Advisory Committee. Together, they guide and steward the asset-mapping work—ensuring that the process is community-driven, inclusive, and aligned with the district's emerging goals and values. Their leadership helps maintain continuity, coordinate outreach, and ensure that the findings reflect the lived experience, cultural strengths, and priorities of the community.

Asset Categories

With the goal of Creative District designation in mind, The asset categories provided in this toolkit can be used as they are, or the group may adapt them to better reflect local context, as long as **creative and cultural assets remain a distinct category**.

For this toolkit we have categorized assets into the following areas:

- **Creative & Cultural**
- **Natural & Outdoor Recreation**
- **History, Heritage & Innovation**
- **Institutions & Community Organizations**
- **Business & Industry**
- **Investors & Funders**

Creative & Cultural

These assets, as defined by Pennsylvania Creative Industries, encompass the full range of artistic, cultural, and creative resources that contribute to a community's social, cultural, civic, and economic vitality. These assets reflect the Commonwealth's broader creative-industry ecosystem and strengthen local identity, deepen engagement, and generate opportunities for creative expression, economic activity, and shared belonging.

- **Arts & culture facilities and venues** — Arts centers, arts councils, dance studios, theatres, craft schools, museums, galleries, maker spaces, and performing arts

spaces (both indoor and outdoor) that anchor cultural life and provide opportunities for people to gather, learn, and experience arts and culture.

- **Creative organizations, associations, and collectives** — Nonprofit arts and culture organizations, artist collectives and co-ops, volunteer-run groups, and membership-based associations that organize creative activity, support artists and cultural participation, and contribute to a community's cultural ecosystem, regardless of whether they operate a permanent physical space.
- **Creative businesses and industries** — For-profit enterprises operating within the creative industries including, manufacturing, artisan shops, design studios, creative service firms, and other businesses that produce or support creative work.
- **Artists, creative entrepreneurs and creative workers** — Individuals whose creative skills, practices, and leadership generate cultural, social, and economic value across Pennsylvania's creative industries. This includes artists, makers, designers, performers, architects, marketing and advertising professionals, media and film producers, digital game developers, writers, and other creative professionals.
- **Public art and cultural landmarks** — Murals, sculptures, land and environmental art, artist designed creative lighting and media installations and infrastructure (i.e. bike racks, storm drains, utility boxes, pavement art, etc.), architecture, and culturally significant sites.
- **Events and programming** — Festivals, creative activities, workshops, performances, exhibitions, and markets.
- **Community identity and traditions** — Local stories, foodways, heritage, folk art and artistic traditions, and cultural practices. Culinary arts and foodways are essential creative and cultural assets. They express local identity, heritage, and storytelling through food traditions, recipes, and culinary practices. These assets also support creative entrepreneurship and community gathering, and they often overlap with both the Creative & Cultural and Business & Industry categories.

2023 US Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) data shows that Pennsylvania's creative sector:

- Added \$30.4 billion to the state economy (ranking 8th among all states in value added).
- Represented 3.1% of total GDP
- Supported 189,700+ jobs
- Generated \$14.6 billion in compensation

Creative assets strengthen communities *and* economies.

Other Assets to Consider:

- **Partnership networks** — Collaborations among arts groups, creative businesses, civic organizations, schools, and public agencies that expand opportunities and strengthen community ties.

- **Spaces with creative potential** – Vacant, underused, or adaptable properties that can be transformed into community-serving creative spaces.

Use of NAICS codes for the Creative Assets Inventory Spreadsheet

As part of the Creative Districts asset-mapping process, communities should use the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) to identify and categorize creative businesses, organizations, and practitioners located within the proposed district boundaries. NAICS codes provide a standardized method for classifying creative-sector activity and help ensure consistency across all participating communities.

However, Pennsylvania Creative Industries recognizes that many creative workers, entrepreneurs, and cultural practitioners do not fit neatly into a single NAICS code or may operate across multiple creative disciplines. If a business, organization, or individual does not align clearly with an existing NAICS code, communities should still include them in the asset map and document their role in the local creative ecosystem. In these cases, applicants should:

- Select the closest applicable NAICS code, or
- Provide a brief description of the asset's creative function or contribution.

This flexible approach ensures that all relevant creative activity is captured, including emerging, hybrid, or culturally specific practices that may not be fully represented in the NAICS system.

Natural & Outdoor Recreation

Natural and outdoor recreation assets are the places, landscapes, and amenities that support a community's connection to nature, physical activity, and outdoor enjoyment. They include the gardens, green spaces, parks, parklets, trails, waterways, open spaces, and recreational facilities that contribute to quality of life, environmental health, and a community's sense of place.

History, Heritage, & Innovation

History, heritage, and innovation assets include the places, people, preservation organizations, and institutions that reflect Pennsylvania's deep cultural roots and long-standing influence on the nation's identity, industry, and creative and innovative spirit. These assets encompass historic makers, craftspeople, inventors, and community members whose work shaped the community and the Commonwealth's past, as well as the innovators and emerging technologies that continue to spark new ideas today.

This category also includes historic sites, landmarks, archives, and architecturally significant buildings that preserve and interpret the stories of Pennsylvania's communities. Equally important are the histories that have been overlooked or not widely known—stories that reveal the resilience, creativity, and contributions of people who built and continue to shape the state.

Together, these assets highlight how Pennsylvania's legacy of creativity, leadership, and innovation continues to evolve and fuel its future.

Institutions & Community Organizations

Institutions and community organization assets include the governmental, nonprofit, and for-profit entities that support a community's education, youth development, community and economic development, health, human services, wellbeing, environment, safety, civic life, and social support networks. These organizations form the systems of care, learning, leadership, and civic engagement that help a community remain resilient, connected, and positioned for long-term growth.

This category also includes regional offices and programs of other Pennsylvania state agencies that play a role in local capacity-building and community & economic development. Examples include PREP and Engage partners, Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs), Heritage Areas, Conservation Landscape programs, and similar statewide initiatives that provide technical assistance, training, funding, and cross-sector collaboration opportunities.

Business & Industry

This category includes the businesses, industries, entrepreneurs, and business-support organizations that make up the community's business and industry ecosystem. These assets highlight the kinds of work people do, the skills and traditions present in the community, the vital goods and services available locally, and the ways local businesses contribute to the community's economy.

Keep in mind that many assets naturally overlap across multiple areas, and that is expected. Above all, approach this work with the understanding that asset mapping is an ongoing practice—as communities transform, the assets transform too.

Investors & Funders

Investors and funders include the individuals, foundations, financial institutions, public agencies, philanthropic partners, and developers that bring financial resources and investment capacity to a community. These assets may include local and regional foundations, community development financial institutions (CDFIs), banks, donor-advised funds, corporate giving programs, real estate and community developers, and state or federal funding sources. Together, they help communities launch new initiatives, strengthen creative activity, support small businesses, and leverage additional public and private investment to advance long-term community and economic development.

Steps for Asset Mapping

1. Explain the “why”

Ground the process in the purpose of building a Creative District. Help people understand how asset mapping strengthens local creative ecosystems, supports cultural and economic goals, and ensures the district reflects community identity and priorities.

2. Define what asset mapping is

Clarify that asset mapping identifies community strengths across six categories: Creative & Cultural, Natural & Outdoor Recreation, History, Heritage & Innovation, Institutions & Community Organizations, Business & Industry, and Investors & Funders. Explain how documenting these assets will shape the Creative District’s vision, strategies, partnerships, and investment priorities.

3. Align on shared goals

Ensure everyone involved understands that this asset-mapping activity is designed to support the planning and implementation of a Creative District program. At the same time, emphasize that the process brings broader benefits to the community: it strengthens relationships, reveals under-recognized strengths, builds shared understanding, and creates a clearer picture of the community’s creative, cultural, and economic landscape. The findings don’t just inform the Creative District—they become a resource the community can use in many ways, from partnership development to grant applications to long-term planning. When people share a common sense of purpose, the process becomes more meaningful and the results more valuable for both the district and the wider community.

4. Consider the district’s boundaries — and how assets inside and outside connect

As you engage community members, stay mindful of the district’s potential boundaries — whether they are already defined or still being shaped. Pay attention to the assets within the area you’re considering and note assets outside it. Understanding how these internal and external assets connect will help you refine boundaries that make sense for the community. It will also help you identify outside assets that could be valuable partners in planning, programming, and implementing activities and projects that strengthen the district as a whole.

5. Plan activities and root the process in deep community engagement

Work with your group to plan asset collection activities. Prioritize people over projects. Deep community engagement is key to a successful asset mapping project. Work with organizations, artists, cultural leaders, and residents and community leaders who hold trust and relationships. Make space for lived experience, cultural knowledge, and informal networks that shape creative life and community identity.

6. Be clear about the timeline

Set expectations about how long the process will take, when engagement will occur, and when findings will be shared. Transparency builds trust and keeps partners aligned.

7. Gather & Organize Assets

Collect assets across all six categories using the community engagement activities outlined in the guidelines (along with any existing data you already have). As you identify assets, track and inventory them systematically using the Asset Mapping Inventory Spreadsheet to capture key details. Then sort assets into the appropriate categories, looking for patterns, gaps, clusters, anchor institutions, and potential partnerships that can inform district development.

As you organize assets, maintain an up-to-date Asset Mapping Inventory Spreadsheet **(please download the spreadsheet on the Creative Districts page at art.pa.gov)** and note any potential roles or partnerships for each asset. This becomes a working tool for planning, outreach, and long-term Creative District development.

Important Note: When completing the Asset Mapping Inventory Spreadsheet, you will need to provide a NAICS (for businesses/organizations) or SOC (for individuals). Please follow the instructions on the NAICS and SOC list for guidance.

8. Celebrate

Share what you've learned with the community and celebrate the people, places, stories, and strengths that make it unique. Acknowledge the work and the many contributors who helped surface these assets. Celebration builds momentum, reinforces community pride, deepens relationships, and invites continued participation in the Creative District's next phase.

What does the timeline for community asset mapping look like?

The answer depends on your community. Some places may already have asset-mapping work from previous plans or projects; if so, start by reviewing that information and updating it to reflect current realities. If you're beginning from scratch, expect the process to take time. Inclusive asset mapping requires space for meaningful engagement, thoughtful reflection, and community-driven input. Whatever your starting point, build in enough time to do the work well rather than rushing through it.

For Pennsylvania's Creative District rollout, plan at least 3-6 months for asset mapping as part of the Foundational Activities.

Activities for Community Asset Mapping

Your community can explore its assets through many different activities – from surveys to walkabouts and asset walls to small group listening sessions. The list below offers examples.

- **Community Conversations** Host community conversations in locations that are accessible, welcoming, and familiar to residents—places like libraries, community centers, cafés, parks, or neighborhood gathering spots. These sessions should feel less like formal meetings and more like open, inclusive dialogues where people can share what they value about their community.

Use these conversations to invite participants to identify assets, cultural touchpoints, and places that matter to them. Encourage people to talk about:

- Where creativity already shows up in daily life
- Spaces where people gather, celebrate, or make things
- Local businesses, traditions, or stories that shape community identity
- Places that feel inspiring, historic, or culturally significant

There are multiple ways to gear the asset-collection process—large-group discussions, small breakout circles, sticky-note walls, asset-mapping worksheets, or even a big, printed map where participants can place dots or write in locations.

Make sure facilitators create space for a wide range of voices, especially those who may not typically be included in planning processes. Consider offering food, childcare, or translation support to reduce barriers to participation.

Community conversations are not just about gathering data—they help build trust, deepen relationships, and ensure the district reflects the community.

- **Tabling at Community Events** Set up a table at well-attended community events to meet people where they already are and gather input from residents who may not participate in formal meetings. This approach helps you reach a broad cross-section of the community in a casual, approachable setting.

Examples of events where tabling works well include:

- Farmers markets
- Street fairs and block parties
- Cultural festivals
- School or library events
- Holiday celebrations
- Outdoor concerts or movie nights
- Neighborhood association gatherings
- Community days or municipal events

Bring a large, printed map, simple asset-mapping worksheets, and a few easy, interactive tools that help people mark places they value—creative spaces, local businesses, institutions, heritage sites, and natural assets. You might offer dot stickers for quick input, short story cards where people can jot down memories tied to specific places, or a quick “circle your favorite spots” activity for kids and families. Encourage people to share stories, memories, and ideas as they identify assets. Tabling is especially effective for connecting with families, young people, and residents who are often underrepresented in planning processes.

- **Surveys and Questionnaires** Collect input from a broad base of residents about what they see as community strengths through a simple community survey. Make the survey available in multiple formats so people can access and complete it in the way that works best for them—paper copies at public locations, digital versions shared through email or social media, and QR codes posted at community hubs or events. Offering several options ensures that residents of all ages, abilities, and comfort levels can participate and that the survey reaches people who might not otherwise engage in planning processes.

Community events reach people digital tools miss.

Neighborworks America found that tabling at existing community events is one of the most effective ways to reach residents who do not participate in formal meetings or online surveys, especially youth, elders, and lower-income residents.

- **Community Walkabouts** Organize guided walkabouts through the proposed district area to observe how people actually use the space, where activity naturally clusters, and what assets might be overlooked on a map. These walks help participants experience the district at street level—its energy, rhythms, challenges, and opportunities.

You can structure these as informal strolls or as more intentional Jane Jacobs-style walks, inspired by the urbanist’s belief that the best way to understand a place is to walk it, observe it, and listen to the people who live and work there. A Jane Jacobs-style walk encourages participants to pay attention to:

- How people move through the area
- Where social interaction naturally happens
- What feels welcoming or unwelcoming
- The mix of uses—businesses, homes, institutions, creative spaces
- Street life, gathering spots, and “eyes on the street”
- Places with strong character, history, or cultural meaning

During the walk, invite participants to identify assets of all kinds—creative spaces, local businesses, heritage sites, institutions, natural features, and the people who animate the district. Encourage them to take notes, photos, or mark observations on a printed map.

Walkabouts are especially effective for surfacing insights that don't show up in surveys or meetings—like the feel of a block, the importance of a small gathering spot, or the presence of informal creative activity. They also help build shared understanding and spark new ideas among participants.

- **Mapping Workshops** Use large maps, sticky notes, or digital platforms to mark assets (arts venues, parks, businesses, cultural organizations).
- **Story Circles / Listening Sessions** Small group conversations where participants share stories about places, traditions, or people they value. These highlight

Celebration Strengthens Engagement: A growing body of research from around the world shows that public events that share findings significantly increase community engagement and support for a project, because residents see that their contributions are acknowledged and valued. -Hong Kong Polytechnic University

intangible assets like heritage, networks, and local knowledge.

- **Photo Documentation / Asset Hunts** Invite residents to take photos of places, people, or activities they consider assets. This creates a visual record and engages younger participants.
- **Partnership Mapping** Chart organizations, institutions, and informal networks that contribute to community vitality. Identify overlaps and gaps to strengthen collaboration.
- **Public Displays / Asset Walls** Create a community wall or board where residents can add sticky notes naming assets. This makes the process visible and participatory.

Why These Activities Work

- They foster community pride by **centering on abundance/strengths** rather than deficits/challenges.
- They **invite broad participation**, ensuring inclusive community representation.
- They **generate multiple formats of data** (stories, visuals, lists, maps) that can be synthesized into planning documents.
- They **build ownership and trust**, laying the groundwork for designation and other Foundational Activities.

Celebration or Showcase Events

If possible, end the process with a community gathering that celebrates the community's assets. This could be in conjunction with an existing community event, or it could be a stand-alone event. Either way, bringing people together to share what was learned helps

strengthen pride, deepen connection, and build momentum around a proposed Creative District program in your community.

Note: For Creative District applicants please download the Asset Mapping Inventory spreadsheet on the Creative Districts page at pa.arts.gov.

Explore more resources

Some of the resources listed here are designed for specific sectors or focus areas but they still offer valuable ideas, best practices, and examples that communities can adapt to their own context. Even if a tool wasn't created specifically for creative districts, it can spark useful approaches to engagement, planning, and asset identification.

- [Asset-Based Community Development Institute](#)
- [A Guide to Asset Mapping – Bank of I.D.E.A.S.](#)
- [IMLS Asset Mapping Resources](#)
- [Participatory Asset Mapping – Community Research Lab Toolkit](#)
- [A Toolkit for Community Assessment: Community Asset Mapping – C4 Innovations & Georgia Health Policy Center](#)
- [The Community Mapping Toolkit- Preston City Council](#)
- [Asset Mapping with Youth](#)
- [Asset Mapping - National Digital Inclusion Alliance](#)
- [Asset Mapping 101 – American Press Institute](#)
- [Jane Jacobs Walks](#)
- [Community Tool Box – Center for Community Health & Development, University of Kansas](#)

Links to Asset Mapping Tools

[Asset Inventory Spreadsheet](#)

[Asset Mapping Worksheet](#)