

A council for artists, a cultural district for New London

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By **The Day Editorial Board** (/apps/pbcs.dll/personalia?ID=editorialboard)

One of the beauties of the New England way is the plethora of good ideas that manage to get a life of their own, take a name and spell out a plan, profitmaking or nonprofit. Everybody and every group can try to float their dream.

Conversely, that do-it-our-way approach tends to create a host of enterprises operating on too limited a scale to compete effectively for attention and customers, or to jibe with the efforts of their neighbors. Take arts and culture as a prime example.

New London, which hosts the region's main music scene, numerous galleries and art studios, significant but small historical sites and the bigger players — the Garde Arts Center, Hygienic Arts, Lyman Allyn Art Museum, Eastern Connecticut Symphony Orchestra — is taking the logical next step. The city is partnering to form an **arts council** (<https://www.theday.com/local-news/20190823/new-london-takes-step-toward-formation-of-arts-council>) intended to sustain small enterprises as well as larger ones and benefit the local economy.

With this move New London is buying into the concept that fostering a diverse arts scene is a wise use of one of the city's primary assets. The time has definitely arrived, with the growth in jobs and housing that tend to create bigger and more diverse audiences.

Ultimately, this action is expected to culminate in creation of a "cultural district" as defined in a recent law now being fleshed out by the state Department of Economic and Community Development. The **idea** (<https://www.theridgefieldpress.com/news/politics-elections/article/Rep-Frey-s-bill-to-establish-cultural-14052617.php>) is roughly modeled on the connections among different sites and businesses on the state's wine and history trails, but entirely within a single community.

"The arts council is a tool for and by the artists and arts organizations. The cultural district," says Wendy Bury, executive director of the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition, "is a tool for the city." The coalition has guided the genesis of the new arts council.

The New London City Council stepped up not with funds for the arts council — none were sought — but with the appointment of City Planner Sybil Tetteh as its official representative to the steering committee charged with getting the arts council up and running. By January the plan is to form an arts council of 25 members, each representing one of these categories: visual arts and performing arts, music, film, creative businesses and arts education, as well as all city neighborhoods. Diversity will go beyond artistic disciplines and geography; 50 percent of the council members will be individual artists, 50 percent minorities.

A diverse group for a diverse city.

Do the math and you can see some of the logic. Categories and geographic areas will overlap, creating connections for artists who previously labored alone to coordinate events, exhibitions, and marketing.

A designated cultural district would go even further, by bringing arts and cultural venues into the fold with commercial tourism and giving towns and cities a role. While the arts council is a volunteer group with no budget, a future cultural district, if there is one, might well ask the City Council for funding to promote the city's attractions and lead to a more livable community. However, the public-private partnering increases eligibility for funding that is ordinarily available only to one sector or the other. The city would be able to apply for grants, both public and private, that currently it could not.

It's good that New London is lining up to qualify. Cities with cultural districts should gain a competitive edge in tourism, economic development and attracting businesses, talent, residents and visitors.

As every local knows, newcomers here always seem perplexed that, with all it has to offer, New London never quite soars. A key task for the new arts council will be to meet artists and cultural businesses where they are and to forge solid cooperation. If it can do that, the city may have the formula it has been looking for.

*The Day editorial board meets regularly with political, business and community leaders and convenes weekly to formulate editorial viewpoints. It is composed of President and Publisher **Tim Dwyer** (</apps/pbcs.dll/personalia?ID=t.dwyer>), Editorial Page Editor **Paul Choiniere** (</apps/pbcs.dll/personalia?ID=p.choiniere>), Managing Editor **Tim Cotter** (</apps/pbcs.dll/personalia?ID=t.cotter>), Staff Writer **Julia Bergman** (</apps/pbcs.dll/personalia?ID=j.bergman>) and retired deputy managing editor **Lisa McGinley** (/section/columnists_mcginley). However, only the publisher and editorial page editor are responsible for developing the editorial opinions. The board operates independently from the Day newsroom.*

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