



Posted Online 10/21/25

# Culture connects



*Power of culture*

"La Cultura es Poder,"  
Colectivo Moriviví, Holyoke  
Puerto Rican Cultural District

# Program Description

## Cultural Districts Initiative

*Driving growth and opportunity*

Cultural Districts drive economic growth, strengthen our distinctive local character, and improve the quality of life of families across Massachusetts. By supporting arts, humanities, and science organizations, Cultural Districts attract tourists and entrepreneurs, which in turn help communities foster their cultural sector and expand their tax base.



69th Annual Fall Foliage Parade, North Adams Cultural District, Photo by: Nick Mantello

# What Success Looks Like

Successful Districts are most effective when:

- There is an alignment of community and economic development initiatives, state and federal offerings and procedures, and municipal planning efforts.
- Districts are open and accessible to all and embrace community-engaged planning and implementation processes and collaborative partnerships.



"Nubian Nights," Roxbury Cultural District

# Benefits of Being a State Designated District

4

## Direct Benefits

- Eligible to receive state funding
- Reports on the impact of designation of participating districts
- Technical Support through a peer learning community
- Partnership/Statewide Commonwealth Consortium resources and support
- Connectivity on a local, regional, and state level



Armenian Museum of America, Watertown Cultural District

# Benefits of Being a District continued

5

## Additional Benefits

Designated Cultural Districts benefit from collaborations with State and Regional agencies and offices. These include:

- Priority in grant reviews and funding opportunities
- Inclusion in statewide programs and policy development
- Opportunities to pilot new initiatives in the district
- Access to local, regional, and statewide partner networks
- Planning and technical support resources
- District-specific research, data, and evaluation tools
- GIS map of the approved district

# Old vs. New Requirements for Redesigned Program

Old	New
Used to provide list of assets in application.	<b>Will provide <a href="#">MACRIS map</a> or <a href="#">MassMapper map</a></b> created with their municipality, that can be used as the zoning overlay and a base for more detailed GIS Mapping.
No staffing requirement, districts could be 100% volunteer run.	<b>District must have one .25%/10hrs FTE District Manager or up to 2 District Managers</b> sharing the time. Can be paid by City or district orgs.
Municipality did not have to make financial investment.	<b>Municipality must choose one of 5 ways to invest financially</b> (i.e. match grant funds, pay for staff, commit line item in annual budget, make other capital investments pertinent to district goals and activities, or provide in-kind services to the district that are otherwise billable.)
Municipality made resolution of support for district.	Municipality must <b>make resolution to adopt formal ordinance</b> once district is approved and provide a draft of the ordinance defining the district and if relevant, outlining zoning and other considerations for the district to support program goals.

# Old vs. New Requirements continued

Old	New
Districts could operate under any type of governance model.	<b>Districts will need to choose from 3 types of governance models</b> , but the municipality's commitment of resources is the same for all 3: <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Municipal</li><li>2. Third Party Managing Entity</li><li>3. Independent Non-Profit</li></ol>
Required local stakeholder partnership.	<b>Strengthened with a signed Local Partnership Agreement</b> outlining roles and responsibilities of each partner. Addition of <b>an accessible community inclusion pledge</b> . <b>Submission of business/sustainability plan</b> for operation over 3 years.

# Old vs. New Requirements continued

Old	New
<p>Required management plan laying out district goals and narrative on how they planned to achieve them.</p>	<p><b>Work plan remains, but to be a district they must have specific goals tied to at least three of the six statutory goals, and in alignment with municipal and regional goals,</b> with coinciding metrics. We will provide a template to ensure they address the required components.</p>
<p>Required Annual report.</p>	<p><b>Will be a continued requirement, but districts will now be reporting back on their stated goals with metrics.</b> The annual report will replace the concept of "re-designation" and will collect 2 required data points from all districts and 3 data points from each district tied to their specific goals.</p>

# Designation Application & Review

9

## Review process for existing and future districts

- Updated/realigned LOI **(existing & future)**
- Staff site visit **(existing)**
- Updated/realigned application **(existing & future)**
- Formal team site visit/review **(future)**
- Applications reviewed by Review Committee made up of key partners such as MOTT, MMA, MassDevelopment, MDI, DOT, MAPC, EOHLC, Rural Affairs, etc. They identify the applications that are ready for designation and make recommendations. **(future)**
- Mass Cultural Staff and Council determine which applications to approve. Those who do not move forward will enter queue-style system for future rounds. **(future)**

# Evaluating Designation

10

**In lieu of recertification/re-designation process, districts will be assessed annually to ensure compliance and/or identify the need for additional support.**

The following conditions will be used in evaluation for designation maintenance:

- Lack of standard metrics or progress over a two-year period
- No municipal support
- Grant funding not being used to support the goals and activities of the Cultural District and its collaborative work plan
- No 25% FTE or equivalent
- Failure to submit applications and/or reports by the required deadline

# Mass Cultural Council Direct Funding

11

**FY26 will be the final year of annual funding** for current Cultural Districts.

**New districts (FY27)** will receive **one-time grant**. Start-Up Grant to support the launch of the district. No Match required.

**Current districts** will have the opportunity to apply for a **one-time**, 3-year Accelerator Grant that leverages more municipal funding with increasing matching requirements:

- **Year 1:** 2 to 1 Match
- **Year 2:** 1 to 1 Match
- **Year 3:** 1 to 2 Match (the municipality must invest double what the Mass Cultural Council invests.)

Any year a district is getting their Start-Up or Accelerator Grant they are ineligible for any other direct grant programs.

When not receiving these grants, they can apply to Creative Experiences or Operating Grants for Organizations if they meet program eligibility requirements.

# Program Redesign and Certification Timeline + Roll Out

12

## Timeline – *Current Districts*

November 2025

- New program compliance period
  - Applications and requirements released
  - Info session to introduce new guidelines and answer questions

November 2025 – May 2027

- Staff will certify that districts have reached compliance for new program.
- Rolling compliance submittals begin and continue through May 2027

May 2026 (tentative)

- Accelerator Grant application opens for recertified districts. Approval for these grants would go to the August 2026 Council meeting.



Public Tour, Seaport Cultural District, New Bedford

# Program Redesign & Certification Timeline + Roll Out

13

## Existing Districts: Application Components to Demonstrate Compliance

- 18 months from October 2025 to show compliance.
- Staff to conduct a check-in call/meeting with each District, if needed/requested, to review options which include:
- **State or Municipal Designation :**
  - Two months after redesign launches, and after check-in calls, Districts will be required to submit a Letter of Intent informing Mass Cultural Council which option they will choose.



Springfield Street Historic District, Chicopee, MA

# Program Redesign and Certification Timeline + Roll Out

## Timeline – *New Districts*

July 2026

- Application opens to New Districts
  - Info sessions and office hours made available

July 2026 to March 2027

- LOIs submitted and staff site visits

March 2027

- Application Deadline (new districts)

March 2027 – July 2027

- Application Review by Staff and then Review Committee
- Formal Site Visits

August 2027

- Council approves new districts and their FY27 Start Up Grant Amounts
- These districts do not become eligible for Accelerator grants until FY28

14



Artist Studio, Hyannis Cultural District

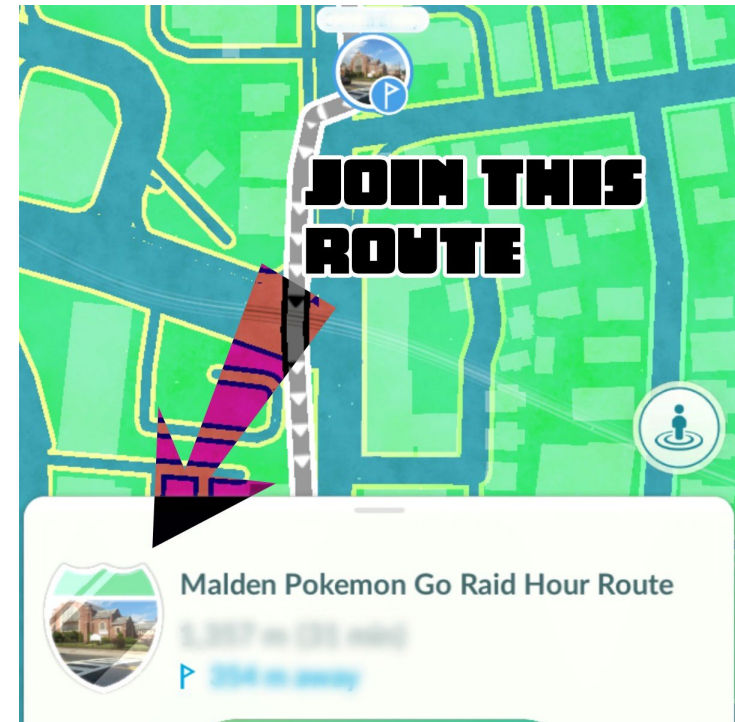
# Municipal Designation

*We want all communities to continue to be successful in infusing arts and culture into their community and economic development efforts, regardless of whether their municipality has the capacity to maintain a formal state designation at this time.*

15

## Municipal Cultural Districts

- Once municipal endorsement/vote is submitted, an entity can be labeled as a **'Municipal Cultural District'**.
- No review, evaluation, or certification is conducted—only verification that the City/Town recognizes the area as a Cultural/Arts District, with a designated a representing entity.
- The designated entity will be recorded in GMS as the **'Municipal Cultural District'**.
- Entities are encouraged to also register with platforms like **Mass Municipal Association (MMA)**, **CreativeGround**, and **Mass Office of Travel & Tourism (MOTT)**.



Malden Gaming District, spearheaded by  
Malden Econ Dev & Community

# Municipal Cultural Districts

16

## Benefits can include:

- Eligibility for Creative Experiences and other Agency grant programs based on their organization's legal status (i.e. municipal, unincorporated, non-profit, etc.);
- Shared Opportunities and Resources to be made available to them;
- Engagement with other districts and affinity groups on external peer platforms, and;
- Their distinction in our GMS system will allow us to include them on invites to pertinent workshops, convenings, network opportunities, and information sessions.
- Potentially mapping of Cultural Districts across the Commonwealth, i.e. inclusion on MOTT's website



# THANK YOU!

## Questions?

[Lisa.Simmons@mass.gov](mailto:Lisa.Simmons@mass.gov)

[Timothea.Pham@mass.gov](mailto:Timothea.Pham@mass.gov)

A huge thank you to  
**Carolyn Cole & Susan Silberberg** for  
their work on the redesign process!

