



Arts in MetroWest Listening Sessions

Findings Report

July 2025

Introduction

The Community Foundation for MetroWest and the Metropolitan Area Planning Council conducted a series of listening sessions with individuals and organizations in the arts and culture ecosystem of MetroWest. Beginning on Friday May 9, 2025, the partners convened five virtual listening sessions and concluded the series with an in-person session on Thursday June 12, 2025. These sessions explored the contours and texture of arts and culture in the MetroWest region and will inform the strategic development of ARTbuilds MetroWest, an initiative developed by the Community Foundation of MetroWest with funding from the Barr Foundation. This document summarizes key takeaways from the series and provides recommendations for next steps. Summaries of each session are included in Appendix-A.

Series Overview

The five virtual sessions explored specific topics related to the arts and culture ecosystem of MetroWest. The first session explored the **Economic Impact** of arts and culture, using ArtSpace Maynard as a case study to anchor the conversation. Participants discussed the ways that arts and culture organizations and their activities contribute economic value to MetroWest (e.g., jobs, products needed to make art of all kinds) and the way that arts and culture destinations spur economic activity, such as dining out, shopping, staying at hotels drawing people and businesses to the region.

The second session explored **Representation** of MetroWest's diversity in the region's arts and culture ecosystem using the work of Chhandika-Chhandam Institute of Kathak Dance as a starting point. Participants discussed the ways that arts and culture can help ensure that the richness of the region's diversity is more fully recognized and represented in its regional identity and considered what arts and culture organizations, events, and individuals are helping to broaden the cultural identity and strength of MetroWest.

Session three focused on **Access** and accessibility in MetroWest's arts and culture ecosystem building from the leadership of Think Outside the Vox and Open Door Theater's work on arts inclusion. Discussion focused on ways that removing barriers and improving access can expand participation and strengthen the foundation of arts and culture in MetroWest. In addition, the group shared bright spots where individuals and organizations are making meaningful improvements to accessibility and helping the region thrive.

Session four focused on the **Life of an Artist** in MetroWest, grounded in data presented by the Community Foundation for MetroWest. Discussion explored what is needed for artists to live and thrive and how support for artful lives contributes to a thriving region.

Session five revisited the question of the **Economic Value** generated by the arts and culture ecosystem. Inspired by Reyad Shah's experiences growing up in Framingham and working at the MetroWest Chamber of Commerce, participants discussed the value and impact of arts and culture to the MetroWest region, including the "sticky places" that allow people and institutions to sustain connections and what is needed to ensure the impacts of these assets are sustained.

The sixth and final session was held in-person at Gems@TheArts in Framingham and focused on **reviewing the takeaways** from the previous sessions. Participants used the takeaways to imagine a future MetroWest that has leveraged the region's strengths to produce a thriving arts and culture ecosystem.

Listening Session Format

The listening sessions were designed as engaging opportunities for members of the MetroWest arts and culture community to connect with one another, learn together, and share their experiences. Each session began with a pair-share exercise where participants responded to questions related to the session's subject. These connective exercises were followed by presentations about work and data related to the session topic, with additional discussion prompts to elicit participant feedback. MAPA Translations, Inc. provided live interpretation during the sessions in Haitian Creole, Mandarin, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. Across all listening sessions, sixty-two individuals engaged as participants or presenters and reported strong ties to two-thirds of the region's thirty-three communities. With eight participants attending two or more sessions, themes and ideas extended and evolved across the series of discussions to inform the findings shared in this report.

Report Structure

Takeaways from the entire series are organized into the following report sections:

- **Defining Arts and Culture through Bright Spots in MetroWest**, which outlines both a framework for defining arts and culture in the region and illustrates the framework through the bright spots identified by participants
- **Challenges and Opportunities**, which highlights both the barriers to accessing and fully engaging in the arts and culture ecosystem of MetroWest as well as opportunities to overcome and reduce those barriers.
- **Emergent Themes**, which offers key ideas that can spur catalytic investment as well as opportunities for further learning about the themes that the series explored.
- **Next Steps**, which offers recommendations for the Community Foundation for MetroWest to apply these learnings through their ARTbuilds MetroWest Initiative.



Participants during Listening Session Six at Gems@TheArts

Defining Arts and Culture through Bright Spots in MetroWest

This section outlines both a framework for defining arts and culture in the region and illustrates the framework through the bright spots identified by participants.

Defining Arts and Culture in MetroWest

Arts and culture often have distinct contextual elements, so it was important to define what arts and culture means in MetroWest communities. Each session invited participants to share their definitions of arts and culture. Responses ranged from concrete examples of artistic practices to expansive definitions that reflect a variety of experiences, meanings, and ecosystems that arts and culture represent. Expansive definitions included the places where people experience it (e.g., schools, restaurants, institutions); specific creative disciplines (e.g., dance, writing, film/video, visual art); as ideas (e.g., the enhancement of life, healing environments, newcomers); and the people themselves (e.g., all people, multi-national and racialized people, creators and enjoyers of arts and culture).

While the task of defining arts and culture is nuanced, participants in the sessions made clear that this is because arts and culture is multi-faceted and pervades almost every aspect of our lives. Arts and culture are the connective tissue that makes relationships to community, family, and oneself meaningful. Arts and culture offer pathways to personal well-being and professional growth. They are drivers of regional connections and economic vitality.

From these definitions and conversations, the following framework is proposed as a starting point for defining arts and culture in the MetroWest region.

- **Art** is the process and product of imagining, prototyping, and producing outputs that stimulate human senses. Art has an external reality – it is able to be experienced by others. At the

same time, art is both a thing that can be created and a practice that can be cultivated into a profession. There is value to experiencing the process of making art and of experiencing art made by others without necessarily pursuing art as a practice or as a professional pathway.

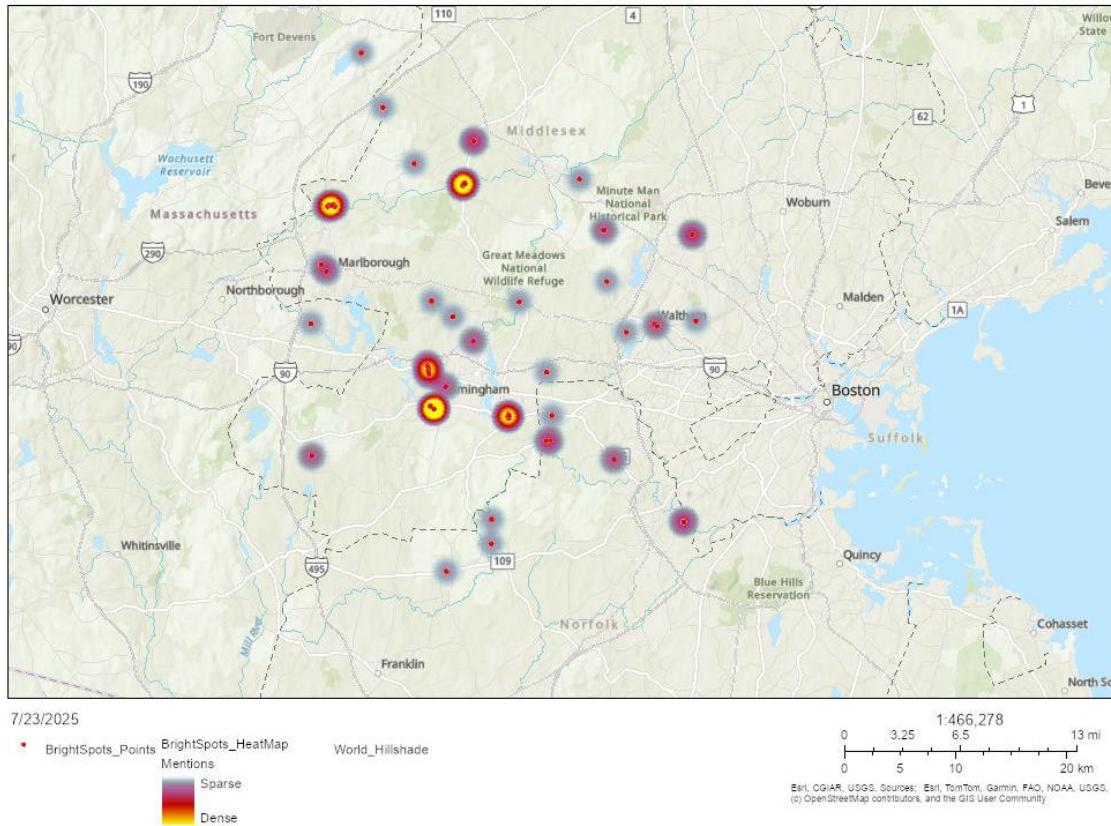
- **Culture** is grounded in connective practices where shared meanings are developed, evolved, interpreted, and shared. It is a bridge between an internal sense of self and an external sense of connection and connectedness to family, land, history, heritage, past, and future.

These definitions align with Dr. Maria Rosario Jackson's concept of "artful lives," which recognizes individuals and organizations that actively embody the full spectrum of art and culture in all parts of their lives. Achieving artful lives requires that communities provide access to the spaces, resources, material culture, and networks that allow any individual to engage in the full spectrum of creative life. Culture is created when art is made communally, and places that enable cultural production are important anchors for healthy communities. When people recognize these places offer access to art and cultural production, these places become known for what is made or experienced there. Becoming known as a destination further embeds arts and culture into the identity of the broader community, as a place, or region, of cultural connection.

Bright Spots in MetroWest Arts & Culture Organization Ecosystem

Characteristics of Bright Spots

Throughout the sessions, participants spoke about places they value and where they connect to their community, creative practices, and cultural lives. This framework refers to these places and experiences as the "bright spots" or hidden gems in MetroWest. They highlight the roles arts and culture play in bridging the individual and collective experiences, understanding of the regional identity, and highlighting the ways that different elements of the ecosystem work in concert to stimulate and strengthen the region.



Map of regional arts and culture bright spots as reported by listening session participants. See Appendix B for complete list

Places of Belonging and Representation

Arts and culture frequently strengthen connection, community, and sense of belonging. However, there is a fundamental tension in MetroWest between what are considered “mainstream” arts and culture activities and the broader experiences of arts and culture within a diversity of cultural communities. Without recognizing this tension, efforts to define and support the arts and culture ecosystem overlook the nuance of community experiences and the need for inclusive spaces that cultivate belonging and broaden representation. Many individuals in MetroWest experience the arts, creativity, and culture as part of belonging to their families and communities, whether those practices are reflected in the broader community or not. When diverse cultural communities are not included in the “mainstream,” the arts and culture ecosystem lacks representation of these communities. Narrow definitions of arts and culture deprive the region of access to the full strength and potential of its residents.

Organizations in MetroWest are offering alternative models of arts and culture programming that build places and spaces of belonging. These bright spots include **Gems@TheArts** (formerly Amazing Things Art Center or atac) and **Africano Waltham**. Both organizations operate with an expansive definition of arts and culture, in what might be called an “art is life” model, where arts and culture include every aspect of life, including language, storytelling, and daily interactions. As

a result, these organizations are creating spaces of belonging where arts, culture, language, individual growth, and community connection are interwoven.

“We the people are the art.’ Framingham Gems@TheArts [is a bright spot] because it’s a safe space for everyone no matter what age or problem there is.”

*“In Uganda, art was an everyday thing, people gathered for this and people were coming to do it. That is what we [**Africano Waltham**] brought to Waltham. Art is a struggle for us and is 90% of life.”*

Another example of an organization bridging arts and culture with representation and belonging in the region is **Chhandika: Chhandam Institute of Kathak Dance**. As one of the premier schools for Kathak dance, Chhandika preserves and celebrates traditional teachings of the northern Indian dance form. In MetroWest, they sustain this important cultural tradition of Northern India and provide an important node of belonging for the region’s growing community with roots in India. These bright spots of belonging and representation in MetroWest expand and enrich the definition of arts and culture in the region.

Spaces with Expanded Access

Given MetroWest’s cultural richness and diversity of experiences, it is critical to examine how the region’s resources, opportunities, and support are culturally responsive and linguistically accessible and adaptable to residents of varying abilities. Conversations about accessibility highlighted the importance of understanding participation in the arts and culture ecosystem as both an individually embodied experience and a communal experience of connection.

Ensuring multilingual access is an important indicator of inclusion and an essential investment for cultural relevance with the diverse communities in MetroWest. MAPA Translations, Inc., the translation and interpretation company that provided services for the listening sessions, is also working to expand language access across the region and is based in Waltham.

Participants highlighted the critical need for language access in the region:

“Language is part of culture in Metro West. People who do not speak English as their first language do not feel comfortable at the arts center. We have a large audience of Portuguese speakers in MetroWest. How do we integrate other languages?”

“Too many artists cannot showcase their work because of language barriers; If we could open up the doors and let the art form in their own ways; we are wasting a lot of talents because the mainstream is limited to English; artists from other cultures had to throw away their art experiences and it’s a loss for the U.S.; artists have fled countries and want to practice art here but it’s so hard; want artists to be able to showcase art in their own ways, with access to interpretation.”

Considering accessibility in the arts also prompts numerous considerations on how to ensure that programming and experiences are inclusive of and led by people with disabilities. Organizations like **Think Outside the Vox** and **Open Door Theater** serve as models for what inclusive places and program accessibility can look like, where people with disabilities are also part of performances and centered in programming efforts.

Participants also identified additional sites that are developing models for access. Bright spot organizations committed to increasing accessibility to arts and culture for those with diverse abilities are not simply offering accommodation by request. These models of accessibility include provision of consistently accessible programs (e.g. assisted listening devices at all performances, ASL interpretation, closed captioning, etc.) and clear communications of offerings in ways that build trust and connection with those whom they serve. These organizations are also considering how to support participants who need accessibility accommodations to participate as part of a family or with personal care assistants (PCAs).

Participants also highlighted the organizations working to expand accessibility in the region:

“The Discovery Museum in Acton does a good job to include patrons of all ages; we’re filming some deaf blind modules for best practices, and we tell the information before hand, so the audience knows when the loud parts will be so that people can adjust.”

“LexArts offers a scholarship for Personal Care Attendants both in classes and studios; they are trying to make studios accessible by offering duplicate equipment at different heights and adjustable for different types of disabilities. They need to expand their space to accommodate the additional equipment.”

“Plugged In Band is an inclusive rock band program. It has been a journey... Working to be inclusive is being open to change to make it better and do everything to make it possible for everyone to participate in a band. We realized that some participants needed support when they were in the audience. You need to be humble and not be judgmental of yourself.”

These accessibility bright spots highlight the need for arts organizations and programming to allow for diverse conditions related individual experience, growth and development, and community connections.

Sites of Learning and Community Connection

Spaces for learning artistic and cultural practices emerged as foundational components for the region’s arts and culture ecosystem. Local arts communities greatly benefit from institutions that provide art instruction, which simultaneously provide opportunities for young and new artists’ exposure to creative practices and a pathway to professional practice for emerging and established artists. Institutions that support teaching artists provide a space for learning and connection in the arts and culture ecosystem.

Bright spots in arts education include both public and private institutions, including Framingham's **public-school arts programs** and Maynard and Marlborough's **public libraries**. Organizations like **Mother Brook Community Arts** in Dedham offer unique educational programs, including **OreMetals Studio**, which offers metalworking and jewelry making classes. Arts classes at breweries and places like **Bellforge Arts** in Medfield offer opportunities for artists to make personal and professional connections. Another example is the **Hopkinton Center for the Arts'** **Ceramics Studio** serves ceramic artists honing their professional practice, while also being a place of exchange where community members come to learn and practice ceramic arts. Each of these bright spots, in addition to their arts and culture offerings, are critical gathering places where ideas and information are exchanged and relationships are formed.

An artist with a studio at **ArtSpace Maynard** shared:

"We need workshops and classes available (in addition to being in schools); partner with other businesses in town for Saturday morning connections for children 2-7; not a teaching time but a sharing time, parents building with their kids; people from outside of Maynard are coming to this event; we need more networking and community openness for artists to feel known and welcome."

Educational programs offered through colleges and museums in MetroWest, like those hosted at the **Danforth Museum** and previously at the **deCordova Sculpture Museum**, also provide critical opportunities for teaching artists in the region. These institutional and museum programs sustain the dissemination of knowledge and connect practitioners with those experienced in various fields. While some programs no longer exist, there are other emerging educational hubs in the region that are working to meet demand.

The role that sites of arts education play in building a culture of belonging in the region is critical to defining arts and culture in the region. Bright spots of belonging, such as **Chhandika and Africano Waltham**, are also places of education. These arts organizations' teaching practices are passing down both art forms and cultural traditions and providing spaces for gathering and connection.

Connections to Nature

Nature is an integral part of MetroWest's arts and culture ecosystem. Places that offer opportunities to experience and explore nature are valuable and connected to community culture. Natural landscapes, parks, trails, gardens, outdoor exhibits, and experiences in nature provide inspiration for creative practices, connections with the natural world, and spaces for community gatherings. Arts and culture enhance participants' experience connecting to nature in MetroWest.

Regional bright spots such as **Nobscot Hill** and **Garden in the Woods** in Framingham demonstrate the value that natural spaces provide in the region's arts and culture ecosystem. Participants frequently highlighted the role that art plays in connecting to nature in describing the region's arts and culture:

*“At the **Discovery Museum in Acton**, we are connected with nature. One request is that we broaden the definition of arts and culture to also include museums, historic houses and educational environments that also fall under arts and culture. What more could be done? More expression of the diversity within arts and culture [could] ... have more people realize that they are engaging in and supporting and economically connecting and benefiting from arts and culture.”*

*“**Garden in the Woods** and the **Mass Horticultural Society** [are hidden gems in the region]. We don’t include agriculture and the natural world as much, but people come from all over the world to see it.”*

Old Frog Pond Farm and Studio in Harvard hosts an annual outdoor sculpture exhibit designed to connect people and nature. Other examples of opportunities to create in tandem with natural beauty include the **Mount Auburn Cemetery** artists' residencies as inspiration in Watertown.

Walking in nature was identified by participants as a meaningful cultural experience. Given the region's wealth of trails, there are tremendous opportunities to strengthen connections among arts, culture, nature, and community.

*“The **trails** that connect downtown Framingham to the region [are an asset here]. We have an opportunity to connect twenty-two miles of trails, and we want to bring to light museums and nature.”*

Bright Spot Communities

In addition to the many people and organizations that are creating and sustaining the arts and culture ecosystem of MetroWest, a few municipalities stand out from the discussions as places where arts and culture activity and value is concentrated and visible. These communities serve as models for what is possible when communities invest in arts and culture.

Maynard – An Emerging Arts and Culture Ecosystem

Maynard was consistently uplifted by participants as a place where the benefits of leveraging and supporting arts and culture feel visible and tangible. **ArtSpace Maynard**, which is an artistic campus of community studio space in downtown Maynard, and **Sanctuary Maynard** serve as cultural anchors that provide spaces of connection, learning, and community activity that make the community feel open and welcoming. The presence of businesses that provide opportunities to experience art, music, culture, and gathering has given the place an emerging and distinctive identity as a hub of culture in the region.

*“The town I live in doesn’t have an art center, and I am curious to know why it has taken so long to have one. Art brings people out and builds connections. An art center, a theater center says something about a community’s commitment to culture, whether they want to draw people to the town. I have heard that people move to Maynard because of the presence of **ArtSpace Maynard** and **Sanctuary Maynard**. I am trying to get [my town] to think about doing something like that.”*

“Sanctuary Maynard draws people to the area; Maynard is the coolest town because it’s small, not many people, but so much is going on in the little downtown area. Music is a way to draw people in. Coffee houses, live music, restaurants.”

“Maynard works together because businesses, local band, artists, everyone all coordinated with each other, and this makes Maynard a destination.”

Natick – A Destination with a Cultural District

Natick demonstrates the potential for using arts and culture to turn a downtown into a destination. Natick’s dual strengths of its **Natick Center Cultural District** and **The Center for the Arts in Natick (TCAN)** have made the downtown area a place where people go to attend events and performances and to experience arts and culture. Art installations, events, and programs ensure that Natick is experienced and recognized as a destination for arts and culture in the region.

*“Music in the area is the center of the region; **TCAN** is the center for music.”*

“Natick had the amazing tunnel of love a few years ago and has had some great opportunities for community participation in some public installations.”

*“The towns that have formed or are forming cultural districts, like the **Natick Center Cultural District**. They offer opportunities for various kinds of engagement, for all residents.”*

Framingham – An Established Ecosystem

The City of Framingham is unique among communities in MetroWest in that it has all the elements that define the arts and culture ecosystem in MetroWest. It is recognized for the excellence of its **public-school arts programs**. Its trails and natural areas like **Nobscott Hill** and **Garden in the Woods** are regional destinations for connecting with nature. It is home to universities and long-standing arts institutions like the **Danforth Museum**. It is also home to emerging beacons of belonging like **Gems@TheArts**. Finally, it has individuals and organizations who recognize the value in strengthening the fabric of the ecosystem by weaving new connections among its various elements. The programming at the **Framingham History Center** blends arts, culture and belonging with its history and humanities programming. The **MetroWest Food Collaborative** is an example of innovation in funding with its food access micro grant program. **Downtown Framingham, Inc.** and the **MetroWest Chamber of Commerce** understand the interconnections of arts and culture, community and thriving local businesses.

*“People come to the Framingham for business, visiting family; to hike **Nobscott Hill**, and then want to stay in the area; maybe to visit the **Danforth Museum** or **The Framingham History Center**, which is a great asset – celebrating sense of time and place; the cluster experience.”*

*“**Framingham History Center’s Hikes through History** program was a partnership with **Downtown Framingham, Inc.** We stopped at local businesses, combined audiences so*

people got a sense of comfort. It was a way to boost local businesses and learn history and make those history-interested folks more comfortable coming downtown.”

Strengthening these emerging connections can help the region to leverage and benefit from the wealth of resources concentrated within Framingham.

Challenges and Opportunities

This section highlights both the barriers to accessing and fully engaging in the arts and culture ecosystem of MetroWest as well as opportunities to overcome and reduce those barriers.

Challenges

Supporting the future of MetroWest's art and culture ecosystem requires a thorough examination of existing challenges in the region. Participants identified that many challenges are structural, meaning they include larger issues of affordability of cultural resources, access to dependable transportation, and limited availability of physical space for creating, presenting, and engaging with arts and culture. They also noted other challenges that are societal, like the barriers to identifying as an artist, the limitations of mainstream definitions of art and culture, and access to networks. While these challenges are not unique to MetroWest, they indicate what investments need to be made for a more robust, equitable cultural future for the region.

Recognition and Visibility

A core challenge in MetroWest is recognizing the breadth of local artists and cultural workers. Not everyone who has a creative or artistic practice or body of work is acknowledged as an artist or part of the broader arts community. The lack of acknowledgment limits who is included and counted as a participant in the arts and culture community. This dynamic affects whether organizations, artists, and culture-makers have access to resources, preservation, protection, and consideration in decisions made by and for the field.

Exclusive Definitions of Who is an Artist

Explaining what it means to be an artist and self-identifying as an artist was noted as a challenge. As a result, many people with artistic or creative practices, formally or informally, may not consider themselves a part of the larger arts and culture community. For some, identifying as an artist might require making a living as an artist. Still, MetroWest has many contributors to the region's cultural wellbeing, even if their creative practice is not their primary source of income. Cultural participants may sometimes not earn any income for their artistic or creative practice, but it still brings value to their community and has positive outcomes. For many people, the arts are a part of their cultural identity, and permeate every aspect of their lives, so distinguishing between art and culture is impossible. Presently, the term "artist" can unintentionally exclude the cultural richness found in MetroWest, when in reality, a wide range of creative practices, disciplines, and experiences remain under documented.

Recognition of Value and Connecting with Peers

Related to the experience of lack of recognition, feeling heard in the MetroWest region is a challenge. For some, reaching audiences and potential participants for existing programming and sharing work is challenging. Others desire more opportunities to connect with peers and learn from one another. In MetroWest, various organizations struggle to articulate the value of their work to funders and decision makers. The ones that participated in the listening sessions

appreciated the opportunity to hear how peers talk about their work, as well as opportunities to work differently. It was the first invitation for some participants to share their perspectives and challenges. There are gaps in access to existing resources in the region, and the listening sessions highlighted the importance of sharing perspectives and resources, including advice and best practices for accessibility practices.

Regional recognition and visibility are core challenges in MetroWest, limited by the barriers to identifying as an artist and organizations not feeling heard as part of the larger arts ecosystem. Artists and organizations not considered within the narrow definition of mainstream and treated as "other" find it difficult to be recognized and valued within the mainstream arts and culture ecosystem, and find it difficult to determine who is listening to them. Many organizations actively create spaces that understand arts, culture, language, individual growth, and community connection as interwoven. However, these organizations find it hard to be recognized as part of the broader arts ecosystem and profession. Chhandika, for example, offers rigorous professional training in the dance style; however, it is not considered part of mainstream professional dance training.

Providing access to cultural expression and viable career pathways is challenging for regional arts and culture participants. Other entities are building new spaces and practices, while working to define their place in the ecosystem and learn from their peers. There is no consistent effort to convene and connect diverse arts organizations to share their experiences across the region. As a result, there are few pathways to share experiences and knowledge, or amplify innovative efforts throughout the region.

Space and Programmatic Stability

Spaces supporting arts and cultural activities are critical to the regional ecosystem in MetroWest. When there are disruptions to spaces or programs, there are consequences for the entire arts and culture region. In the *Life of an Artist* session, a discussion emerged about discontinuing the arts education program at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, and how that programmatic loss affects the arts ecosystem in MetroWest. When the program ended, the arts educators lost critical space and programmatic support for their work. Throughout the listening sessions, similar stories about the role that arts spaces and organizations play made it clear that each time an asset is lost, a ripple effect slows opportunity across the region as programs must find new homes and take time to be rebuilt.

Lack of space, particularly space for gathering to learn, practice, and engage in arts and culture activities, is a constant challenge. Spaces for arts and culture activities are too expensive for many individuals and organizations to sustain. Instability in programmatic funding exacerbates the challenge of securing and maintaining space for arts and culture programs. Further, there is a dire need for space and programs that provide access for all people of all abilities and offer linguistic accessibility. These are compounding and acute challenges in the region and beyond.

Affordability, Distance, and Time

The geography of MetroWest exacerbates the effects of limited arts and culture space. Participants identified the cost of accessing arts and culture (e.g. space, materials, admission, etc.), the geographic distance separating residents and experiences, and the time required to actively participate in the arts and culture ecosystem as pervasive challenges. For many, other commitments and obligations for work and family make it difficult to participate in the arts. Other barriers include the direct cost of participating in arts and culture, the lack of transportation access, and the time required to participate in activities. These challenges can prevent participants from engaging in arts and cultural activities in MetroWest.

Opportunities

While participants identified a number of challenges, these listening sessions illuminated the opportunities to fill in the gaps of the cultural ecosystem in MetroWest.

Engagement

The listening sessions primarily engaged the leaders of partner organizations that successfully create spaces of belonging for immigrant communities and spaces that serve disability communities, rather than with the communities themselves. However, as the Community Foundation for MetroWest initiates efforts to launch ARTbuilds MetroWest, future engagement will require connecting and collaborating with these trusted partners to engage with their audiences in safe and familiar spaces. Future efforts to refine the definition of arts and culture and opportunities for investment can utilize these unique spaces where people feel safe, comfortable, and protected. Encouraging participation from voices of youth, immigrants, diverse cultural communities, and those of all abilities is critical for better serving MetroWest's arts and cultural ecosystem. In this moment, when some residents face real risks in leaving their homes to engage in arts and culture, supporting trusted partners to lead engagement is critical and can reduce participants' risk and vulnerability.

Facilitation

Facilitation of future engagement should adapt to participants' preferences, needs, and comfort levels. In the presentation from Out of the Vox and reflections from interpreters at MAPA Translations Inc., regarding participants with accessibility or interpretation needs, the provision of consistent and reliable access to information and accommodations is critical. Participants can enter into conversations with greater trust and ease when conversations are hosted in trusted, accessible spaces that they know and are facilitated in a person's native language. Ensuring accommodations and learning how to improve accessibility will allow a more nuanced understanding of the opportunities to expand these communities' participation in the MetroWest arts and culture ecosystem.

Youth Engagement

Working with trusted youth spaces will also help engage young people in further developing the ARTbuilds MetroWest program. Youth need space to define and redefine what their communities

mean to them. As ARTbuilds MetroWest continues, training young people to advocate for arts and culture in their lives and communities will also be important. Supporting youth art and culture spaces also creates safe spaces for young people to influence and shape regional arts and culture. In the sixth listening session, the Director of Gems@TheArts created a protected space for youth to feel comfortable participating. The facilitation of her table group made them feel safe and heard, which offered the project team critical perspectives not represented in previous listening sessions without youth participation. Partnering with organizations like Gems@TheArts was important for increasing the reach and impact of the series' engagement.

Spaces for arts and culture

Artists and culture-makers need more space in MetroWest, including housing, studios, rehearsal spaces, performance venues, and exhibition spaces. To meet this need for space, the region must support the creative reuse of existing buildings and invest in new construction and development. Recent examples include Bellforge Arts and the Armory on the Assabet, which provide opportunities to experiment with new approaches to space development that prioritize a more connected ecosystem and champion inclusive access to arts and culture. Both organizations actively participated in the sessions and expressed interest in continued learning and collaboration. Another consideration for the Community Foundation for MetroWest is its role in connecting artists and cultural organizations looking for spaces and seeding potential partnerships.

Pathways to accessibility

Forging pathways to improve accessibility in MetroWest's arts and culture community is a critical opportunity for all organizations. One lesson from the listening sessions is that accessibility is built incrementally, intentionally, and in partnership with communities. Building a regional culture of accessibility is imperative to the long-term success of the arts and culture sector and community wellbeing. Community Foundation for MetroWest can model leadership that prioritizes efforts that leverage the existing strengths and leaders in the region. Specific examples highlighted in the listening sessions include amplifying the Massachusetts Cultural Council's Universal Participation Initiative as a regional resource. Participants also expressed interest in training and resources to help reinforce the considerations, habits, and procedural steps needed to develop experientially and physically accessible arts and culture spaces.

Bright spot organizations like Think Outside the Vox, Open Door Theater, and Open Door Arts offer knowledge and resources that can support the larger region's efforts. Supporting the larger arts and culture ecosystem to start small and build practices over time will help develop a practice of accessibility that can become a culture of accessibility. These steps can lay a foundation for a future arts and culture ecosystem where access considerations are ubiquitous in the region's design, development, and implementation of cultural space and programming.

Support for teaching artists

During the series, participants discussed the role of teaching artists housed within arts institutions such as the deCordova Museum and Ore Metals Studio in the Mother Brook Community Art Center. Teaching artists positions are critical to the regional arts ecosystem, as they provide

pathways from experiencing arts and culture to cultivating artistic practice to producing art and culture as a vocation. Teaching artists act as ambassadors to an artful life by demonstrating the process and the possibility of engaging in an artistic practice as a fun experience, an emerging interest, a regular hobby, or even a profession. By facilitating the experience of art and its intersection with culture, teaching artists connect residents with the arts and culture abundant in their communities and encourage residents to identify as artists.

Emergent Themes

These themes that emerged through the listening sessions offer ideas that can spur catalytic investment as well as opportunities for further learning about the themes that the series explored.

Art is Life

Art is an integral part of being alive. A person's cultural background and lived experiences inform their approach to art, creative practices, and community. Listening session participants described how they experience arts and culture, what is most engaging to them, and why it is important.

“Shared stories, music and cultural celebration help me feel most engaged whether it’s with a familiar community or one that’s new to me.”

At the same time, this framework does not align with current funding approaches or the structures that define arts and culture in MetroWest communities.

“My grandmother was a storyteller, a dancer, could act out a play from a story. I have never gone to school for these things, but I pass them on to all of my students and see each one thriving. Here [in the U.S] you can only be a dancer or a drummer [not everything together] - but that is the art I grew up with in my country. When I write a grant, I am told - that art is not art.”

Art is Life is an aspirational framework based on the conversations in the series and the visions participants articulated for the future of MetroWest. A young person offered the perspective that “Art is the people” and this framework helps reorient the ecosystem to the people it serves. The framework blurs the distinction between the definitions of art and culture and can reorient funding models to invest in the pillars of the concept:

- Target investment into organizations that embody the Art is Life model.
- Connect leaders of those organizations with each other to build community.
- Support leaders of the organizations to share the story of their work to help inform and expand practices in the larger ecosystem.
- Expand the definition of arts education beyond professionalization to elevate its value to culture, community, and connection.

An Art is Life framework also requires an appreciation of and strategies to address the barriers to forms of participation that are societal and not only found within the sector. A youth participant in Framingham provided a vision for the future that included changes to

“invest in a quicker and easier way for the undocumented to become documented. I’d also invest in the lives that are unhomed and unwell.”

In thinking about what this might mean for arts investment, another participant suggested a path forward:

“invest in organizations that hold arts as a foundation of healing. Lift their voice and experience to lead the path forward.”

Culture of Access

There is a need to build a culture of access, which means that access considerations are ubiquitous in the region’s arts and culture ecosystem. This will require organizations to initiate consistent and reliable accommodations and further expand those accommodations through communication and partnership with individuals who have access needs. Arts and culture organizations and organizers can increase transparency about accessibility capabilities by communicating what they’re able to offer and what resources are available. This allows people to self-determine whether programs are equipped to effectively meet their specific needs. Building a culture of access also requires recognizing that access is for practitioners as well as audiences. Expanding the consideration of who needs access and accommodation also expands the possibilities for the types of spaces that are needed and types of experiences that can find a home in MetroWest.

Within the framework of a culture of access, engagement with communities seeking better access is essential. Incremental experimentation and testing in partnership with disability communities, language access communities, and others will be critical to building a sustainable and responsive culture of access that grows and evolves over time.

Arts Education as a Hub of Possibility

Arts education serves as a pathway to artistic practice and community cohesion. Arts education is also connected to place. Institutions, businesses, and organizations that support learning artistic and cultural practice enable arts and culture opportunities to happen, create teaching opportunities for practicing artists, and offer pathways for youth development. They are places of possibility – where novices begin to form an understanding of what arts and culture are, how they are practiced, and where more experienced practitioners refine their understanding of their own practice by sharing it with others. These sites also provide important income streams for local artists, while other cultural organizations are asked to provide educational programming in schools without compensation.

Recognize the Value of Arts and Culture

While arts and culture are part of everyday life, there are many community members who do not recognize the role arts and culture play in their lives and communities. This lack of recognition and understanding leads to undervaluing arts and culture, and the people who share it. It is important to champion the value that arts and culture brings to MetroWest, including economic impact, social and cultural connection, and quality of life.

Establishing the Foundation

The consistent and active engagement among a cohort of listening session participants speaks to the appetite for gathering and meaning making among members of the MetroWest arts and culture ecosystem. As the series progressed, participants began to link ideas from earlier sessions into new themes of conversation. These participants helped illuminate new ways to understand the current value and potential impact of investment in arts and culture in MetroWest.

Storytelling to build a sense of place in MetroWest and creating more opportunities for continued gathering and connection across the ecosystem is critical to establishing a foundation for this work moving forward. Sharing and retelling the story of what arts and culture is and imagining what arts and culture can become will help reinforce and support MetroWest as a place of culture and meaning.

Supporting cohort models and opportunities for peer support are needed to continue the momentum generated by the listening sessions of understanding what is needed and what is possible. One way to structure this continuation is to engage with existing models like the resident artists at Art Space Maynard, where people consistently gather to talk about their experiences. Building more opportunities for leaders of bright-spot organizations to share their work with peers to find opportunities for collaboration and apply successful strategies is another.

Investing in affordable spaces and accessibility improvements will support the growth of an inclusive, thriving arts and culture ecosystem. Space for work, affordable space, accessible space, were highlighted repeatedly as critical to ensuring a sustainable, thriving ecosystem that can drive prosperity and well-being in the region.

With this foundation in place, arts and culture can provide a foundation for building MetroWest, which will make the region better able to invest in building arts and culture.

Next Steps

These listening sessions were an enlightening and inspiring initial step in understanding MetroWest's arts and culture ecosystem. In bringing these findings into consideration, the implementation of ARTbuilds MetroWest, there are three recommended actions.

1. **Leverage peer-learning cohorts or other convening structures** to engage more directly with the communities in MetroWest most impacted by the challenges we identified related to language access, belonging, disability access and space needs. The goal is to establish more direct feedback mechanisms as new approaches are tested so that they can be adapted based on the needs and experiences of the communities they are meant to serve.
2. **Invest in organizations using an *Art is Life* programming model**, and work with those organizations to amplify this framework to inform the work and perspective of organizations using more traditional programming models.
3. **Engage in further research** to document two areas of the MetroWest ecosystem:
 - a. Regional arts and culture spaces and space needs.

- b. Arts and culture education ecosystem to better understand the investments needed to strengthen it.

Conclusion

MetroWest is a region with a strong and active ecosystem of arts and culture organizations and activities. These organizations provide the region with increased connection, identity, social, and economic activity. At the same time, artists and culture makers in the MetroWest ecosystem do not receive or have regional recognition, coordination, and support that would unlock the full potential that exists in the region. Art and culture are building MetroWest. The communities with a concentration of connected artists, culturemakers, organizations, and institutions are communities with increased connection, identity, social, and economic activity. These listening sessions revealed some arts organizations promoting the arts as a part of everyday life. They offer models for expanding access to and integrating the arts in MetroWest. As such, the ARTbuild MetroWest offers a true opportunity to stimulate a more expansive ecosystem of arts and culture and amplify the impact of arts and culture on the region and in people's lives.

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Community Foundation for MetroWest

- Caroline Murphy, Vice President of Advancement and Philanthropic Services
- Alyssa Berkson, Program Manager
- Julie Williams, Community Volunteer

Guest Speakers

- Suchitra Mumford, *ArtSpace Maynard*
- Meenakshi Verma-Agrawal, *Chhandika Institute of Kathak Dance*
- Gretchen Hayden, *Chhandika Institute of Kathak Dance*
- Shefali Jain, *Chhandika Institute of Kathak Dance*
- Sam Gould, *Think Outside the Vox & Open Door Theater*
- Reyad Shah, *MetroWest Chamber of Commerce*
- Margie Rosario, *Gems@TheArts*, also in-person session host

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MAPC Project Team

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Appendix A: Listening Session Summaries

Friday May 9, 2025: Economic Impact

Presenter: Suchi Mumford of ArtSpace Maynard.

Suchi walked the group through her development as an arts entrepreneur, the evolution of ArtSpace Maynard, and the impact that this organization had on Maynard's economic and cultural vitality. From her first venture, Indigo Fire to Art Space Maynard, Suchi demonstrated the power of using art practice to build community, culture, and by investing in those two, economic impact. Maynard and ArtSpace Maynard were frequently referenced as regional bright spots, having revitalized the economic activity and identity of downtown and made Maynard a destination for visitors and potential residents.

During this first listening session, the three most prominent themes followed a pattern of strengths and weaknesses, these being the **benefits of arts organizations** and the **potential for growth in visibility/communication and audience/participant outreach**. Regarding positives in the MetroWest creative economy, many respondents mentioned arts organizations and events that anchor the arts and draw visitors to the region. However, many cited visibility barriers and the siloed audience of arts programming as challenges to overcome. This included calls for improved language accessibility, digital resources, diversity of engagement, and recognition of arts' value in order to secure the public attention necessary to improve creative economic output.

- Visibility/communication create barriers to creative economic growth – language barriers, social media, reach new demographics, businesses don't recognize the value of the arts
- Arts organizations and events are big economic drivers
- Art installations slow people down; encourage visitors and residents to linger
- Themes of visibility/communication and expanding to new audiences/participants are the most mentioned opportunities and barriers

Thursday May 15, 2025: Representation

Presenter: Meenakshi Verma-Agrawal and Gretchen Hayden of Chhandika: Chhandam Institute of Kathak Dance.

In discussing the development and current work of Chhandika, Meenakshi prompted interesting questions around the concept of “mainstream” and what it would mean for art and cultural practice, like Kathak, to be the mainstream dance not just “ethnic” or some othered practice. What happens when the onus is on these communities, artists, organizations, to push themselves to the communities that they are not part of.

In Session 2, needs and opportunities dominated the conversation about representation in the arts. Respondents focused on the potential value of designated resources, including **funding and curriculum development**, for improving diversity in arts organizations and education. There was consensus about the **need/demand for better representation** but collective disappointment at the **lack of resources to meet that demand**. Additionally, participants noted the barriers created by **ineffective communication regarding arts representation** as well as the lack of diversity on arts leadership boards. The positive comments surrounded specific diversity-oriented endeavors, such as African cultural programming at Africano Waltham and the use of videography to document the stories of immigrant artists.

- Need for funding diverse arts experiences, notably in education

- Need for diversity on leadership boards
- Communication barriers
- Continued need for art programming/spaces, wanting to preserve what exists

Tuesday May 21, 2025: Accessibility

Presenter: Sam Gould of Think Outside the Vox and Open Door Theater.

Sam shared the work of Think Outside the Vox and Open Door Theater in building and expanding access accommodations for both audience members, artists, and staff. Sam offered important questions for the group to consider:

- Are you consulting disabled stakeholders?
- Are you building your community in trust? What other things could make your space more accessible to audiences (e.g., public transportation, language and anti-racism statements, etc.)?

During Session 3, many comments focused on the barriers and accessibility solutions that participants had personally experienced, and emphasis was placed on the value of continuous improvement and community feedback when trying to improve accommodations in arts spaces. Major themes included **the need for accessible physical spaces and designated accessibility resources** (staff, training, equipment, etc.), as well as **the opportunity to expand the reach of arts programming** through investment in **accommodations for both spectators and participants**. Many participants mentioned specific barriers, including physical disabilities, blindness, deafness, autism/sensory issues, language differences, and the need for Personal Care Attendants, stating that these barriers could be faced both in-person and digitally using accessible facilities and online resources like screen readers and “know before you go” pages.

- Need for accessible physical spaces and funding/resources
- Opportunities to expand audience and participation by improving accessibility; create opportunities for all to participate, perform, etc., not just spectate
- Importance of trial-and-error, community feedback
- Mention of specific disabilities/accommodations, including for personal care attendants, deafness, blindness, sensory issues, hidden disabilities
- Accessible digital resources
- Language barriers

Monday June 2, 2025: Life of an Artist

Presenter: Alyssa Berkson of Community Foundation for MetroWest

Alyssa presented the data that the foundation currently has about the state of arts and culture in MetroWest. The presentation served as an opportunity to garner participants' perspective – whether it reinforced, contradicted, or added to the quantitative understanding of life of artists in the region.

The discussion of artists' experiences in MetroWest during Session 4 saw more mentions of needs than any other session: **participants discussed the “dire need” for more space, including studio spaces, as well as the need for more funding and networking opportunities**. These resources, many said, would create more opportunities to spread the arts to a variety of audiences throughout MetroWest, including through education programs, which many spotlighted as

valuable opportunities for artists and the community at large. Additional resources could also help to improve the visibility of smaller arts organizations and independent artists lacking the influence of more well-known art centers.

- Need for physical space (performing space, studio space, etc.)
- Cost barriers for participation in the arts, should be more than a privilege for the wealthy; often requires grants/funding
- Importance of arts organizations for visibility; smaller orgs and artists lacking exposure
- Education as a bright spot
- Lack of recognition for interdisciplinary/unconventional art forms
- Need for more community/networking connections among artists

Tuesday June 10, 2025: Value and Impact of the Arts

Presenter: Reyad Shah of the MetroWest Chamber of Commerce

In the last virtual session, Reyad highlighted the ways that he has seen the value of arts and culture in the life and vitality of the communities he's worked in. He offered an expansive definition of arts and culture to include restaurants, murals, dance nights, parks and talked how that expansive framework allowed him to notice opportunities to support the culturemakers and artists in his community. By connecting young people to arts organizations, spaces to display art and perform, civic engagement opportunities, Reyad saw the growth of community ownership and identity develop in downtown Framingham.

Session 5 was characterized by many positive comments, more than any other session by far. Participants lauded the **community, performing arts, and events central to arts and culture in MetroWest**. Many also mentioned the value of food, museums, cultural programming, classes and workshops, music, and public art installations in their celebration of the cultural opportunities in the region. Above all, however, respondents noted the **sense of community and the strong connections they have that connect them with arts in the area**. It is through these connections and community bulletins (physical and digital), many said, that they find new opportunities to participate in arts and culture.

- Most positive comments by far (34)
- Participants lauded the community, performing arts, and events in MetroWest
- Food, museums, cultural events, classes and workshops, music, public art installations
- Communication through community bulletin postings and social media

Thursday June 12, 2025:

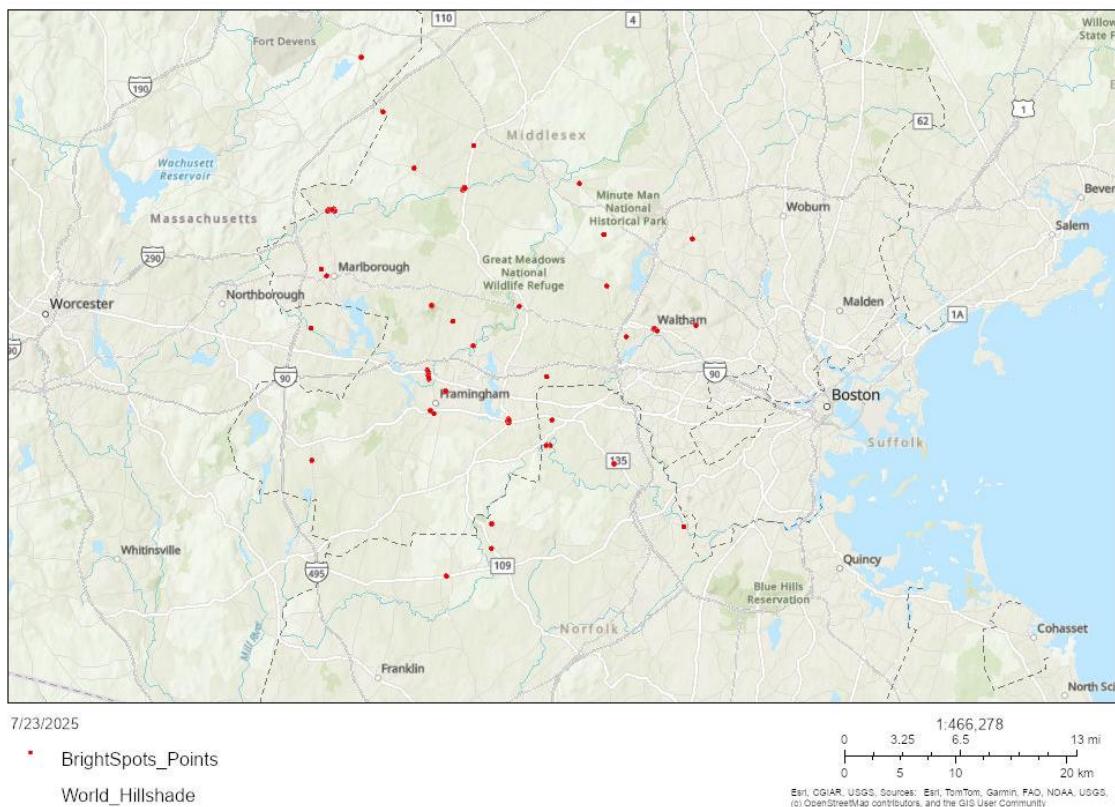
The final listening session took place in person at Gems@TheArts in downtown Framingham. This engagement was designed to share back initial findings from the previous listening sessions, create opportunities for participants to amend and add their thoughts, and to have folks – many of whom had participated in previous sessions – connect with each other. Through a series of activities and facilitated discussions, participants got to reflect on the overall questions posed by these listening sessions and ruminate on their aspirations for the future of arts and culture in MetroWest.

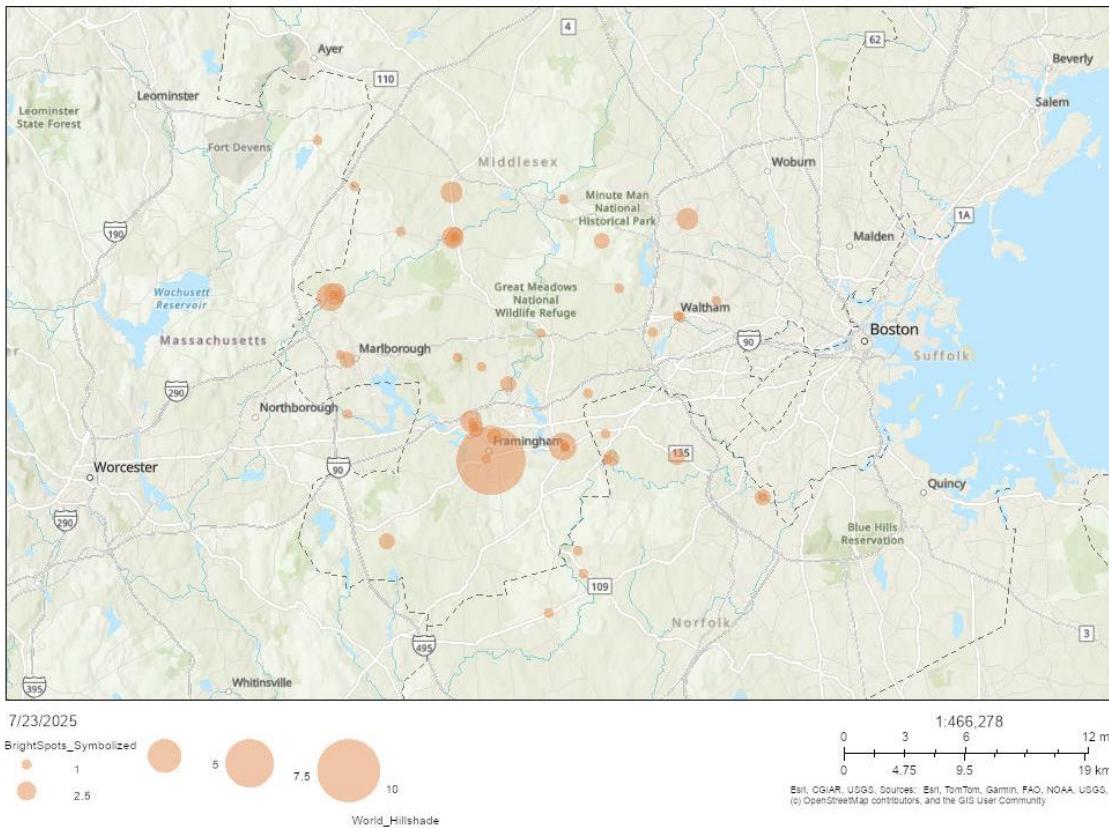
During the in-person final listening session, respondents approached arts & culture topics broadly, starting with a definition of the term itself: the consensus was that arts & culture is that which enriches life through the creation of beauty and is not limited to any one people group. The bright

spots listed in MetroWest primarily fall into the categories of **arts organizations, libraries, and education programs**, whereas the challenges most frequently noted were **the unaffordability of arts programs, the lack of priority for arts initiatives, and the current fear-based political climate**. However, many community members offered suggestions for potential arts & culture investments, including **long-term project funding, securing support from local elected officials, communication and networking opportunities, dedicated studio spaces, new art museums and institutes, and scholarships**. The community vision for MetroWest in 25 years is a region marked by community centers and other free spaces, opportunities to explore different art mediums, cultural centers, a stronger community, and uplifting learning and cultural opportunities.

- Arts and culture enriches life through the creation of beauty and is not limited to any one people group
- Bright spots: arts organizations, libraries, and education programs
- Challenges: lack of priority, unaffordability, current political climate of fear
- Investments: Long-term funding, elected leadership, communication/networking, dedicated studio spaces, new art museums/institutes, scholarships
- MetroWest in 25 years: community center (and other free spaces), opportunities to explore different art mediums, more recognition and visibility for the arts, public art, cultural centers, stronger community, uplifting learning and cultural opportunities.

Appendix B: Arts and Culture Bright Spots





Map of regional bright spots. See the table below for the location of bright spots and the number of times they were mentioned during the six listening sessions.

Organization Name	Mentions	City	State
Gems@TheArts	11	Framingham	Massachusetts
Armory on the Assabet	4	Hudson	Massachusetts
The Center for Arts in Natick	4	Natick	Massachusetts
Lexington Arts & Crafts Society	3	Lexington	Massachusetts
Symphony Pro Musica	3	Hudson	Massachusetts
Discovery Children's Museum	3	Acton	Massachusetts
ArtSpace Maynard	3	Maynard	Massachusetts
Danforth Art Museum	3	Framingham	Massachusetts
deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum	2	Lincoln	Massachusetts
Mother Brook Arts & Community Center	2	Dedham	Massachusetts
Framingham Public Schools	2	Framingham	Massachusetts
Marlborough Public Library	2	Marlborough	Massachusetts
Maynard Public Library	2	Maynard	Massachusetts
Performing Arts Center of MetroWest	2	Framingham	Massachusetts
Rock Voices	2	Framingham	Massachusetts
Plugged In Band Program	2	Needham	Massachusetts

Sanctuary Cultural Arts Center	2	Maynard	Massachusetts
Massachusetts Horticultural Society	2	Wellesley	Massachusetts
Hopkinton Center for the Arts	2	Hopkinton	Massachusetts
Belforge Arts Center	1	Medfield	Massachusetts
Africano Waltham	1	Waltham	Massachusetts
Concord Center for Visual Art	1	Concord	Massachusetts
Framingham History Center	1	Framingham	Massachusetts
Watch City Steampunk Festival	1	Waltham	Massachusetts
Boys & Girls Club	1	Marlborough	Massachusetts
Elm Bank Reservation	1	Wellesley	Massachusetts
The Rivers School Conservatory	1	Weston	Massachusetts
ArtsWayland	1	Wayland	Massachusetts
Centre Music House	1	Framingham	Massachusetts
Brazilian-American Center	1	Framingham	Massachusetts
Beals Preserve	1	Southborough	Massachusetts
New City Microcreamery	1	Hudson	Massachusetts
Lalo's Mexican	1	Hudson	Massachusetts
First Parish Church UU of Stow & Acton	1	Stow	Massachusetts
Fugitive Productions	1	Maynard	Massachusetts
Fivesparks	1	Harvard	Massachusetts
Old Frog Pond Farm & Studio	1	Harvard	Massachusetts
Amory's Tomb Brewing Co.	1	Maynard	Massachusetts
7th Wave Brewing	1	Medfield	Massachusetts
Mighty Squirrel Brewing Co.	1	Waltham	Massachusetts
Tunnel of Love	1	Natick	Massachusetts
Natick Earth Day	1	Natick	Massachusetts
Juneteenth in Natick	1	Natick	Massachusetts
Natick Holi Festival	1	Natick	Massachusetts
Niagara Coffee Haus	1	Millis	Massachusetts
Acme Theater	1	Weston	Massachusetts
Maynard Fine Arts Theatre	1	Maynard	Massachusetts
MetroWest Food Collaborative	1	Hudson	Massachusetts
Ore Metals Studio	1	Dedham	Massachusetts
Garden in the Woods	1	Framingham	Massachusetts
Nobscot Hill	1	Framingham	Massachusetts
Rose Art Museum	1	Waltham	Massachusetts
Davis Museum at Wellesley College	1	Wellesley	Massachusetts
MetroWest Nonprofit Network	1	Framingham	Massachusetts
Hudson Cultural Alliance	0	Hudson	Massachusetts
Massachusetts Cultural Council	3	Boston	Massachusetts
Open Door Arts	3	Boston	Massachusetts

HOBY	3	
Groton Hill Music Center	2	Groton Massachusetts
Cold Spring Park	1	Newton Massachusetts
New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill	1	Boylston Massachusetts
Massachusetts College of Art and Design	1	Boston Massachusetts
Keep Natick Beautiful	1	Natick Massachusetts
Keep Framingham Beautiful	1	Framingham Massachusetts
The Big E	1	West Springfield Massachusetts
Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum	1	Boston Massachusetts
Phantom Gourmet	1	Massachusetts
Merrimack Repertory Theatre	1	Lowell Massachusetts
PorchFest Somerville	1	Somerville Massachusetts
Boston Symphony Orchestra	1	Boston Massachusetts
Museum of Science	1	Boston Massachusetts
EcoTarium	1	Worcester Massachusetts
Calliope Productions	1	Boylston Massachusetts
The Hanover Theatre and Conservatory for the Performing Arts	1	Worcester Massachusetts
MetroFest	1	Framingham Massachusetts
ArtsBoston	1	Boston Massachusetts
Kennedy Center	1	Washington DC
Mosaic Lowell	1	Lowell Massachusetts
Mount Auburn Cemetery	1	Cambridge Massachusetts
19 Carter	1	Berlin Massachusetts