

# Group seeks to assess 'cultural landscape' in Southeastern Connecticut

Published January 29, 2018 9:03PM

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Norwich — Living in a state where many feel glum about where they come from, Jason Vincent – director of planning for the Town of Stonington – feels that Connecticut needs fewer Eeyore's and more Winnie the Pooh's.

But pinpointing a sense of place in southeastern Connecticut – one that will make residents proud to live here and prospective tourists want to visit – can be tricky.

Or as Vincent sees it, the situation is sticky: He called such placemaking "a 200-pound marshmallow" that is "hard to pick up."

He was one of 10 people in attendance at Monday's meeting of the Cultural Landscape Working Group, held at Foundry 66 in Norwich. The meeting marked the beginning of the Cultural Landscape Initiative that the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition is spearheading.

Attendees agreed that Southeastern Connecticut doesn't have a regional identity.

Lisa McGinley, chairwoman of the board of directors for the Cultural Coalition, commented that the area doesn't have one narrative but a bunch of narratives, like a book of short stories. McGinley was previously an editor at The Day.

The initiative came about after the group convened in the summer to explore an Our Town grant, funding from the National Endowment for the Arts that supports placemaking projects to "transform" communities.

But Wendy Bury, executive director of the Cultural Coalition, said the group "realized that when it comes to the discussion of place, we were not really at a point where we felt comfortable really knowing what is our place, who we are as a region."

So the group decided to take a step back and put discussion of the grant on hold.

In December, the Cultural Coalition received a \$25,000 donation to support a regional cultural facilities assessment report, which Bury said will cost upwards of \$20,000. There is no contract yet, but the Cultural Coalition is eyeing AMS Planning & Research, a Southport-based consultant for the arts and entertainment industries.

Bury said the report will take three to four months, and her goal is for the working group to wrap up in 12-18 months.

The Cultural Coalition has been an advocate for regional approaches, and the meeting on Monday focused on placemaking not through the lens of individual cities and towns, but through themes present across southeastern Connecticut.

The preliminary themes attendees came up with included maritime, adventure-seeking, ethnic, military, transportation, agriculture, sports and the arts. They also acknowledged that looking at the region's sense of identity will involve delving into more controversial themes, like politics, religion and immigration.

McGinley advocated for transparency, saying "there will be shameful parts" of the region's history and we must "own it."

The Cultural Landscape Initiative will require input from many people who have expertise in these themes. Bury realized if the group is asking for help, they must be prepared to answer the question, "What's in it for me, for the community?"

Regan Miner, consultant for the Norwich Historical Society, said it could bring some national exposure. Carrie Dyer, of Reliance Health and Norwich Creates, said it could bring pride.

The other group members present were Deb Mathiasen, assistant director of the Cultural Coalition; Deanna Rhodes, city planner for Norwich; Sybil Tetteh, city planner for New London; Bob Mills, president of the Norwich Community Development Corporation; and Melinda Wilson, grants manager of the Southeastern Connecticut Enterprise Region.

The next meeting is scheduled for March 5. Bury will bring a one-page document compiled from her copious whiteboard notes at Monday's meeting, and the March meeting will focus on cultural facilities in the region.

Vincent feels the cultural facilities assessment report will "scare the pants off people, when we look at the condition of our assets."

McGinley optimistically noted, "On the other hand, we have assets."

The report will be one of many tools used in the Cultural Landscape Initiative, along with studies, maps, planning documents and historic documents.