Here’s the buzz: Never before has southeastern Connecticut been able to harness all of its creative resources, leverage its assets, and unite the region’s arts, cultural and heritage community ... until now. And here are the buzz words: Connection. Partnership. Collaboration.

What does it all mean? Well, that’s a work in progress. Bob Mills, president of Norwich Community Development Corporation, explains it this way: “Back in 2011 or 2012, maybe, two areas did an assessment on what the need is. One was done in Norwich and the other in New London. It spelled out very clearly the need to help these businesses and organizations — such things as marketing issues, back-office support, a voice to represent their needs in Hartford and Washington, D.C. and just within the region.”

The answer, Mills and others believe, is the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition – SECT, for short. Southeastern Connecticut is the last of the state’s nine regions to form a regional arts alliance, an organization that serves the local arts and cultural community. The creation of those alliances was the brainchild of John Cusano, who is community development coordinator for the Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism. Somehow, the state’s southeastern corner is a latecomer to the party, and eager to make up for lost time.

But, first things first: choosing a 25-member Board of Directors. Check! Choosing an executive director. Check! She is Wendy Bury, formerly a founder and director of the La Grua Center in Stonington. The coalition’s only paid employee, Bury works from her home, a money-saving measure to bypass office
“Our mission is to connect, collaborate and communicate”

Wendy Bury, Executive Director of the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition.
rental. SECT does have financial backing, Bury says, but not a lot – about $35,000 in grant money from the state, the Connecticut Office of the Arts. And what it doesn’t have in funding, it makes up for in ambition.

The goals for SECT are many. To connect area arts and cultural organizations, heritage and business organizations. To create mutually beneficial partnerships among them. To become a clearinghouse for regional resources. To help spread the word about what is out there, the major attractions and those hidden in their shadow.

So far, more than 250 groups and individuals have signed on as “partners.”

According to the SECT website: “Partnership with the Coalition is a two-way street. Our work depends on the sharing of information and a desire and willingness to connect and collaborate. As a Partner, you will join a diverse coalition of people who live, work and support the creative sector in southeastern Connecticut. The Coalition provides opportunities to connect your business or talents with others in the region; find resources to obtain grants, jobs, auditions and more; attend workshops to strengthen your business or organization; share your good news with culture minded people in the region; unite with other creative organizations and individuals to advocate for arts and culture on a statewide basis.”

The website opens the door wide, inviting “Artists, creative businesses/services, graphic artists, designers, music organizations/musicians, libraries, community development organizations, historic/heritage organizations, economic development groups, municipalities, educational organizations, chambers, galleries, arts retailers, museums, and cultural attractions ... and more” to “Be part of our connected community, become a Partner...today!”
Kia Baird, a jazz vocalist from Norwich, is a Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition partner. She recently helped to launch a new jazz series, Miss Lottie’s Café, at the Donald Oat Theater in downtown Norwich. The new series is presented by the Eastern CT Urban Professionals, along with the Norwich Arts Center.

“I'm hoping that the jazz series, with the help of the coalition, will be able to spotlight some local artists who haven't yet performed locally,” said Baird, who produces the series. “We want to showcase them and also a more culturally diverse group of artists. We also want to get people who don’t usually go to small theater venues in, and do something that is true to the art form.”

Miss Lottie’s Café in November features Lady Day and Janet “Becky” Bass as Billie Holiday and The Jim Hunter Trio. The shows are Nov. 6 and Nov. 7 at 8 p.m. at the theater at 60 Broadway. On January 9, singer Michelle Rollins portrays Ella Fitzgerald. Tickets are $20.

For more information, go to norwicharts.org.

There is no fee to become a partner. Among the household-name partners are Mystic Seaport and Mystic Aquarium, the Slater Memorial Museum, the Garde Arts Center, the O’Neill Theatre Center and the Florence Griswold Museum. Libraries and historical societies are among the venues sought out by already-interested parties. Individual artists, boutiques, galleries and the like are among those who might wish for wider recognition, from both area residents and tourists.

The getting-to-know-them step is trickier.

“We have to know they’re there,” Bury says. “Part of our work is getting to know the partners. Here’s what we have; here’s what we do. Eventually, that will turn into a usable clearinghouse of information. For now, we’re just making sure we know who you are, what you do, who’s the one person we can contact … We have to get out of our own way. It’s not just about us in our own area. It’s art, it’s history, it’s restaurants, it’s farmer’s markets.”

Bury continues to recruit partners. And partners continue to sign on. What are they signing on for, exactly? Here is the work-in-progress part.

“I don’t think we’re going come in with the white hat and rescue everyone,” Bob Mills acknowledges. “We’re not going to come in and do the backroom books for them.”

OK, no white hat. So, what then, do the partners want? What do they expect?

“That’s the first question I’m asked: ‘Can you help us with money?’” Bury says. “We can’t. We can provide the skills, tell them what the trends are, so they can begin to adapt their grant applications. And the donors want that, to be able to do more with their dollars.”

“Funding sources have gone down. But when you start to link a couple of arts organizations, city organizations, government money, you have something. With grants, it’s all about, ‘Are you making a difference and having an impact?’ It’s not about how great you are. Donors have to have a way of justifying their spending. That’s the shift now. They don’t have enough money to give to just ‘quality’; they have to show that something is having an impact.”

No money? That distant whoosh you hear is the sound of hopes deflating.

Here’s where collaboration takes center stage. Wendy Bury is a great believer in the power of collaboration. For far too long, she says, cultural venues have taken the go-it-alone route, viewing one another as competition rather than allies, resources.

“Our mission is to connect, collaborate and communicate,” she says. “We’ve never had a regional organization that can offer information to the partners – grant information, marketing information.”

As part of that effort, SECT offers the “Rising Tide Series” – a selection of what it calls “Cultural Conversations and Cultural Summits” – open to partners and prospective partners. The meetings, which began in October, promise to “bring together regional leaders and experts for informative panel discussions, presentations and educational forums” address-
ing such topics as collaboration, information sharing and common challenges. One of the first conversations had more than 20 attendees from local historical organizations. And the coalition’s first summit brought together 50 nonprofits for a discussion about grants.

“We want to get people to do something that’s fairly uncommon here: Work together,” Bury says. “Can we share things? Is there a set of solutions for similar needs in similar situations? We’re saying, ‘You have a tool, and you have a tool, and if we put all the tools together, we have a heck of a tool bag.’”

Brett Bernardini, the creator, overseer and one-man staff of Norwich’s “Spirit of Broadway” theater, sees just that kind of potential for the coalition. (Bernardini is retiring from his post at the end of this year).

His assessment: “It sort of crosses that No Man’s Land, and says, ‘What can we do to help each other?’ A real strong arts coalition — and I mean a strong coalition, not a passive one — derives its strength from the participation of its members. I think a really strong coalition could play a huge role in directing Spirit of Broadway in moving forward.”

The theater’s entire board of directors stepped down after learning of Bernardini’s imminent departure. The theater’s future teeters on uncertainty. Will it continue to produce original musicals? Minus Bernardini’s guiding hand and ceaseless energy, will it survive at all?

“I just had to do something else,” Bernardini says. “It’s not that I have a job lined up. It’s not that I’m not happy where I am. I just can’t do more here. At this point, the Cultural Coalition, their strength right now is helping (Spirit’s) Board of Directors decide what options to pursue.”

Wendy Bury says the coalition can do that.

“There are certain things we can help guide. They need to ask themselves, ‘If you change (the theater), what will be the impact? Was it dependent on Brett, or not? I’d like to think the community benefited from his brilliance but also that Norwich loves theater. It’s up to them.”

Not all of SECT’s partners share Bernardini’s faith that the coalition can offer solutions, and question whether all the partners are viewed as equals.

Bob Mills of NCDC acknowledged that some partners are skeptical of this new coalition.

“We are an instant-gratification society. We’ve promised something, and we have to deliver.”

This page: Artreach/Second Step Players staff; Get Bent Yoga. Opposite page: Ginchybots by Sarah Edmond of Norwich; The Giesing-Williams family supports Christ Church School of the Arts.
“They’ve been down this road before,” Mills says, alluding to the region’s prior efforts to coalesce, boost and promote its abundant attractions. “It’s something we’re not good at. We start; we stop. We are planning convenings of stakeholders. We will begin to engage more directly with our partners. … It does take time. We can’t be the be-all and end-all for the region until we know who’s out there and what they’re doing.”

Wendy Bury is out there doing just that right now.

On a recent afternoon, at Slater Memorial Museum, Bury was there doing what she does so well. Meeting. Greeting. Hugging. Hand-shaking. Praising. Congratulating. Encouraging. Promoting the collaboration concept. This is a trifecta visit. Slater is a partner. So is Connecticut Women’s Artists, which is hosting its 85th annual members’ exhibition here. So is artist Sadie DeVore, whose eye-catching acrylic “Styling Sampling” hangs prominently on a side wall.

“We want to support and be a part of their activities,” Bury says. “We attend events to the best of our ability and we have board members who also attend events all around the region. Attending the events and activities of our partners is important to our ‘boots on the ground’ knowledge of what is going on in the sector right now with working artists, businesses, nonprofits, etc.”

If the future looks a bit hazy, a tad vague, Bob Mills and Wendy Bury are quick to concede the work-in-progress aspect of it all – and just as quick to reassure that, ultimately, the coalition will not disappoint.

“That’s the question right now: ‘What are you gonna do for me?’ And that’s something we are shaping right now,” Mills says. “It’ll take time to bring them together, so we tell them to be patient. … What does the end product look like? That’s a good question.”

One part of the answer, one specific goal: a regional calendar, online, that can showcase all of the area’s cultural and community and educational doings, allowing locals and tourists alike to consult a single source rather than the plethora of event calendars that currently compete for attention.

“We want to provide a clear pipeline of information and a pathway for information,” Bury says. “We want to speak as an advocate for our region and in our region.”

And, yes, she says. She knows how eager SECT partners are for action and results.

“The assessments were two years ago,” she says. “So it may seem even longer to them. I’m a staff person, paid to facilitate, energize and move things along.

“We are an instant-gratification society. We’ve promised something, and we have to deliver.”