

Creative conference creates buzz in New London




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Wendy Bury, executive director of the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition, speaks to a crowd at the Garde Arts Center on Thursday, June 8, 2017, during welcoming ceremonies for the Cultural Communities Exchange conference sponsored by the New England Foundation for the Arts. The two-day conference based this year in New London made its first appearance in the state. (Lee Howard/The Day)

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New London — A two-day celebration of the arts in New England kicked off Thursday morning at the Garde Arts Center with welcoming remarks and the release of a report showing the creative economy is a more important sector in New England than in other parts of the country.

The new report (<http://www.nefa.org/NEcreativejobsmatter>) by the New England Foundation for the Arts, which was discussed in a panel session later in the day, found that the creative sector accounts for more than \$17 billion in earnings in the six-state region. Creative-economy employment was about 5 percent more prevalent in New England than in the rest of the United States, but has dropped about 15 percent in the region over the past decade, according to the report.

All of New England was represented at Thursday's conference, called the Creative Communities Exchange, or CCX, which was based at several downtown locations, including Harris Place, Hygienic Art and Spark Makerspace. Previous conferences had been held in Keene, N.H.; Portland, Maine; North Adams, Mass., and Providence, R.I.

"We're really thrilled to be here in Connecticut," said Cathy Edwards, executive director of the arts foundation, in opening remarks.

She said the New London meeting of cultural leaders from throughout New England this year had attracted its highest attendance ever. Now in its fifth year, CCX registration had to be capped at 270, she said.

"We're sold out because we're in Connecticut," joked Kristina Newman-Scott, director of culture for the state.

Newman-Scott said studies have shown that every dollar invested in the arts returns \$7 in economic activity. "It is not acceptable to not invest in the arts," she said.

Wendy Bury, executive director of the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition that served as event host, said the arts are a major economic driver for the region, pointing to her organization's 500 members. She emphasized the positivity of the region's collaborative mindset, creativity and innovation.

"It's a region rich with the arts," she added.

The idea behind the conference, leaders said, was to allow the creative community to network, share new ideas and develop collaborations to spur economic development related to the arts. The biennial event has helped launch several projects, some of which were discussed during panel sessions Thursday.

On Friday, NEFA will announce its NEFA Creative Economy Awards that recognize one organization and one specific project in New England.

New London has rolled out the red carpet (<http://www.theday.com/article/20170605/ENT02/170609681>) for the conference, planning a blues fest, maker fair, major art show and temporary storefront art exhibit along State Street.

The events (<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/festival-of-creativity-innovation-creatinova-tickets-32828407651>), under the branding of the Festival of Creativity and Innovation (<http://culturesect.org/nefa-ccx-2017-new-london/>), kicked off Thursday with a ribbon cutting for the storefront exhibit. The CREATiNOVA maker fair runs Friday and Saturday and the Blues & Brews Fest happens Saturday and Sunday.

At the same time, the Hygienic on Bank Street hosts its Apex exhibit featuring top Connecticut artists, and the city also is promoting the New London Maritime Society's Sunset Boat and Harbor Tours and a new self-guided New London mural tour (<http://www.theday.com/article/20170507/NWS01/170509453>).

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