

## **Draft - Olympia Creative District Petition for Recertification - May 2024**

Certifying Olympia's Creative District in July 2019 served to document the presence of an already-thriving creative economy in downtown Olympia, one deserving of greater city support, with a community hungry for connection. At time of certification, the roughly 30 blocks of Olympia's downtown Creative District included:

- Over 150 Creative Industries
- 38 Food businesses
- 25 Makers and fabricators
- 10 Performance/Event Spaces

These numbers reflect Olympia's long-standing, underlying creative culture. It's who we are. Given that its very nature centers innovation, our creative economy is a dynamic, continually renewing ecosystem that welcomes new voices all the time. Cultivating, supporting, and celebrating this creative impulse in all its forms is likewise perpetually work-in-progress, and the central goal of the Olympia Creative District.

### **Public Engagement and the Creative District**

Olympia's CD Certification was preceded by two important city planning initiatives: The 2017 *Downtown Strategy*, and the 2018 *Arts, Cultures, and Heritage (ArCH) Report*. Both efforts generated extensive community input to develop a vision for a healthy and vibrant downtown economy. The *ArCH Report* focused specifically on Olympia's creative economy, and its recommended actions included seeking CD Certification, and establishing partnership among the city's arts, heritage, planning, and economic development efforts to better support the creative community.

In 2019 the city took the lead in CD certification and also created its ArCH Team of interdisciplinary staff representing the City Manager, Economic Development, Planning, Arts, and Heritage that fall. This team continues to further the work of the Creative District and pursue other actions and initiatives that step up the City's commitment to arts, culture and heritage.

Because Olympia's creative district certification was initiated by the city, the work to build a cohesive community in support of the district yet to be fully undertaken. Moreover, for many among our diverse creative community it has been hard to grasp the what and the why of a creative district designation. Proudly independent and disinclined to solutions from city government, facing concerns about gentrification, increasing costs for food, housing and commercial space, and siloed in many ways by their own independence, it became clear from the start that Olympia's creatives and their allies required broad and deep conversation about their needs and common challenges, in order to build trust and strengthen the sense of community within the district.

In early 2020 we made plans for an ArCH Forum that would gather local creatives together for a series of discussions and learning opportunities oriented to these issues and Creative District development. However, Pandemic conditions forced a dramatic shift in priorities that continued into 2021. The Pandemic's impacts on our downtown were compounded by the social justice movement that followed the murder of George Floyd. As the capitol city and home of the Evergreen State College, activism has a strong tradition in Olympia and the downtown was deeply impacted by protests and the ensuing riots, vandalism, and social division. Efforts to build anything new were supplanted by efforts to stem the

losses and political divisions, support working artists, interact remotely, share virtually, and support outdoor activity.

In 2022 we were able to regroup and begin a nearly year-long Creative District Strategic Planning process involving over 650 individuals through surveys, interviews, and listening sessions that engaged a range of industry sectors. The plan includes five primary goals, and actionable workplans for each: Support, Promotion, Affordable and Accessible space, and Building Community.

In early 2023 the Creative District Strategic Plan was submitted to City Council. Along with Vision, Mission, Values and Goals, it included a recommendation to gradually shift CD leadership from the city to a local arts agency. With that guidance, the city contracted with the Olympia Arts Alliance to begin such a transition. The initial contract with OAA includes a mix of relationship-building, data gathering, programming, and initial efforts to define the character of the district as a foundation for branding.

Branding has been an area of emphasis for ArtsWa, so it is important to address it here. Given the unique and independent spirit of Olympia’s creative community, any effort that put branding at the front end of the Creative District process would have risked being perceived as shallow, and would have been developed under city leadership and without the benefit of a fully-engaged community. We strongly believe that a “with, not for” approach to branding the district will be more fruitful, consistent with our values for inclusiveness, and far more creative. As we continue to work with OAA to build Creative District cohesion and community, describing our district’s character and identity will offer a creative challenge that can unite and inspire. Good things will come.

**Summary of Creative District Activity, with *related arts, culture and heritage activities in italics.***

2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Olympia’s Downtown Strategy identifies Entertainment and Artisan/Tech Districts, a vision for district character, and supporting design policy. These are later combined to form the Creative District.</i></li> </ul>
2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The ArCH Report is completed; over 30 key individuals across arts, culture and heritage sectors discuss how to expand and support, grow participation in, and strengthen the city’s commitment to the arts, culture &amp; heritage in Olympia.</i></li> </ul>
2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Olympia Creative District Certification</b></li> <li>• <i>An interdisciplinary team of city staff, the ArCH Team, established “to work together to provide space, visibility, and funding to help our creative community thrive.”</i></li> </ul>
2020 – 2021	<p>Pandemic response forces a shift away from plans for a forum gathering local creatives. Social Justice upheaval compounds impacts Downtown with frequent protests and associated damage. Creative District activities included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Virtual convenings of industry groups: Olympia’s Theaters, Festival Organizers, Heritage organizations, and local arts agencies meet monthly.</li> <li>• Artists at the Community Table, a planned NEA training opportunity for 33 artists and community members, held in revised virtual format.</li> <li>• Third Thirty Oral History Project explores origins of Olympia’s creative ecosystem.</li> <li>• Transfer of Olympia Armory from Military Dept to City is culmination of years-long effort to craft and share vision for a community arts center.</li> <li>• Examination of city zoning and development regulations begun.</li> <li>• New flexibility introduced in city regulations for outdoor dining and displays.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Artists on Board program commissions local artists to paint on boarded storefronts.</li> <li>• Positive Notes program commissions local musicians to record inspiring and uplifting musical performances, shared virtually.</li> <li>• Video commissioned to photo-document the spontaneous artwork that appeared all over downtown in response to the murder of George Floyd.</li> <li>• Interactive online story map and guide to “The Big W,” exploring the ‘W’ shape of our downtown public waterfront, highlights history, art, and public places and encourages safe, outdoor enjoyment of downtown public spaces.</li> <li>• CD Capital grant supports upgrades to theater lighting at the Washington Center for the Performing Arts.</li> <li>• Contract with ODA includes initial work on convening Creative District stakeholders.</li> <li>• <i>Assistance to local creative businesses in securing federal and state pandemic relief funding.</i></li> <li>• <i>Armory visioning project engages the public in pre-planning discussions to guide future use of the property as a creative campus.</i></li> <li>• <i>City initiates Cultural Events Program with Juneteenth celebration, increasing city focus on equity, inclusion and belonging.</i></li> </ul>
2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creative District highway signage installed.</li> <li>• Creative District Strategic Planning work gathers input from 658 individuals, increases cohesion across industries and artists in downtown, and develops vision, mission and goals for the Creative District. Recommends local arts agency leadership.</li> <li>• LoveOly programming offers summer and winter downtown festivals in the CD.</li> <li>• CD Capital grant supports design of safety and parking improvements for the historic Capital Theater.</li> <li>• <i>Olympia Music History Project documents Olympia music scene with focus on downtown events and venues.</i></li> <li>• <i>Inspire Olympia Cultural Access Campaign; Voter initiative passes with overwhelming support in April 2022.</i></li> </ul>
2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creative District Strategic Plan presented to City Council in February.</li> <li>• Key OAA members attend ArtsWA CD Convening in June.</li> <li>• Contract established with Olympia Artspace Alliance in December to lead core Creative District activities.</li> <li>• LoveOly commissions local artists for series of promotional posters for Downtown.</li> <li>• Lighting, cleanliness and safety improvements, and new mural art.</li> <li>• <i>Armory produces Art Interventions: NEA-funded events hosted by local arts, culture and heritage groups engage the public, ‘test-drive’ the facility, and inform rehabilitation design.</i></li> <li>• <i>City Cultural Events Program hosts, sponsors, or co-hosts 11 cultural events and celebrations, including 4 each year in the Creative District.</i></li> </ul>
2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CD Capital Grant secured to support Artesian Light Market, activating empty city-owned lot in downtown.</li> <li>• City Council amends development regulations to make adaptive re-use of existing buildings less costly, especially for older buildings.</li> <li>• OAA hires local artist as Creative District Lead.</li> </ul>

## Looking Ahead: Goals for the Next Five Years

Building on data and insight gained in 2022-2023 through public engagement and extensive work sessions, the Downtown Olympia Creative District Strategic Plan was finalized in 2023. This plan made progress on establishing the identity and clarifying the purpose of the Creative District and will serve a framework of actionable long- and short-term implementation goals as the Creative District evolves.

The Creative District Strategic Plan outlines five high-level goals that the City of Olympia will prioritize through 2029, alongside our Creative District Partners:

1. **Build Community:** A web of people, organizations, businesses, and grassroots groups engaged in collaborative relationships rooted in mutual trust and respect.
2. **Support:** Provide educational, financial, and physical resources and advocacy to uplift and empower artists and creative businesses.
3. **Promotions:** To amplify the voice of artists while providing marketing tools and support for community visibility.
4. **Space:** Advocacy for artists and creatives who need specific, affordable space to create, practice or conduct business.
5. **Access:** Equitable accessibility for artists and the broad community to engage without barriers.

In addition to the above broad goals, developing Creative District administration and leadership capacity from within and alongside our community will be a key element of success. Although the City of Olympia has been a key partner and leader in driving the initial certification and establishment of our Creative District, we have long known that finding a way to move into a support role and release leadership of the Creative District to our community will be crucial if the Downtown Olympia Creative district is to be sustainable long-term and embraced in a meaningful way by the broader creative community.

The strategic plan explored several potential options for how the Creative District could be managed:

- By an existing art nonprofit
- By forming a new Creative District nonprofit
- By City contract for services
- By City oversight
- As individual initiatives managed by different entities

Ultimately, the option of a community organization taking responsibility for comprehensive coordination and administration of the strategy emerged as the preferred alternative. There is still some uncertainty around which community organization (if any) is most well-positioned and willing to administer the Creative District, especially as there is no existing Local Arts Agency (LAA) serving Olympia or our broader region. However, the Olympia Artspace Alliance (OAA) has emerged as a strong, local nonprofit partner whose mission is strongly aligned with the Creative District goals and priorities.

## 2024-2025 Goals

**Partnership with the Olympia Artspace Alliance.** To support OAA in growing their organizational capacity, move the Creative District Strategic Plan forward, and practice shifting management of the Creative District away from the City and toward the Community, the City of Olympia has contracted with

OAA to advance several strategic goals—with City funding and support—in 2024. These goals connect back to the broader Strategic Plan and include:

- **Ensure Ongoing Arts Programming:** OAA will continue supporting the Creative District through various programs such as Art in Olympia Storefronts, murals, space grants, artist mingles, and meet-up events, focusing on defining, promoting, and branding the Downtown Olympia Creative district.
- **Inventory and Data Collection:** Develop a Downtown Olympia Creative District Directory identifying creative enterprises within the district boundary through direct contact and correspondence, as well as other sources including the City of Olympia, Olympia Downtown Alliance (ODA), and other partners.
- **Continuous Outreach and Community Building:** Compile and share resources for artists and creatives, including support programs, grants, financial opportunities, and educational partnerships. Plan events for networking and outreach, promoting cross-promotion and social media exposure.
- **Building Brand Identity:** Develop a branding process for the Creative District, including creation of a logo, signage, asset usage guidelines, and key messaging, aligning with the Creative District Strategic Plan's goals of community building, artist support, promotions, advocacy for affordable space, and equitable access.

In early 2024, OAA hired local artist, David Hoekje, to manage the first three goals, and they are currently hiring for the Brand Identity project in preparation for a start date of June 1, 2024.

**Artesian Light Market.** The City has earmarked funding and received an ArtsWA grant to support transforming the former “Artesian Commons” in the central corridor of our Creative District into a “Light Market” in support of the Creative District economy. Beginning with critical site improvements, especially lighting, in 2024, our goal is to move toward full activation of this space in 2025 in support of the overarching Creative District Strategic Plan goals of Space and Access.

**Armory.** While the Armory Creative Campus is currently considered just outside or “in the glow” of the Downtown Olympia Creative District, it will likely become a key Creative District asset through future boundary adjustments. This 50,000 sq. ft. facility on the edge of downtown will provide space, programs and activities to support Olympia’s artistic, collaborative, and entrepreneurial spirit. Eight anchor tenants have been selected, and construction to prepare the site for use will commence in 2024.

**Music.** Music is a key element of Olympia’s creative economy, culture, and history, and this is reflected in two of our 2024-2025 Creative District goals.

- **The Indie Music Project**—a project of the Olympia Heritage Commission—is an oral history effort to explore the locations, ideas and influences of Olympia’s independent music scene from the 1980’s to early 2000’s. Phase two of this project, which will develop a digital repository that belongs to and is maintained by the community is underway in 2024.
- **Music City** conversation, strategy development, and policy review. In March of 2024, Music City expert Shain Shapiro joined our community for a Creative District conversation on supporting music in policy and planning efforts. Determining capacity to develop a music-specific strategy, fostering follow-up conversations with our music community, and internal policy review based on the initial conversation will occur through 2024-2025.

2024-2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partnership with Olympia Artspace Alliance (programming, data collection, and Directory, outreach and community building, and branding/identity work)</li> <li>• Artesian “Light Market” site improvements and RFP development for operations</li> <li>• Creative District boundary adjustment</li> <li>• Armory Creative Campus construction</li> <li>• Indie Music History Project Phase 2</li> <li>• Music City strategy exploration</li> </ul>
2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Armory Creative Campus activation</li> <li>• Branding and wayfinding implementation and development</li> <li>• Identify policy goals (e.g. parking relief for loading and unloading at shows) and recommend changes</li> </ul>
2027	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>
2028	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>
2029	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>