

Framingham Arts & Culture Vision Plan

Community Landscape

March 2026

“We the people are the art.”

Framingham Youth, *Community Foundation for MetroWest Listening Session Report 2025*

Framingham has long been an important destination for arts and culture in the Metro West region as well as a place where civic activity intermingles with artistic expression. The definition of arts and culture in Framingham goes beyond traditional artistic production and cultural celebration and reaches deeply into everyday life, with the people at the core of the ecosystem. Artists, organizations, and regional visitors often arrive for multiple purposes, including business, family visits, or outdoor recreation, and then extend their time in the city to experience cultural destinations such as the Danforth Art Museum and School and the Framingham History Center. This pattern creates a documented “cluster experience” in which nature, arts, and culture reinforce one another. The trails connecting downtown Framingham to surrounding areas, including opportunities to link more than twenty-two miles of regional trails, help bring regional audiences to local arts and cultural venues. This regional draw contributes to Framingham’s sense of place. Partnerships such as the Framingham History Center’s *Hikes through History* program with Downtown Framingham, Inc., demonstrate how regional recreation, local businesses, and cultural programming intentionally combine audiences and encourage visitors to engage with downtown spaces.

Framingham’s diverse population shapes its cultural identity. The city has a total population of 73,361, which is racially and ethnically diverse. About 37% of the population identifies as BIPOC, including Asian and Pacific Islander (7.7%), Black (5.6%), Native American (0.06%), Other (4.8 %) or Hispanic or Latino (18.7%). More than one in five residents identify as multiracial (21.1%). Nearly half of residents (49.6%) speak a language other than English as their first language, continuing an upward trend from 44% in 2022 and 40% in 2020.¹ In the Framingham Public Schools, 55.9% of students speak a language other than English as their first language as of October 1, 2025, and more than 70 languages are spoken in the public school district for the 2025-2026 school year.²

Framingham is a thriving hub for artists across career stages and disciplines. Artists remain at the creative core of the community, actively engaging with community-based organizations, residents, and businesses while shaping the city’s spaces. Anchored by the Centre Common

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey 2020–2024 5-Year Estimates*.

² The Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2025

Cultural District and downtown Framingham, the city has a strong arts and culture ecosystem and vibrant community life woven together by artistic expression, creative education, and cultural practices.

Framingham is a hub for visual arts, history and humanities. The Danforth Art Museum and School is a well-established art center that offers exhibition space and hosts respected educational programs, providing critical opportunities for artistic and cultural growth. The Mill Contemporary Art Studios and Project B Gallery at Saxonville Mills and Howard Street Studios have brought together large and diverse artist groups, and the Gateway Camera Club welcomes photographers of all skill levels. The Framingham Artists' Guild, founded in 1954, continues to convene artists through regular meetings at the downtown Framingham Library. Other resources include the programming at the Framingham History Center that blends art, culture, and belonging with its history and humanities work.

Framingham is also a regional center for performing arts. Numerous theater groups are based in the area and regularly present performances, including A Common Thread Theatre Company and the Performing Arts Center of MetroWest. Dance organizations such as Mass Ballet offer high-quality training for dancers; MetroWest Heritage Chorale and Centre Music House gather a large community of music lovers throughout the MetroWest region.

Youth are active in the area through schools and youth programs, which connect them to arts and culture. According to 2024 American Community Survey, 21.7% of residents in Framingham are under the age of 18. A range of schools, after-school programs, and youth clubs support young people with arts-based activities that connect them to local artists and cultural communities. Framingham has 14 public schools, four of which are located within a one-mile radius of City Hall, generating a natural flow of students and families through the downtown area. Framingham public schools are known for their dynamic arts programs, including award winning theatre companies, Marching Band State Champions, and frequent visual art exhibitions throughout the city. Framingham students' work is showcased across the greater Boston area, and the district has an established Director of Fine and Performing Arts.

A network of youth-focused art organizations and after-school education centers, that are well connected to the public school system, provides programs that extend beyond academic support. These initiatives encourage young people to become community leaders and help build a healthy, equitable community. They are also mindful of historic inequities and are committed to serving low-income youth and families and Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC). Hoops and Homework provides affordable after-school programs that include recreational, cultural, and enrichment activities. Framingham Families for Racial Equity in Education (FFREE) engages youth and families in advocating for culturally responsive and equitable school systems. Other organizations, such as the Boys & Girls Clubs of MetroWest and Pelham Lifelong Learning Center, also offer youth programming and maintain strong relationships with young people.

Community resource hubs provide spaces for gathering, learning and accessing essential services, weaving a network of mutual support. The Framingham Public Library stands out as a central and welcoming anchor for community connection. Other key institutions, such as Pelham Lifelong Learning Center, The Brazilian-American Center (BRACE), South Middlesex Opportunity Council (SMOC), and Framingham Adult ESL Plus, offer safe and welcoming environments for education, language assistance, job training, and access to medical, legal, and cultural resources; Framingham Callahan Center and Senior Services provides older adults with opportunities for recreation, learning, and social connection; The Learning Center for the Deaf supports children and adults who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Small businesses in Framingham contribute to the city's cultural richness. Beyond their economic role, small businesses also serve as natural connectors and cultural assets, offering everyday spaces where people gather through food, shopping, and daily services. While business owners might not always recognize their own role in creating safe, inviting, and meaningful places, organizations such as Downtown Framingham, Inc. and the MetroWest Chamber of Commerce acknowledge the interconnections between arts and culture, community life, and local economic vitality.

Framingham faces challenges related to access to cultural space and disconnection among its diverse communities. While physical spaces have been identified as a critical factor in sustaining and deepening these emerging connections, the community's creative capacity is constrained by the loss of artist studios, limited performing venues, and lack of affordable and welcoming cultural spaces. Meanwhile, community members continue to express concerns about trust and safety shaped by past experiences of exclusion and disconnection from municipal processes.

The City has initiated ongoing efforts to strengthen connections with its communities, including collaborations among the city, artists, and cultural organizations for events such as Framingham Fest and art shows hosted in the Memorial Building, as well as expanded translation services for municipal communications. Yet many of the community-led systems continue to operate at a distance from municipal structures to ensure a sense of safety and comfort for participation.

About South Framingham

South Framingham is home to a large multilingual and foreign-born community and has been a focal point of the City's efforts to strengthen local identity and build connections. These efforts are challenged by the longstanding divide between North and South Framingham, reflected in disparities in political representation, economic opportunity, and social and cultural identity.

Compared to North Framingham, available data suggest that South Framingham experiences greater housing vulnerability, including lower household incomes, higher poverty rates, and lower

homeownership, all of which are associated with increased housing cost burden.³ South Framingham also faces traffic congestion and inadequate public transit, uneven access to economic opportunities, and ongoing environmental concerns. These issues were intensified by the construction of Route 9, a major east-west highway that cuts through the center of Framingham and contributes to socio-economic disparities between North and South Framingham.

South Framingham residents share a strong sense of mutual aid and pride in their cultural diversity. This spirit nourishes a close-knit network of trusted cultural institutions, community organizations, educators, and activists. These self-sufficient networks play a supportive role for BIPOC communities and for those whose preferred language is not English.

Language access and cultural responsiveness are shared priorities across organizations serving South Framingham. For example, the Public Library emphasizes cultural inclusiveness and language accessibility, and integrates these principles into spatial design, resources, staff services, and programming. Multilingual wayfinding signs, welcoming murals and banners, a free book mobile, and any other spatial interfaces send a clear message that people from all cultures are welcome. A dedicated team of multilingual staff conducts extensive outreach, recognizing that even the safest place may feel unwelcoming to newcomers or people who are not native to the area. Several places serve specific language and cultural populations. The Brazilian-American Center (BRACE), for example, acts as a one-stop resource hub for the Portuguese-speaking residents. Local churches serve as vital community anchors, particularly churches serving Portuguese- and Spanish-speaking communities. In a community where faith institutions play a central role in daily life, these churches form tight-knit, trust-based networks, and pastors frequently serve as first points of contact, connecting residents to resources, information, and support. Small businesses in South Framingham, many of which are owned by local residents who do not speak English as their first language, also play a vital role in connecting the community through commerce and shared traditions.

About Nevins Hall

Nevins Hall is a large auditorium space located within the Memorial Building at 150 Concord Street in downtown Framingham. The Memorial Building (also referred to as Framingham's Town/City Hall) houses many government offices and civic functions. Dedicated in 1928 and approaching its 100th anniversary, the Hall once served as a popular venue for concerts, proms, and community celebrations. The area surrounding Nevins Hall is the center of Framingham's dynamic arts and cultural ecosystem. Located along Union Ave, a corridor linking the Cultural District, Downtown Framingham, and the South Framingham Communities, Nevins Hall has the potential to become a shared civic and cultural gathering place that strengthens connections across neighborhoods and languages.

³ City of Framingham. *Needs Assessment*. <https://www.framinghamma.gov/4003/Needs-Assessment>

Despite efforts to make Nevins Hall more accessible, community members have identified several barriers that keep people from using the space. High rental costs for Nevins Hall make it difficult for community members to activate the space. Restrictions such as no food, limited electrical outlets, and restricted use of the balcony also limit its capacity to host community events. While the size and layout of the hall make it suitable for large music events, the absence of a backstage, kitchen area, and sound isolation limits the types of programming it can accommodate. Some participants noted that the prominence of the large American flag as a backdrop for the stage creates a formal civic atmosphere that limits its potential use for other cultural or creative events.

Community members also raised concerns about the space feeling isolated, with a transitional, impersonal atmosphere that discourages people from staying. Interviewees expressed frustration with how municipal spaces are operated and the slow pace of projects related to community and cultural space. They call for greater transparency, regular communication, faster timelines, and tangible outcomes. In the area around Nevins Hall, pedestrian safety and accessible public transit are major concerns for the community. Residents, particularly youth, seniors, and people with mobility challenges, often do not feel safe reaching the hall without a car.

The strong demand for safe and affordable gathering spaces creates an important opportunity for Nevins Hall to serve community needs.

Placemaking Learnings for Nevins Hall

The community has long used creativity to cultivate spaces for people to share their stories, connect with one another, and express their hopes. A community-led process, grounded in an understanding of historical exclusion and long-standing frustrations, is essential for creating a safe and inclusive environment for participation. Equally important is grassroots outreach, which relies on trusted messengers and culturally specific communication channels.

Youth in South Framingham hold potential to bridge across cultures and lead creative and meaningful efforts to identify structural challenges and develop collaborative solutions.

Other successful programming elements include food, music, crafts, and free resources. The library's concerts, arts, and crafting events are among the most popular, and cultural days to engage BIPOC community members. Events that provide free and practical resources for school, work, and daily needs are also highly valued.