



**CultureSpark Master Plan**  
**The Ten-Year Plan for Arts, Culture and Heritage in Erie County**  
**Executive Summary**  
**May 2010**  
**[www.culturesparkerie.org](http://www.culturesparkerie.org)**

**Why Cultural Planning for Erie County**

Erie County, like communities across the country, has undertaken cultural planning to take stock of existing cultural resources and the many ways in which they benefit the community; to assess cultural strengths, challenges and opportunities; to gain community and stakeholder input in setting future cultural priorities; and to further integrate cultural development as a tool for building prosperity, vitality, creativity and community.

The idea of creating a cultural plan for Erie County was first suggested several years ago by the Erie Community Foundation. Unable to take on the task at that time, ArtsErie included the concept as a long-term goal in its strategic plan. In mid 2008, ArtsErie began raising the necessary funds to conduct cultural planning, and joined with The Nonprofit Partnership to cosponsor CultureSpark. The Erie Community Foundation, the PA Council on the Arts, ArtsErie Special Project Fund and Unrestricted Gaming Revenue from the County of Erie provided the needed financial support to hire a consultant in early 2009, and the process began with the appointment of a Steering Committee to oversee planning.

The leadership of CultureSpark chose to examine culture broadly in the Erie region – from artistic expression, performance and design, to heritage, ethnic traditions and hands-on involvement, to culinary traditions and cultural education. An important value of the CultureSpark Plan is that it both reflects and celebrates the diversity of the region – and all residents have had and will continue to have the opportunity to participate. Together, participants in the planning process framed a number of wide-ranging recommendations that promise to transform our relationship with arts, culture, and heritage throughout the county over the next decade.

## **CultureSpark Top Recommendations:**

Based upon research, stakeholder and community input, Task Force deliberations, Steering Committee review, and the perspective of the consultant team, the following recommendations, all equally important, are highlighted as having the greatest potential impact on the 10 year CultureSpark vision for cultural development:

1. **Launch a joint marketing initiative** to increase and diversify participation in cultural activity, and increase earned income for arts, cultural and heritage organizations. Convene a Marketing Advisory Committee to create a marketing plan addressing opportunities surfaced in CultureSpark market research, such as cross promotions, targeted marketing and cultural tourism.
2. **Create a Central Cultural Website** as a primary tool for communication, marketing and networking, with links to other important sites. It would include a directory of artists, cultural and heritage organizations, venues, events, education and youth programs; a calendar for scheduling and marketing purposes; and information on training, service and funding for the arts, culture and heritage sector.
3. **Countywide Cultural Development:** increase the number and visibility of cultural activities in communities throughout Erie County to promote greater access, participation and community vitality. Integrate CultureSpark strategies into other civic and public planning initiatives.
4. **Increase cultural education opportunities** in K-12 schools and community settings, through concerted advocacy to education, community, business and government leaders - this is key to the Erie regions future cultural and economic vitality.
5. **Enhance professional development, marketing and support for individual artists and creators** to sustain their presence and impact in Erie County. Develop an artists/creators alliance under ArtsErie, for networking, collaborations and marketing.
6. **Develop a Cultural Center, or centers** to provide additional spaces for exhibition and performance, to raise the visibility of culture in the region and to contribute to revitalization of downtowns through rehabilitation of vacant or underutilized buildings.
7. **Increase private fundraising** capacity and activity of arts, cultural and heritage organizations, particularly planned giving to endowments, in order to strengthen and stabilize them.
8. **Secure a sustainable government/public dedicated funding source** for the arts, culture and heritage In Erie County to provide a balanced, stable mix of earned income, private and government/public support.
9. **Develop new partnerships that improve and enhance the relationship among community leadership, governments, civic organizations, colleges/universities and arts, culture and heritage.**

## Community Context

The Erie region is, indeed, home to a diverse range of arts, culture and heritage resources: large, established organizations and venues in downtown Erie; smaller organizations throughout the county; heritage venues and sites in nearly every community; many artists, representing a broad range of disciplines; colleges and universities with significant arts and cultural programming; church-based cultural activity; arts councils in Corry and North East; both newer and established ethnic communities and traditions.

These cultural resources contribute indelibly to the Erie region's identity, quality of life and economy. A recent Americans for the Arts study pegged the economic impact of the arts and culture in Erie County at nearly \$15 million per year, counting only a limited range of nonprofit cultural activity.

A cultural plan must grow from its region's unique history, values, issues, assets, aspirations and decision-making dynamics. Key interviews and forums were used to probe the Erie region's character and identity, critical community issues and leadership dynamics in order to provide context for the cultural assessment.

Most individuals were quick to describe **regional character and identity** in terms of the **abundant natural beauty** of Erie County including the location on the lake. Other permeating themes included the **vitality, passion and resiliency** of those who live throughout the region. There is great pride in both regional and individual community **histories**, and a growing recognition of the **rich diversity** of people living here. While the population is aging and declining, there is a high nativity rate. Many young people want to stay here and there is a sense of young people moving back to raise families. The Erie region is considered **family-friendly**. The city of Erie is characterized as a big small town.

One of the **critical community issues** involves an economy in transition and includes such things as leveraging our location on Lake Erie, developing smaller companies, and building on fast growth industries like healthcare, tourism and hospitality. Other critical issues are Erie's distressed city status, the high poverty rate, the lack of minority inclusion, and disparities in education and geographic location. Some people mentioned the need for vital urban cores in Erie and other towns. There is also a sense that things get done slowly in Erie and that, historically, key leaders and influential people have been able to stop an initiative or move it forward. There is a **strong desire for regional thinking and collaboration** rather than back room decision-making to determine civic direction.

**Leadership dynamics** are also changing in the Erie region. New community leaders are emerging to focus on issues including poverty, a community college, healthcare access, early childhood, and workforce initiatives.

Corporate leadership for the arts has changed over time with the loss of large companies that formerly supported the arts financially and through staff volunteer leadership. Strong political leadership is also perceived to be missing with government

leaders largely absent from cultural events and unfamiliar with what is happening with the arts, culture and heritage.

Yet nearly 600 CultureSpark community survey respondents validated the importance of arts, culture and heritage in the Erie region with ratings of 8 or more on a scale of 1-10 for these quality of life impacts:

- Makes Erie County a desirable place to live
- Helps our children with academics and other important life skills
- Provides safe and healthy activities for our youth
- Fosters downtown and neighborhood revitalization
- Contributes to economic prosperity
- Stimulates innovation and new ideas

### **CultureSpark Planning Process**

The CultureSpark process featured exhaustive research and community dialog in order to assess cultural strengths, challenges, opportunities and community context, as a basis for developing specific recommendations and implementation suggestions. The yearlong process began with appointment of an oversight Steering Committee in May of 2009. Planning was designed and facilitated by Bill Bulick of Creative Planning, from Portland, Oregon, assisted by research specialist Surale Phillips, of Decision Support Partners, Bozeman, Montana. Planning elements included:

- Extensive and ongoing review of **background materials and data** on the Erie region and its cultural sector.
- Almost **40 interviews** with key civic and cultural leaders.
- **Focus groups** with cultural organizations, heritage organizations, youth arts programs, educators, Project Blueprint, and the ArtsErie board.
- **Forums** with artists/creators and cultural organizations.
- Five open **community meetings** held in different parts of Erie County.
- **Surveys** of artists/creators, cultural organizations and the general public.
- A **geo-demographic analysis** of the regional market for cultural activity and the audiences of major cultural and heritage organizations.
- Researched **profiles of comparable communities** and their cultural programs to surface models and examples. These included: York County, PA; Scranton/Lackawanna County, PA; Reading/Berks County, PA; Allentown/Lehigh Valley, PA; Peoria, Illinois; Asheville, North Carolina; Pawtucket, Rhode Island.

- Creation of a **CultureSpark website** and **Facebook page** as access points for information, review of documents and notices of opportunities for public participation.
- The consultants working with several advisory groups:
  - CultureSpark **Steering Committee**: a diverse group of over 30 civic and cultural leaders and community members who met bimonthly to review research and community input, shape and ultimately, approve the Cultural Master Plan.
  - A small **Working Group** of cultural leaders and staff who met regularly to advise on the planning process and outreach.
  - **Six Task Forces**, made up of Steering Committee members, cultural professionals, community members, and civic leaders, who met 4 - 6 times during January and February 2010 to review the findings from research and public engagement, and develop strategies to address the six priority topics offering the greatest opportunities for productive cultural strategy development: Joint Marketing, Countywide Services, Cultural Education, Individual Artists and Creators, Community Development, and Resources and Infrastructure. The task force phase also addressed four crosscutting issues – Leadership and Advocacy, Multicultural Communication and Inclusion, Capacity Building, and Economic Development.
- Development of a **Draft Cultural Master Plan**, reviewed by the Steering Committee and Task Forces and in a public meeting.
- Presentation of the **Final CultureSpark Master Plan** to the community.

### **The CultureSpark Master Plan Document**

The full plan document is comprised of an introduction, the six topical chapters containing the 35 plan recommendations, a section on implementation first steps and appendices. For each recommendation implementation factors are suggested, including lead and partner implementers, timeline, resources, first steps models if available, outcomes and benefits.

The Cultural Master Plan reflects a “big picture” overview of cultural resources, challenges, opportunities and recommendations based upon the research and community dialog that was possible during our planning timeframe. In some cases recommendations are concrete and specific, in others, more tactical planning and assessment are needed. This is a “living document” whose vision, values and overarching recommendations will provide a lasting framework that will embolden leaders to respond to new challenges and opportunities, as they arise.

## **Conclusion:**

The CultureSpark planning process was comprehensive, featuring extensive research and robust stakeholder and community dialog in order to identify and assess cultural strengths, challenges and opportunities, as a basis for its 35 recommendations. The process was open, porous and engaging - designed to cultivate and inspire the ongoing community leadership needed to realize its 10-year vision. Many thanks to the hundreds of Erie County citizens who helped create CultureSpark.

A key concern expressed repeatedly throughout the planning process was that in addition to strong committed community participation and development of resources, implementation would require continued leadership from Arts Erie and The Nonprofit Partnership, and that financial support is required to insure that leadership. As the process moves forward towards implementation, this concern must still be addressed.

In addition, cultural leaders expressed the need for stronger, better-coordinated advocacy based upon well-articulated messages as to the role and benefits of arts, culture and heritage. The CultureSpark Master Plan provides these "messages," wrapped in a framework of vision, values and strategies for cultural development with unquestioned benefit to the Erie region's vitality, livability and prosperity. Some questioned undertaking cultural planning during such a doom and gloom economy, in a region noted for its poverty and plans that sit on shelves. But the CultureSpark process itself challenged us to examine the range and reach of "culture" in the region and what culture means in a changed economy with an altered social fabric. The process also sparked new partnerships and collaborations to address its strategies - and some resources have already been tapped to begin implementation. As the economy turns around and improves, CultureSpark will provide a good framework and rationales for cultural investment to benefit the citizens of the region.