

# The Providence Journal

## Mayor kicks off new focus on arts and the city

01:00 AM EDT on Thursday, September 25, 2008

By Linda Borg

Providence Journal Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE — Mayor David N. Cicilline announced that the city is embarking on a cultural plan to explore the weaknesses, strengths and challenges facing the city's arts and cultural community.

At a breakfast meeting yesterday at the Renaissance Hotel, Cicilline assembled members of the city's arts and nonprofit communities, including representatives from the Rhode Island School of Design, AS220, The Steelyard, the Rhode Island Council for the Arts and members of the City Council.

The mayor's message went like this: Providence is already recognized as an arts and cultural center. What can we do to further promote that image and expand on programs already offered by the city's artists and cultural institutions?

The arts are a major economic driver in Providence. They generated \$111.8 million in economic activity in one year; supported 2,759 jobs; produced \$55.5 million in annual household income and delivered more than \$11 million in state and local tax revenue, Cicilline said.

Last fall, the city's Department of Art, Culture and Tourism established an arts investment task force, which is about to launch two initiatives: one to strengthen cultural tourism and another to create a marketing campaign about the power of the arts.

"The cultural plan will focus on stimulating economic development," Cicilline said, "building links with the creative economy, developing a strong network of arts learning opportunities and enhancing the quality of life through civic engagement in the arts."

The objectives of Creative Providence: A Cultural Plan for the Capital City, are:



- To serve as a catalyst for city and statewide conversations about the evolution and sustainability of the arts.
- To recognize artists, art administrators and cultural institutions as leaders who already shape the current environment.
- To provide emerging arts leaders and experienced professionals with a forum to develop fresh ways of enriching the arts.

"We must develop an intentional plan where arts and culture are at the center of conversations about how the city can face — and meet — new challenges," Cicilline said. "Only if we are prepared, can we increase the sustainability and the scope of our city's artistic programming, marketing and operations."

Two consulting firms will lead the effort: Craig Dreeszen, a nationally recognized cultural planner, and the staff of New Commons, a Providence-based think tank.

Dreeszen said this is a two-part process: "First, we will be looking at what's working and what holds you back," he said yesterday. "Step two is the planning stage, interviewing community leaders, holding focus groups, looking at the data.

"What defines culture?" he said. "It includes the visual and performing arts, the humanities, the private and nonprofit sectors. It's not just the fine arts. It could be a religious festival."

The hope is that this effort will increase cooperation between the arts and business groups, the arts and schools and the arts and government agencies, Dreeszen said.

Charlestown, S.C., and Philadelphia, Pa., conducted similar studies and the results were noteworthy, Dreeszen said. Charlestown now hosts the internationally known Spoleto Arts Festival, while Philadelphia has produced a Web site called Fun Facts on Line.

The planners hope to present their recommendations to the City Council in June.

A community forum on how the city's artistic community evolved will be held on Oct. 7 from 2 until 5 p.m. at the Rhode Island Convention Center. A second forum on how to strengthen the city's "creative ecosystem" will be held Nov. 18 from 2 until 5 p.m. at the Roger Williams Park Casino.

And the Department of Art, Culture and Tourism will invite a group of local and national leaders to discuss the challenges facing the local arts community on March 3 and 4 at the Rhode Island Convention Center.

The public is invited to share their thoughts on line at a new Web site, [www.creativeprov.org](http://www.creativeprov.org).

The initiative will cost \$60,000, some of which will be paid for by the city with the rest coming from private foundations and businesses.