

Cultural Coalition: Advocating and connecting

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By Kristina Dorsey (/apps/pbcs.dll/personalia?ID=k.dorsey)

Rounding out its second year, the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition is busy advocating for the cultural and creative sector in this region and connecting sector members with each other.

The group aims to encourage and support economic and community development using arts, cultural and heritage assets. Each region in the state has a similar organization, with southeastern Connecticut being the final one created. This local group was developed after cultural assessments were conducted in the New London and Norwich regions.

The Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition now has 381 partners, consisting of such diverse groups as museums, municipalities, libraries, history organizations, creative businesses, and individual artists. The majority of the partners are for-profit, rather than nonprofit.

The coalition aims to foster collaborations among these partners; its values are "connect, collaborate and communicate," says Wendy Bury, the group's executive director.

Preston Whiteway, the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center's executive director who recently became the coalition board's chairman, uses an anatomy metaphor to describe what the organization does. He sees the coalition as connective tissue between all the partners — the bones and muscles — who have been doing great work but have often been doing it on their own.

"We are a way that gets all the bones and muscles moving in the same direction, talking to each other, and helping," he says. "We aren't doing their work for them. We are just connecting them and helping everyone ... be a larger force than they could be on their own."

Some concrete examples of how that might work: If several organizations all needed new roofs, they could see if they could get a lower price by bidding together. Or, with a lot of nonprofits cutting back on hours, several organizations could share a single employee; the employee would have a full-time job, and the organizations would benefit from his or her expertise.

Another of the coalition's goals is advocacy, and Bury says coalition representatives did a lot of that during the state budget hearings. They testified in Hartford and sent out communications to the partners about where things stood with the budget.

The coalition also held its first legislative breakfast. Whiteway says that breakfast "shows we can be a platform for convening the legislators and ... small and large organizations in the region and get everybody in the same room together in a way that I'm not sure a small gallery owner ever had the capacity to do before. Now, we can be the platform to bring these groups together in a way and really educate the legislators about what we do, what we as a creative economy do for the region."

When the group presented those aggregated financial numbers, Whiteway says, "you could see the eyes widening of the legislators about how much economic activity is generated once you add up all the small businesses together."

With the creation of the coalition, the region now has a place "at the statewide table," Bury says. Bury and her colleagues from around the state meet every six weeks with the Connecticut director of culture, and they sit as board members with the Connecticut Arts Alliance.

"This region finally has representation, information and communication, which has really been great to see," Bury says.

The group has also started its Rising Tide Series, offering cultural conversations and cultural summits. The coalition hosted three summits, where professional panelists discussed a major subject.

The cultural conversations, meanwhile, bring together the coalition's similar partners to meet and talk. The coalition now hosts regular quarterly roundtables for museum directors; historical society sites; healing arts organizations; performing arts organizations; and arts centers.

A resulting effort: 21 historical societies and historic site representatives — who knew of each other but hadn't met before — are now collaborating and working on a tourism initiative. They are realizing, Bury says, that someone who loves historic places isn't going to visit the same site every weekend. That person would love to be referred to other locales that might interest them.

The coalition has been working with Norwich to help create the Norwich Creates arts collaborative, whose multiple tasks include establishing a public art advisory committee. New London is next, and the city can choose to accept the coalition's support and do something comparable to Norwich or not to.

In the fall, the coalition is expecting to add staff; as of now, Bury is the sole staff member. The group is also looking for a work space.

Bury notes that becoming a coalition partner is free to any individual, business, organization, or entity; an online form is available at CultureSECT.org.