

Boulder Arts Blueprint Phase 1

Discovery Report

**Prepared by Public Sphere Projects
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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Literature review.....	3
Community Cultural Plan review.....	4
Community engagement approach.....	8
Stakeholder affinities and typologies.....	9
Overview of initial stakeholder engagement.....	10
Local and national landscape review.....	12
Benchmarking 2015 peer markets.....	13
Positive trends.....	19
Challenges in arts funding	20
Proposed peer markets.....	21
Arts and culture budget analysis.....	24
Contextualizing the budget.....	24
Budget insights and discussion.....	25
Next steps.....	30
 Appendix	
A: Public art funding in comparison to 2015 benchmark cities	31
B: Extended data for proposed peer markets.....	32
C: Municipal arts and culture expenditures.....	36
D: Initial observations.....	37

Introduction

In 2024, the City of Boulder launched a broad-based planning process that will culminate in the Boulder Arts Blueprint: a new, comprehensive framework to support the vibrancy of Boulder's creative landscape. The project will result in a dynamic and actionable roadmap aligned with the City of Boulder Sustainability, Equity, and Resilience Framework (SER) and the goals of the Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan (BVCP). Public Sphere Projects, a national planning and placemaking consultancy, in partnership with P.U.M.A., is leading the development of the plan. **The project is unfolding in three steps, beginning with Step 1: Discovery and Analysis, which is summarized in the pages of this discovery report.**

In Step 1, Public Sphere Projects and P.U.M.A. reviewed current policies, plans, and documents pertinent to the Office of Arts and Culture, benchmarked best practices, and conducted various community engagement strategies. This report outlines the key findings and insights from this effort, highlighting existing conditions, emerging themes, and critical areas for further exploration. The report proposes updates to the City's benchmarking, in terms of comparisons to peer markets and changes that have taken place in Boulder and across the US. Crucially, this report also addresses the 2025 Office of Arts and Culture budget, which reflects increases in funding stemming from the passage of the 2A ballot measure (continued referred to as Arts, Culture, and Heritage tax). The Budget Insights section in particular offers considerations for understanding the budget both through a local lens of municipal expenditures and priorities, and through a discussion of national practices.

In the forthcoming *Step 2: Community Engagement Support and Draft Blueprint Framework*, the consultant team will gather community input through additional meetings and roundtables to inform a draft framework aligned with Step 1 findings. Finally, in *Step 3: Recommendations and Roadmap*, the Blueprint will be finalized, incorporating feedback and identifying priority items and potential funding models for the Office of Arts and Culture.

This report marks the conclusion of the initial step in this process and serves as a foundation for further development. The material presented below will be refined as the project progresses.

Literature review

As part of *Step 1: Discovery and Analysis*, Public Sphere Projects reviewed existing policies, plans, and documents pertinent to the Office of Arts and Culture. The review considered multiple documents from within and beyond the Office of Arts and Culture, as well as national studies and reports that shed light on Boulder.

The review emphasized the 2015 Community Cultural Plan Review, which has guided the City of Boulder through arts and culture investments over the past decade.

Additional documents include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Americans for the Arts' Arts & Economic Prosperity Research (5 and 6)
- Artist Census (Office of Arts and Culture, 2019 and 2024)
- BCAA Art Space Directory
- Boulder Chamber of Commerce Economic Profiles
- Boulder Revised Code
- Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan
- Bridge-Year Needs and Funding Assessment (Office of Arts and Culture, 2024)
- City of Boulder Citywide Strategic Plan
- City of Boulder Engagement Strategic Framework
- City of Boulder Racial Equity Plan
- City of Boulder Sustainability, Equity, and Resilience Framework
- Civic Area Master Plan
- Community Cultural Plan (Office of Arts and Culture, 2015)
- Community Vitality Hoshin Kanri
- Community Vitality Strategic Plan
- Create Boulder Annual Reports
- Creative Vitality Suite Data (WESTAF, Western States Arts Federation) for Boulder
- Cultural Mapping Project (Office of Arts and Culture, 2022)
- Downtown Boulder Vision Plan
- Final Reports from Boulder Arts Commission Grantees
- General Operating Support Grantee Survey Findings (Office of Arts and Culture, 2016 to 2022)
- Is Boulder ready for a world-class Arts Complex? A 10-15-Year Vision for the Future-Starting Today
- Parks and Recreation Master Plan
- Public Art Implementation Plan
- Public Art Policy

Community Cultural Plan review

The Community Cultural Plan, adopted by City Council in November of 2015, aimed to capture a collective vision of Boulder's arts and culture landscape. With an overarching vision of positioning creativity as a fundamental element contributing to the well-being, prosperity, and happiness of all community members, it served as a roadmap to encourage cultural participation at all levels. Distinctly, the plan also offered a framework for the city government to support cultural institutions and the creative economy as a whole.

Over the past nine years, the city government utilized this document to bridge the gap between community priorities and municipal offerings. Eight strategies were created to guide this work, accompanied by specific goals derived from extensive community priority setting. This plan encompassed recommended priorities, potential collaborators, and successful examples.

As part of Step 1 of this process, the consultant team participated in the October Arts Commission Retreat, where members looked back on the successes and misses of the Cultural Plan over the past nine years. The discovery of highlights and learnings from the October meeting were supplemented by conversations with arts and culture staff and review of existing records and reports.

Support our cultural organizations

With the goal of positively impacting and substantially advancing the operational capacity, organizational resiliency, and innovative spirit of Boulder's diverse cultural organizations for the betterment of the community.

Highlights: Tripled the grants budget and retooled the process to become more inclusive.

- Starting in 2017, the grant application categories were expanded to include creative practices beyond traditional or fine arts defined by the Arts Commission. Entries included important practice areas such as "history and heritage," "design, architecture, and landscape," and "contemplative art."
- The self-reported data from applicants shows that they have increased efforts to diversify both the creation of art and the audiences who experience it. Organizations receiving general operating support grants from the city have reported a 97% increase in programming that targets diverse groups, with the 42 organizations defining "diverse groups" for themselves.
- Grant funding was significantly increased from 2015-2024 from \$232,234 to \$1,326,541, respectively.
- Portions of ARPA funds were specifically used to fund work projects in neighborhoods for individual artists and programs like the Equity Project series.

Learnings: The creative sector requires diversified sources of funding in order to sustain itself.

- The COVID-19 pandemic had a substantial negative impact on Boulder's vibrant arts and culture scene. The closure of performance venues and the cancellation of numerous gigs and events resulted in a significant shift in the behavior of both artists and audiences, disrupting the City's artistic ecosystem.
- With natural revenue sources being altered, some artists had to quickly pivot to leverage non-Boulder resources, like Bonfils-Stanton and the Denver Foundation

for COVID relief before ARPA funding became available.

Reinvent our public art program

The municipal investment in public art to serve as a model that encourages individuals, businesses, organizations, and developers to invest in improvements to public spaces through the addition of meaningful, innovative, and quality works of art.

Highlights: The City's public art program successfully commissioned a wide range of works—from classic to contemporary—spanning large-scale installations to murals to smaller temporary pieces in neighborhoods.

- A comprehensive audit of the collection has been concluded, with over 300 entries – including infrastructure, urban design, placemaking, and interpretive pieces – identified throughout the City of Boulder. Of those, the public art collection includes 15 signature pieces of public art. Now, a collection management and maintenance strategy is being developed for the current collection.
- 1.75 staff are dedicated to commissioning and managing the City's public art program.
- A public art policy has been adopted by the City, along with a sustainable percent for art funding mechanism that ensures that capital projects incorporate new art commissions.

Learnings: The program's effectiveness is hindered by process, financing, and regulatory challenges.

- The process for identifying public art projects, assigning funding through the percent-for-art rule, and navigating the permitting and taxation steps causes inefficiencies, delays, and added expenses.
- The "Experiment in Public Art" program, started in 2019, is aimed to bring emerging, non-traditional forms of expression into the public realm to – in part – increase equity in this space.

Support artists and creative professionals

Transform Boulder into a thriving hub for artists and creative professionals, leveraging its natural beauty, quality of life, and opportunities in the creative sector.

Highlights: The Office of Arts and Culture led convenings like the artist forums, artist meetups, and professional development opportunities all increased in regularity.

- Started in 2017, the "Business of the Arts" series presented in partnership with Boulder County Arts Alliance, is serving sole practitioners and small organizations with resources for operating creative businesses.
- Dance Bridge was a beloved program that provided space to small organizations and artists; suspended in 2020, it may be reimagined as a showcase not only for dance but other forms of music and performance arts.

Learnings: It still remains difficult to locate affordable music and art practitioner space for both rehearsal and performances.

- The cost of performance venues in Boulder is primarily due to the high cost of maintaining a space in a city with a high cost of living. Many large-scale venues require significant capital improvements to become more usable spaces for both rehearsal and performance.

Enhance the vitality of the creative economy

Solidify Boulder's status as a premier hub for creative professionals and businesses.

Highlights: On a national, state, and local level, economic studies have continued to reinforce the importance of arts and culture to overall economic vitality. Boulder is on trend.

- In 2015, the nonprofit arts and culture industry generated \$69.8 million in annual economic activity in Boulder, Colorado – supporting 1,832 full-time equivalent jobs and generating \$4.6 million in local and state government revenues.
- The nonprofit arts and culture industry generated \$115.1 million in annual economic activity in Boulder, Colorado in 2024 – supporting 2,451 jobs and generating \$21.9 million in local, state, and federal government revenues, according to the Arts & Economic Prosperity 6 national economic impact study.¹
- Grant opportunities were also expanded to arts businesses beyond 501c3's, as in previous years.

Learnings: Expectations for the municipal government's role are misaligned.

- Advocates for the creative sector expressed disappointment with the way the City has stewarded funding for the sector. This sentiment is particularly present with the City's proposed use of Arts, Culture, and Heritage Tax funds, which advocates had expected to be allocated to direct funding of the sector.

Strengthen culture in our neighborhoods and communities

Every resident should have the ability to creatively impact their neighborhood and social community.

Highlights: Due to popular programs – like Public Display of Affection (PDA) for Boulder, and the Creative Neighborhoods Program – neighborhoods are seeing an increase in creative vibrancy.

- Since 2015, 20+ Creative Neighborhoods murals have been installed and are ongoing through 2025.
- The cultural asset mapping project, which overlays city demographics, is currently being undertaken by the Office of Arts and Culture.
- The City of Boulder approved a declaration in 2017 to officially recognize the NoBo Art District as a creative district, acknowledging its grassroots origins, cultural significance, concentration of artists and arts-supportive businesses, and economic impact on the North Boulder community.

Learnings: Art and creativity are not well-represented in all neighborhoods. Some neighborhoods have not benefited from art/creativity initiatives.

- Alongside the aforementioned cultural asset map that will be used to identify gaps in art asset dissemination, the Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan is an opportunity to identify additional, small-scale opportunities throughout districts – such as facade grants, block party permits, murals, etc.

Advance civic dialogue, awareness, and participation

Transform Boulder into a thriving hub for artists and creative professionals, leveraging its natural beauty, quality of life, and opportunities in the creative sector.

¹[*Arts & Economic Prosperity 6 national economic impact study*](#)

Highlights: Boulder Arts Week surpassed its 10 year anniversary with much success.

- Boulder Arts Week has seen significant growth over the past 12 years, with increases in both participants and guests. The program successfully adapted to the challenges of the pandemic by pivoting to an online format, Boulder Arts Online, maintaining its momentum and strength.
- Boulder's expansion has been purposeful, aiming to entice a diverse range of visitors and investments. The city has nurtured and championed equity through the transformative power of art.

Learnings: There is confusion or lack of confidence around who holds the 'arts and culture torch' in the absence of historically involved major institutions, coupled with unclear understanding of the Office of Arts and Culture's role.

- While the Office of Arts and Culture has successfully raised its profile through major programs, it would benefit from additional support in branding and messaging. This would help to highlight the increasing number of organizations working to provide diverse programming for the community.
- Perhaps a reaction to this gap, there are more organizations and individual artists "doing the work" in this space. The number of applicants overall grew 63% from 2022 to 2024, while 47% more people were awarded grants during that time. That includes a 21% increase in the number of first-time grant recipients.

The following two strategies were considered less effective in achieving the desired outcomes. Although there were some individual programs that demonstrated success, overall, these strategies presented missed opportunities and a lack of capacity to be implemented effectively.

Create and enhance venues

Enhance the stability and audience experience of visual and performing arts organizations by bridging the gaps in spaces for studios, rehearsals, performances, and exhibitions. These gaps were identified as challenges that created barriers to innovation and sustainability.

Engage our youth

This nine-year plan had the goal of transforming Boulder into the ideal location for future cultural leaders by advancing opportunities for those who are currently pursuing creative studies.

Although this goal wasn't as far reaching as anticipated, a highlight of this goal includes:

The updated grant program also includes specific earmarked for Arts Education Project Grant and Culture Field Trip Funds-which are allocated to Title I schools.

Community engagement approach

Community engagement was prioritized from the project's outset, recognized as a key component alongside *Community Engagement Support* that will be pursued as part of Step 3. During the initial site visit in December 2024, Public Sphere Projects and P.U.M.A. employed various engagement strategies, acknowledging the widespread interest in this project. In collaboration with the Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan (BVCP) Update Team, we are actively planning broad-reaching, and targeted, engagement activities while remaining mindful of potential engagement fatigue within the community.

The early outreach provided valuable insights, surfacing initial observations that now serve as a foundation for subsequent steps. By integrating community voices from the outset, we ensured that the plan will reflect the city's diverse perspectives and needs while maintaining momentum.

As the project transitions into the next step, the consultant team will concentrate on two concurrent community engagement efforts. These include individual discussions and roundtable meetings to examine initial themes in more depth, as well as expansive community outreach in partnership with the BVCP Update Team. These efforts are based on the insights gained in Step 1.

With this input, we will co-create a draft Blueprint framework, including background research, benchmarking, a progress review of existing initiatives, and an analysis of community priorities. The draft will provide the foundation for the development of the Blueprint in Step 3.

Stakeholder affinities and typologies

At the onset of this project, Public Sphere Projects conducted a stakeholder mapping exercise with leadership of the Community Vitality Department and the Office of Arts and Culture. The purpose of the exercise was to define a range of stakeholders – agencies, nonprofits, individuals, etc. – who either influence the creative ecosystem, or are affected by it. At the same time, the exercise was meant to uncover gaps in the overall map of stakeholders, ensuring that engagement efforts reach those traditionally excluded from planning processes.

As in any ecosystem, Boulder’s stakeholders vary widely across demographics, ideologies, missions, or affinities. Identifying these groups early in the process was crucial for fostering inclusive engagement and making space for divergent perspectives. The mapping process also guided the formation of the Advisory Committee, a diverse group of volunteers that will convene throughout the planning process: to widen its reach, contribute professional and lived experiences, and offer real time critique and direction.

To date, the consultant team is gratified with the level of response and participation from the Boulder community. The following stakeholder affinity groups have been identified and engaged:

- Government leaders and agencies
- Comprehensive planning team
- Creative entrepreneurs
- Venue owners and operators
- Higher education leaders
- Working artists and culture-bearers
- Contemplative art practitioners
- Arts and culture non-profits
- Older adults
- Young people and youth services

Overview of initial stakeholder engagement

The engagement launched with two online focus groups, followed by a three-day site-visit held from December 17-19, 2024. The visit included tours of Boulder's arts and culture assets, meetings with the Office of Arts and Culture staff, in-person focus groups, an open house mixer, and the initial Advisory Committee meeting and presentation.

As the first in a series of planned community engagement activities, this visit set the tone for collaboration and dialogue, providing the consulting team an opportunity to connect with local stakeholders, gather initial insights, and build momentum for the work ahead.



Following is a summary of initial community engagement activities completed as part of Step 1:

- **BVCP Online Focus Group:** To best collaborate with the Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan Update Team, Public Sphere Projects and P.U.M.A. conducted an online focus group aimed at better understanding inputs for a broad-based community engagement strategy with an arts and culture focus.
- **Creative Economy Online Focus Group:** To establish a foundation for our work, we sought insights from professionals involved in the creative economy from a high-level. Public Sphere Projects facilitated conversations using a set of co-crafted questions to pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of Boulder's arts and culture economy.
- **Create Boulder Focus Group:** A prominent creative organization in the City of Boulder, Create Boulder advocates for a thriving and resilient arts and culture ecosystem. Our team met with this group to learn about their ongoing work and contribution to the passing of the Arts, Culture, and Heritage Tax leading future arts and culture funding.

- **Working Artists Focus Group:** The team convened a cross-sectoral focus group consisting of working artists from a variety of mediums, age ranges, and experiences within the Boulder community. The conversation addressed barriers to participation and reinforced themes heard in former focus groups focused on access to space.
- **Office of Arts and Culture Staff Convening:** To better understand the experiences of the staff that lead efforts for the department, we met with Boulder’s arts and culture staff. The conversation focused on citywide policies that cause constraints within the department, and possible areas for innovative thinking..
- **Arts and Culture Mixer:** A casual gathering of artists and local culture-bearers served as a crucial early engagement event. This convening was an opportunity to rally support from the incredibly engaged arts community, a sector with a clear vested interest in the project’s success. The relaxed atmosphere encouraged open dialogue, fostering a sense of shared purpose.
- **Asset Tour and Site Visits:** Site visits to key locations across the city brought the project to life, offering a firsthand view of cultural and economic assets. Stops included the NoBA Arts District, eTown, BMoCA, KGNU’s new building, Central Park, Pearl Street Mall, as well as district nodes and corridors. These visits deepened the consulting team’s understanding of the city’s potential and highlighted opportunities to connect cultural initiatives with other civic efforts.
- **Advisory Committee Kickoff Meeting:** The site-visit concluded with an Advisory Committee Kickoff Meeting, bringing together influential community leaders from diverse sectors such as arts and culture, government, and tourism. This three-hour session was designed to introduce the project scope, share initial data benchmarking and first impressions, and review themes and precedents. The attendees then broke into working groups to discuss prompts posed by the themes and precedents presented, adding Boulder’s local context. This meeting underscored the interconnectedness of cultural initiatives and economic growth, setting a collaborative tone for the work ahead.



Local and national landscape review

While every city has its own unique characteristics, Boulder shares similarities with several national peers in areas such as population size, universities, economic and social priorities, and overall community identity. These peer cities serve as valuable points of reference, offering examples and precedents that can inform Boulder's strategic planning and development.

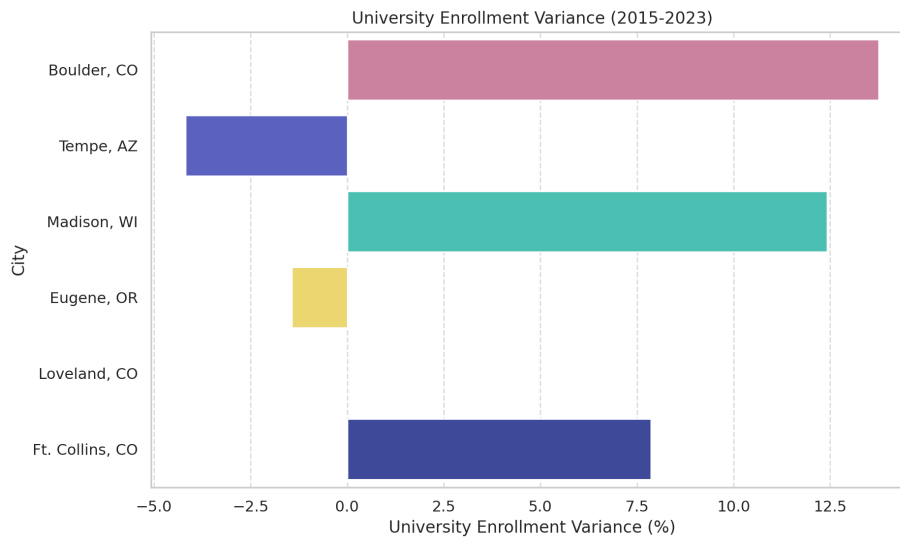
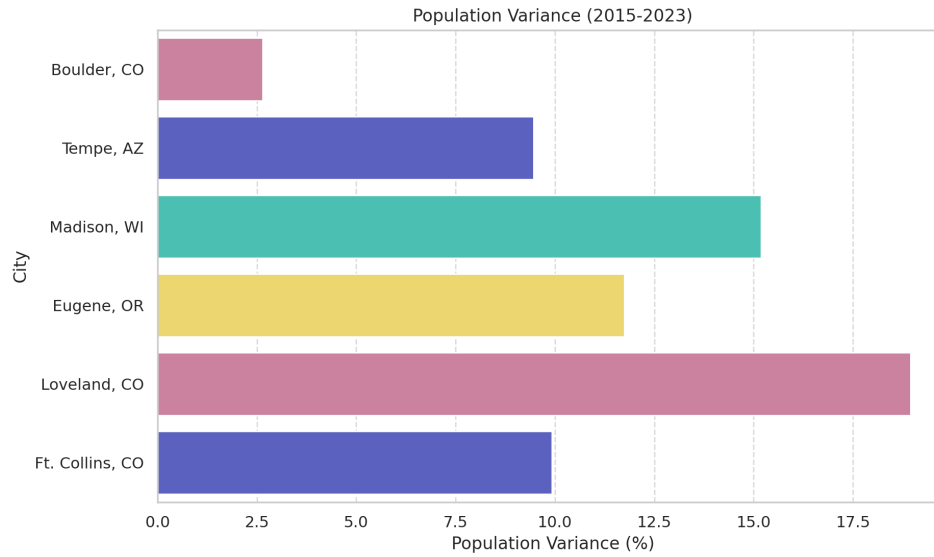
Building on the 2015 Community Cultural Plan and its original data, this analysis allows us to benchmark progress against past insights while identifying trends over time. By examining Boulder's growth alongside university hubs and peer cities such as Tempe, Madison, Eugene, Loveland, and Fort Collins, we can assess changes in population dynamics, the evolving role of universities, and shifts in economic or cultural priorities.

The comparison of cities benchmarked in 2015 versus 2024 reveals extreme growth in specific areas, underscoring the importance of looking beyond traditional peer cities for future arts market strategies.

It is recommended that Boulder consider additional cities where arts markets have demonstrated significant expansion, ensuring that its planning reflects evolving cultural and economic landscapes. A list of additional cities for benchmarking, along with baseline data, is provided at the end of this section to guide future comparisons and strategic decision-making.

Benchmarking 2015 peer markets

Population and university presence: 2023 vs. 2015



All Data²

City	Population (2023)	Population (2015)	Population Variance (%)	University	University Enrollment (2023)	University Enrollment (2015)	Enrollment Variance (%)
Boulder, CO	105,898	103,166	2.65	University of Colorado	34,428	30,265	13.75
Tempe, AZ	184,213	168,288	9.46	Arizona State University	79,818	83,301	-4.18
Madison, WI	280,305	243,344	15.19	University of WI-Madison	48,557	43,193	12.42
Eugene, OR	177,889	159,190	11.75	University of Oregon	23,834	24,181	-1.44
Loveland, CO	79,532	66,859	18.95	N/A	N/A	N/A	0
Ft. Collins, CO	170,376	155,000	9.92	Colorado State University	34,218	31,725	7.86

² All data presented on cities and universities are derived from publicly available U.S. Census Bureau data and supplemented by information directly sourced from organizational reports and statistical publications available on their respective websites.

Demographic trends compared to benchmark cities

Population Growth (2015-2023)

- Boulder's population grew by 2.65%, the lowest among the six benchmarked cities.

University Enrollment Trends

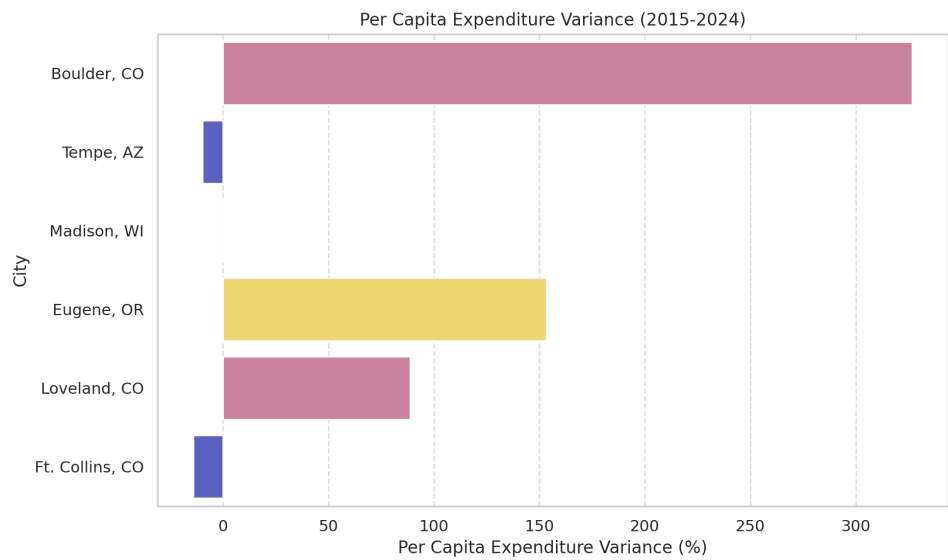
- University of Colorado Boulder enrollment increased by 13.75%, the highest growth among benchmarked cities.

Key Takeaways

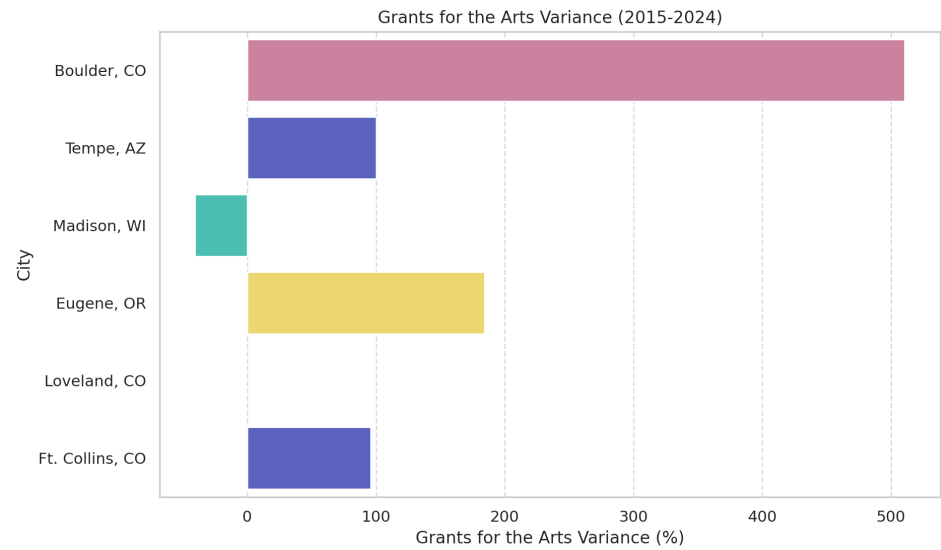
- Boulder's university **growth** is outpacing its population growth, showing the city's continued **appeal** as an academic hub.
- Compared to peer cities, Boulder is experiencing **strong university expansion** despite slower population growth.
- The city remains competitive with other **education-driven economies** like Madison but lags behind in overall residential growth.
- Boulder's trajectory suggests a **balanced and sustainable expansion**, reinforcing its position as a hub for education, innovation, and culture.

Local tax-funded support for arts and culture: 2023 vs. 2015

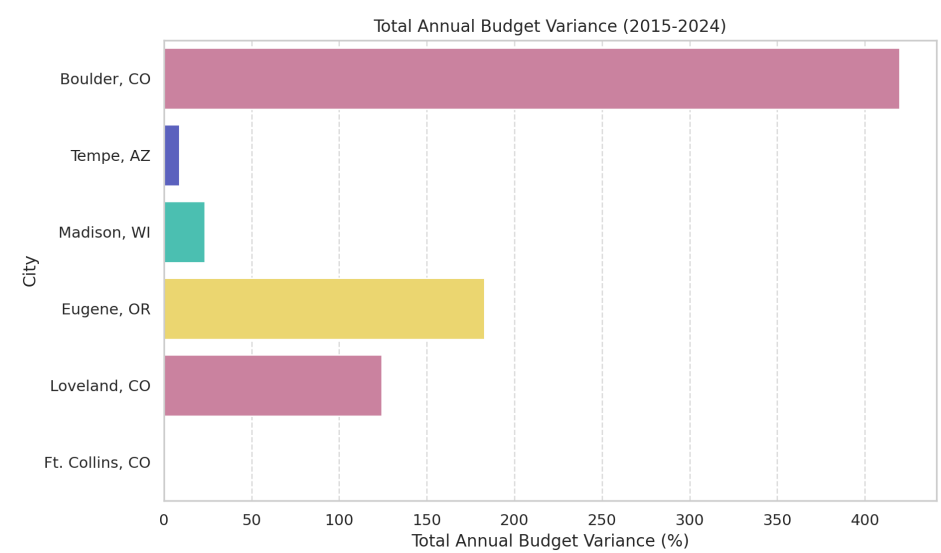
Per capita expenditure variance (2015-2024)



Grants for the arts variance (2015-2024)



Total annual budget variance (2015-2024)



All Data ³

City	Per Capita Expenditure (2024)	Per Capita Expenditure (2015)	Per Capita Expenditure Variance (%)	Grants for the Arts (2024)	Grants for the Arts (2015)	Grants for the Arts Variance (%)	Total Annual Budget, including facility funding/subsidy (2024)	Total Annual Budget, including facility funding/subsidy (2015)	Total Annual Budget, including facility funding/subsidy Variance (%)
Boulder, CO	29.62	6.94	326.8	1,478,200	242,000	510.83	3,056,093	587,872	419.86
Tempe, AZ	53.24	59.00	-9.76	300,000	150,000	100	9,807,944	9,000,000	8.98
Madison, WI	8.66	8.71	-.57	101,000	170,000	-40.59	2,428,958	1,970,000	23.3
Eugene, OR	79.16	31.25	153.31	162,000	57,000	184.21	14,082,000	4,975,000	183.06
Loveland, CO	67.04	35.54	88.63	0	0	0	5,332,456	2,376,866	124.35
Ft. Collins, CO	29.91	34.78	-14	713,459	364,500	95.74	5,100,000	5,066,866	0.65

³ All data presented on cities are derived from publicly available U.S. Census Bureau data and supplemented by information directly sourced from organizational reports and statistical publications available on their respective websites.

Peer benchmarking insights: positive trends

Boulder leads in arts funding growth

- Boulder's per capita arts expenditure increased by 326.8%, rising from \$6.94 in 2015 to \$29.62 in 2024—one of the largest growth rates among the benchmark cities.
- This significant increase signals a strong municipal commitment to arts and culture, making Boulder one of the top investors in the sector.

Increase in grant funding for the arts

- Boulder's arts grant funding grew by 510.83%, jumping from \$242,000 in 2015 to \$1,478,200 in 2024—the largest increase among the benchmarked cities.
- This signals a high level of direct support for artists and cultural organizations, which in turn will foster a thriving arts ecosystem.

Expansion of total budget for arts and culture

- Boulder's total annual budget for arts and culture increased by 419.86%, growing from \$587,872 in 2015 to \$3,056,093 in 2024.
- This rapid expansion suggests the city is prioritizing arts as a central component of its community and economic development strategies.

Peer benchmarking insights: challenges in arts funding

These are initial observations based on comparative data and do not serve as formal recommendations. While Boulder has made significant progress in arts funding, data from comparable cities suggests areas where continued growth and strategic planning may be necessary to maintain competitiveness.

Boulder's per capita arts spending remains lower than other cities

- Despite a substantial increase, Boulder's per capita expenditure (\$29.62) remains less than half of Loveland (\$67.04) and Eugene (\$79.16).
- This suggests that while Boulder has made great strides, there is still room for further growth to align with other high-investment cities.

Some cities are growing at a faster rate in overall budget expansion

- Boulder's 419.86% growth in total arts funding is substantial, yet cities like Loveland (124.35%) and Eugene (183.06%) have also seen significant increases.
- Eugene's total annual budget (\$14M) is nearly five times that of Boulder (\$3M), indicating Boulder could pursue further expansion to reach a similar scale of investment.

Boulder's grant funding increase is impressive, but there is still room for scalability

- A 510.83% increase in grants is an extraordinary leap, but sustaining this level of support long-term will require a mix of public, corporate, and private philanthropy.
- In comparable markets, one-time funding increases have proven most effective when leveraged into extended and diversified funding models to maintain lasting support for artists and organizations.

Regional competition in arts investment is increasing

- While Boulder is expanding its arts funding, cities like Loveland and Eugene continue to invest heavily in per capita spending. Of note, some benchmarked cities also contribute to the management and operation of venues using arts funds while Boulder's comparable contributions are not captured in the arts budget.
- To remain competitive, Boulder may need to explore new revenue sources, strategic partnerships, and innovative arts programming in response to rising investment in peer cities.

Proposed peer markets

Boulder, CO should reconsider its benchmark cities for arts and culture spending, university influence, and economic impact, shifting away from comparisons with **Madison, WI; Eugene, OR; Loveland, CO; and Fort Collins, CO** and **instead aligning with Tempe, AZ; Clearwater, FL; Alexandria, VA; Tacoma, WA; and Santa Fe, NM⁴**. The previous benchmarks, while regionally relevant, do not fully capture Boulder's exponential growth in arts investment, particularly in per capita arts spending, grant funding, and total arts-related budgets.

Boulder's per capita arts expenditure skyrocketed by 326.8% since 2015, reaching \$29.62 per person, while cities like Madison (-0.57%) and Fort Collins (-14%) saw stagnation or decline. Furthermore, grants for the arts in Boulder increased by 510.83% to nearly \$1.5 million, far outpacing Madison (-40.59%) and demonstrating that Boulder's arts economy is rapidly expanding beyond its former peer group. Additionally, Boulder's total annual budget, including facility funding and subsidies, grew by 419.86%—more than double the growth rate of any previous benchmark city. This suggests Boulder is investing at a level more aligned with higher-funded arts economies like Tacoma (\$162.9M in industry expenditures), Clearwater (\$125.6M), and Santa Fe (\$353.8M), rather than Fort Collins or Loveland.

From a university perspective, while Madison and Eugene have larger student populations (48,557 and 23,834, respectively), their enrollment growth has been slower than Boulder's (13.75%), reflecting a less dynamic university-driven arts scene. Meanwhile, Tempe (home to Arizona State University) has a comparable university-driven cultural ecosystem, though ASU's enrollment has slightly declined (-4.18%). Additionally, Boulder's population growth (2.65%) is far lower than previous benchmark cities like Loveland (18.95%) and Madison (15.19%), indicating that rather than relying on rapid expansion, Boulder is strengthening its position as a highly concentrated, high-investment arts hub. This shift prioritizes deepening cultural impact and increasing per capita investment in the arts rather than expansion driven by sheer population increases. Growth in Boulder's arts sector is not related to population increase, but rather an expanding field of cultural organizations and a stated desire to strengthen cultural infrastructure.

Public investment in the arts is also a critical factor. While cities like Tempe, Tacoma, Santa Fe, and Clearwater have robust Percent for Art programs, previous benchmarks like Fort Collins and Loveland do not operate at the same scale, limiting their effectiveness as comparisons for Boulder's growing arts infrastructure. While universities play an important role in local arts ecosystems, arts spending and economic impact are stronger indicators of a thriving arts economy than university enrollment size alone.

Ultimately, Boulder has outgrown its prior benchmarks and should compare itself to cities with stronger arts funding, higher total arts expenditures, and a balance between local and tourism-driven audience spending. By aligning with Tempe, Clearwater, Alexandria, Tacoma, and Santa Fe, Boulder can ensure that its arts economy remains competitive, sustainable, and positioned for long-term growth.

⁴ All comparison data was derived from the [Arts & Economic Prosperity 6 \(AEP6\) Reports](#) and analyzed against Boulder, CO's reported arts data, as well as the respective arts and economic data from each benchmarked city's publicly available data.

Highlights of proposed benchmarked cities

Boulder, CO vs. Tempe, AZ

- Total Arts Economic Impact: Boulder (\$115.1M) vs. Tempe (\$102.9M)
- Arts & Culture Jobs: Boulder (2,451) vs. Tempe (1,844)
- Audience Spending: Boulder (\$33.28 per person) vs. Tempe (\$39.56 per person)
- Population (2023): Boulder: 105,898 vs. Tempe: 189,834
- University: University of Colorado Boulder (34,428 students) vs. Arizona State University (79,818 students)

Public Art: Tempe Public Art is funded by the Municipal Arts Fund. One percent of the city's total annual capital improvements budget is appropriated for the Municipal Art Fund in order to advance art in all its forms.

Key Takeaway: Tempe's arts economy is slightly smaller but benefits from higher visitor spending. Boulder has stronger local tax revenue generation and employment impact, with both cities supported by major universities.

Boulder, CO vs. Clearwater, FL

- Total Arts Economic Impact: Boulder (\$115.1M) vs. Clearwater (\$125.6M)
- Arts & Culture Jobs: Boulder (2,451) vs. Clearwater (1,810)
- Audience Spending: Boulder (\$33.28 per person) vs. Clearwater (\$39.88 per person)
- Population (2023): Boulder: 105,898 vs. Clearwater: 116,850

Public Art: The Clearwater Public Art and Design Program requires that eligible City capital projects with a construction budget equal to or greater than \$500,000 must allocate no less than 1% of the project's total construction budget towards the incorporation of public works of art.

Key Takeaway: Clearwater relies more on tourism and retail shopping, while Boulder has a more balanced spending distribution and stronger arts workforce.

Boulder, CO vs. Alexandria, VA

- Total Arts Economic Impact: Boulder (\$115.1M) vs. Alexandria (\$111.5M)
- Arts & Culture Jobs: Boulder (2,451) vs. Alexandria (1,533)
- Audience Spending: Boulder (\$33.28 per person) vs. Alexandria (\$34.59 per person)
- Population (2023): Boulder: 105,898 vs. Clearwater: 155,230

Public Art: Appropriates \$300K per year to CIP Public Art Projects, not inclusive of Developer Funds for Public Art.

Key Takeaway: Both cities have comparable arts economies, but Boulder has a larger arts workforce while Alexandria attracts more non-local visitors.

Boulder, CO vs. Tacoma, WA

- Total Arts Economic Impact: Boulder (\$115.1M) vs. Tacoma (\$162.9M)
- Arts & Culture Jobs: Boulder (2,451) vs. Tacoma (2,065)
- Audience Spending: Boulder (\$33.28 per person) vs. Tacoma (\$34.02 per person)
- Population (2023): Boulder: 105,898 vs. Tacoma: 222,906

Public Art: The Municipal Art Program dedicates 1% of construction costs from public capital projects to the creation of public art.

Key Takeaway: Tacoma has a larger arts economy but relies more on local audiences, whereas Boulder benefits from higher tourism-driven spending.

Boulder, CO vs. Santa Fe, NM

- Total Arts Economic Impact: Boulder (\$115.1M) vs. Santa Fe (\$353.8M)
- Arts & Culture Jobs: Boulder (2,451) vs. Santa Fe (3,828)
- Audience Spending: Boulder (\$33.28 per person) vs. Santa Fe (\$72.86 per person)
- Population (2023): Boulder: 105,898 vs. Santa Fe: 89,167

Public Art: The Art in Public Places ordinance mandates that 2% of the cost of capital construction projects, whether new construction or renovation, is set aside for the acquisition of art.

Key Takeaway: Santa Fe has made a stronger commitment to public art, dedicating 2% of its Capital Improvement Project (CIP) funding to public art, compared to Boulder's 1% allocation.

Arts and culture budget analysis

Contextualizing the budget

In 2023, Boulder voters passed the dedicated Arts, Culture, and Heritage Tax which repurposed 50% of the existing \$0.15 sales for “arts, culture and heritage purposes. This includes direct and grant funding for arts and culture nonprofits, professional artists, arts education, venues, and workspaces, public art and multi-cultural programs.” This is an extraordinary increase in public funds for arts and culture in Boulder.

The full impact of the Arts, Culture, and Heritage Tax measure will come into clear view over the coming two decades as the City of Boulder and its arts and culture partners invest funds into promising areas of growth and gaps in the creative ecosystem. However, it is important to contextualize the impact of these funds, by viewing it from two related perspectives.

First, Arts, Culture, and Heritage Tax funds should be situated within a broader understanding of the ways in which the City of Boulder supports the arts. Rather than viewing this funding as the sole, or exhaustive, source of support, it should rather be understood as one powerful tool among a set of other municipal policies, funding streams, and workflows that bear on Boulder’s creative sector.

Second, Arts, Culture, and Heritage Tax funds – and the varied portfolio of direct grants, operations, programming, and technical assistance to the creative sector that they support – ought to be considered in a national context. City governments that make sustained and robust investments in their creative ecosystems do not follow a single model; their portfolios vary widely (as addressed in the benchmarking section of this report), as reflected in their budgets.

Following is a discussion of these contexts, grounded in a budget analysis conducted by Public Sphere Projects, review of benchmark markets, in-depth discussions with national arts leaders, and input from Boulder’s arts and advocacy community including members of the Boulder Arts Commission, the Arts Blueprint Steering Committee, Create Boulder, and other stakeholders.

Budget insights and discussion

The Office of Arts and Culture budget does not capture the full extent of municipal arts investment.

As noted throughout this document, the Office of Arts and Culture budget has seen a substantial increase through the designation of Arts, Culture, and Heritage Tax funds. Consequently, the amount of grant support has grown, as has the capacity of the Office to conduct programming and provide needed services to the creative sector.

Yet this picture is incomplete. In fact, a great deal more support to the arts and culture sector is offered by sister agencies across the City of Boulder – as well as by other infusions of capital, staff time, and abatements.

For example, in the course of the previous three years, the City – with guidance from the Office of Arts and Culture – distributed \$1,065,000 in ARPA funds to the creative sector in addition to the Office's core budget. But if pandemic recovery funds represent one-time infusions, other sources of municipal support are sustained over the long term. City agencies such as Facilities and Fleet, Open Space and Mountain Parks, Parks and Recreation, Housing and Human Services, and Community Vitality each contribute staff, services, and financial support that complement investments made by the Office of Arts and Culture.

For the year 2024, the Percent for Art program issued \$271,145 in public art funding. In the next six years, it is projected to generate \$10M in public art commissions. The Community Culture, Resilience, and Safety tax channeled \$74,000 in support to arts and culture nonprofits. Parks and Recreation spent \$176,000 in arts programming, including dance and heritage events; approximately \$100,000 in subsidized rent and maintenance helped Studio Arts Boulder operate out of parks facilities. Open Space and Mountain Parks contracted \$50,000 in services from artists and creative practitioners. And Housing and Human Services provided some \$112,000 to creative engagement, such as afterschool programs.

The Community Vitality Department, which houses the Office of Arts and Culture, piloted the Affordable Commercial Grants program in 2024, aiming to spend up to \$850,000 on placing small business owners in Boulder's storefronts. The pilot is expected to assist creative enterprises including makers, galleries, and others in accessing visible space and attracting new audiences.

In 2024, cultural facilities received direct support and subsidies of \$1,044,920 from the Facilities and Fleet Department. The total includes an estimated \$790,000 in lease subsidies for the Dairy, BMoCA, and Chautauqua. The remainder supported capital and maintenance expenses for cultural tenants.

It is challenging to calculate a precise overall dollar amount dedicated to arts and culture by individual municipal departments and agencies. Between direct support, contracted labor, subsidies and abatements, and staff time, the total can be elusive. **With this caveat, however, it is possible to estimate that, in 2024 alone, between \$2 - \$3M was expended on arts and culture above and beyond the Office of Arts and Culture budget.**

Ratio of direct-to-overhead spending is not an effective measure of impact.

The proposed 2025 budget for the Office of Arts and Culture totals \$3,478,413. Of the total, \$1,850,100 is earmarked for direct program and grant expenditures. Remaining \$1,628,313 is divided among administrative expenses, the maintenance of the City's public art collection, cultural planning, and reserve and general fund allocation. On its face, this suggests that direct support to the arts and culture sector constitutes just over 50% of the budget. The roughly 50/50 ratio of direct-to-overhead spending has been named in stakeholder discussions as a point of contention, with arts advocates expressing frustration that a greater share of the budget is not dedicated to direct support. Corollary to this frustration is a sense that a high overhead may be an indication of organizational inefficiency or irresponsible use of public resources. These questions are understandable, given the passion of advocates and needs of the sector.

However, the 50/50 ratio alone is not a meaningful measure of efficacy or impact. The reasons for this are at least threefold. One is that the nonprofit and philanthropic sector has largely disavowed the so-called "overhead myth,"⁵ which obscures more substantive indicators of organizational impact. Another is that effective organizations consistently invest in tools and technologies, retain and attract competent staff, conduct strategic planning, and otherwise build capacity to perform excellent work. Finally, and most saliently, there is no single accepted standard for municipal arts agencies regarding direct-to-overhead spending.

Consider that in its 2024 budget of approximately \$150M, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, allocated 6% of its total budget to agency expenses. The overhead seems low at first blush, but it's vital to note that the City of New York provides the Cultural Institutions Group operating in public facilities with operating, capital, energy, and other support. Taking those costs into account, the "overhead" dramatically increases.

Through this long-established public-private partnership, a mutual benefit is 'based on the premise that the CIGs are privately managed organizations operating in public facilities established and maintained for the provision of cultural services and programs to the people of New York City.'⁶

Similarly, The City of Wichita Division of Arts and Cultural Services distributes approximately \$5M in funding to arts and cultural organizations. In 2024, \$4,632,705 of the total is earmarked for Cultural Institutions – a category of organizations that operate city-owned assets, including museums, botanical gardens, and the performing arts and convention center. Only remaining funds of \$472,084 are available through competitive grants to the city's nonprofits, emerging creative sectors, and individual artists.

Staff costs represent approximately 18% of the City of Boulder Office of Arts and Culture budget. By comparison, other cities are aligned: at Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program, for example, for 2024, the program's budget designated approximately 18.2% for personnel services, covering employee compensation. But the City of Dallas Office of Arts and Culture allocated 30.25% for personnel.

Finally, in peer-to-peer conversations with top arts leadership in Boston, Wichita, Fayetteville, AR, and Oakland, Public Sphere Projects encountered a similar range of responses to the issue of budget allocation. Some agencies responded to community needs by building up internal resources such as

⁵ <https://npr.brightspotcdn.com/legacy/sites/wlrn/files/gs-overheard-myth.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.cignyc.org/>

artist help desks and technical assistance resources. Others emphasized support to individual artists and creative practitioners. Still others – including the Boston Mayor’s Office of Arts and Culture – reported that their budgets are evenly split between direct support to the sector and department operations.

The 2025 Office of Arts and Culture budget does not accurately predict future investment.

The Office of Arts and Culture proposes a 2025 budget that lists several line items that are unique to that year. These items include a pair of one-time expenditures: the Arts Blueprint, undertaken as part of the Boulder comprehensive planning process which takes place every ten years, and a required one-time reserve that constitutes 16.7% of the overall revenue. The two allocations, accounting for nearly \$470,000, will not be reflected in the following years’ budgets.

Additionally, a balance of \$332,372 is estimated to be carried over at the end of the year. Altogether, some \$700,000 in excess spending can be anticipated in the following year’s budget.

The proposed 2025 budget should therefore not be taken as an absolute or accurate predictor for subsequent years of arts and culture funding in Boulder.

Expectations for the municipal government’s role are misaligned.

This discussion is offered in light of ongoing advocacy led by Create Boulder and the broader arts community. Create Boulder’s advocacy was a deciding factor in the passage of the Arts, Culture, and Heritage Tax measure as a dedicated funding stream for arts and culture. The network of nonprofits and artists that Create Boulder has mobilized credits the passage of the Arts, Culture, and Heritage Tax to these public advocacy efforts.

This group has long expressed disappointment with the way the City has stewarded funding for the sector. The City’s use of Arts, Culture, and Heritage Tax funds towards administrative expenses as well as towards the provision of direct support to the sector has become a flashpoint in a longer history of misunderstandings between municipal leadership and the creative sector, and has produced an environment of mutual mistrust. It should be noted that, while the current atmosphere is charged, the Office of Arts and Culture and its constituents – including Create Boulder – continue to respectfully and productively cooperate, as evidenced not only by the ongoing projects but the sector’s thoughtful engagement with the Arts Blueprint planning process.

Building public support ahead of the 2A Arts, Culture, and Heritage Tax vote was predicated on a shared sense among arts advocates that the City of Boulder had not been adequately resourcing the creative sector. In editorials and public campaigns, Create Boulder and others have pressured the City to allocate more resources to arts and culture, in general operating support to organizations, in capital funds for venues, and in more public recognition of the value that the sector accrues to the economy and reputation of Boulder.

The passage of this tax simultaneously held practical and symbolic dimensions. In practical terms, it would make more funds available to a wide field of hardworking nonprofits and artists. Symbolically, it was intended to demonstrate the City’s renewed commitment to arts and culture – a tangible, visible sign that Boulder values its creative sector and prioritizes supporting it. Advocates also saw

the passage of the Arts, Culture, and Heritage Tax as a course correction to years of underinvestment, deprioritization, and marginalization of the arts in Boulder.

A high – and likely unrealistic – expectation was therefore created around the Arts, Culture, and Heritage Tax. Initially celebrated as a win for the broad arts community, a rift emerged as City Council directed new funds to be split between direct support and agency overhead. In the months since the measure’s passage, sector advocates have repeatedly expressed a sense of being misled about the proposed 2025 budget (and Arts, Culture, and Heritage tax spending overall) and reported a feeling of being, as one stakeholder put it, “left hanging in the air.” “Betrayed,” was how another stakeholder summed it up.

The City of Boulder maintains that the proposed use of funds is consistent with intent and direction of City Council. The Arts, Culture, and Heritage tax represents not a new tax instrument, but a renewal of a legacy tax which had previously flowed into the City’s general fund. The 2024 passage of the Arts, Culture, and Heritage measure effectively diverted 50% of ongoing tax revenues into dedicated support for the arts. From the City’s perspective, this fund reflects the Council’s commitment to prioritizing the arts over other general fund expenditures, including line items related to essential public safety and human services.

A campaign to pressure the City to increase its Office of Arts and Culture budget has had the consequence of eroding trust between the arts sector and the City. For its part, the City of Boulder has also mismanaged a response to sector advocacy. Its decisionmaking has been characterized as opaque in the instance of allocating tax measure funds, and likewise in the procedures for CCRS revenues, instituting millage for Public Library District formation, tenant agreements for maintaining city-owned cultural facilities, and other financial relationships with the creative sector. City agencies and elected officials appear to communicate inconsistently with the sector, exacerbating a sense of precarity among constituents. At the moment, the City and the creative sectors are bound in a relationship that is defined simultaneously by a close working cooperation and a palpable mistrust. The Arts Blueprint process will need to repair trust and generate a candid and forward-looking discussion in order to achieve mutually aligned outcomes.

Finally, the singular focus on Arts, Culture, and Heritage tax funding, and on municipal support more broadly, has produced an unintended consequence of overreliance on the public sector. By consistently framing the City of Boulder’s investments in the arts as an existential issue, arts advocates have inadvertently portrayed the government as the primary (if not the sole) actor responsible for the vibrancy of the sector. This framing not only overstates the role of the municipal government in sustaining the entire creative sector, but, more dangerously, disincentivizes corporate and philanthropic giving. In other words, the public debate regarding the extent of government support may have caused a chilling effect among private-sector grantmakers. A more generative discussion will necessarily need to include voices of corporate and private philanthropy and reframe the government’s role from a primary source of support to that of a champion, catalyst, and supplier of risk capital to the creative sector.

2025 budget breakdown

Expense / Program	Amount	Percent of Budget
Grants	\$1.478M	42%
Ongoing Salaries and Administrative Costs	\$827,701	23%
Programming (including public art funding for artists)	\$371,900	11%
Estimated Fund Balance**	\$332,370	10%
One-time Reserves Establishment	\$302,992	9%
One-time Arts Blueprint Project funds*	\$165,250	5%

*Funds will be incorporated into the community funding for programs in 2026

**Funds will be incorporated into the community funding for programs in 2026

Next steps

Based on the insights gathered in Step 1, the consultant team will shift focus to extensive community engagement. Through surveys, focus groups, round table meetings, and one-on-one interviews, we will support the BVCP Update Team's efforts to gather targeted input from a wide range of stakeholders, ensuring the Blueprint reflects the diverse needs and perspectives of Boulder's creative community. With this input, we will co-create a draft Blueprint framework, including background research, benchmarking, a progress review of existing initiatives, and an analysis of community priorities. The draft will provide the foundation for the development of the Blueprint in Step 3.

The final step of Phase 1 will culminate in the preparation of the comprehensive Boulder Arts Blueprint. This document will incorporate all findings and recommendations, providing a clear and actionable roadmap for the City's Office of Arts and Culture. The Blueprint will outline priority actions, potential funding models, and implementation strategies aligned with the broader goals of the BVCP and the SER Framework. Additionally, the project team will develop a draft schedule for implementation, identify responsible parties for each action, and propose longer term solutions for sustained investment in Boulder's arts and culture sector.



Appendix

A: Public art funding in comparison to 2015 benchmarked cities

Boulder's commitment to public art funding aligns closely with Tempe, AZ, as both cities have expanded their programs to 1% Capital initiatives, ensuring continued integration of public art into capital projects. This positions Boulder as a leader among the benchmarked cities in maintaining a structured and sustained investment in cultural infrastructure.

Boulder's approach to public art funding places it among the more progressive and stable cities in this analysis. While some benchmarked cities have faced budgetary reductions, Boulder's commitment to public art through its 1% Capital program ensures a sustained and growing investment in cultural initiatives.⁷ This comparison underscores the city's role as a regional leader in embedding public art within its civic landscape.

All Data

City	Public Art Program (2024)	Public Art Program (2015)	Public Art Program Variance
Boulder, CO	1% Capital \$100K+	128,000	Increase
Tempe, AZ	1% Capital	152,000	Increase
Madison, WI	160,000	150,000	Decrease
Eugene, OR	1% CAPITAL \$50K+	1% CAPITAL \$50K+	Steady
Loveland, CO	931,194	351,040	Increase
Ft. Collins, CO	105,900	325,000	Decrease

⁷ While Boulder's 1% Capital program provides a dedicated funding source for public art, the actual budget allocation will fluctuate annually based on the municipality's investment in capital projects each fiscal year. This means that while the program ensures a sustained commitment to public art, the total funding available may vary depending on broader infrastructure and development priorities.

B: Extended data for proposed peer markets

Boulder, CO vs. Tempe, AZ

Total Arts Economic Impact

Boulder: \$115.1M (\$53.5M from organizations, \$61.6M from audiences)

Tempe: \$102.9M (\$49.3M from organizations, \$53.6M from audiences)

Arts & Culture Employment

Boulder: 2,451 jobs (1,711 from organizations, 740 from audiences)

Tempe: 1,844 jobs (1,071 from organizations, 773 from audiences)

Audience Attendance & Spending

Boulder: 1.85M attendees | \$33.28 per person (\$25.59 local, \$46.97 non-local)

Tempe: 1.35M attendees | \$39.56 per person (\$33.58 local, \$71.88 non-local)

Tax Revenue from Arts & Culture

Boulder: \$4.6M local, \$2.9M state, \$14.3M federal

Tempe: \$2.53M local, \$3.77M state, \$15.8M federal

Event-Related Spending Per Person

Food & Drink: Boulder \$14.41 | Tempe \$12.64

Retail Shopping: Boulder \$4.28 | Tempe \$8.38

Overnight Lodging: Boulder \$3.93 | Tempe \$3.27

Benchmarking: Tempe vs. Boulder

Similarities

- Both cities have strong arts economies with over \$100M in total arts-related spending.
- High audience engagement, with over 1.3M attendees annually in Tempe and 1.85M in Boulder.
- Significant impact on jobs and non-local tourism contributions.

Differences

- Boulder's arts economy is slightly larger with higher total expenditures and more jobs in the arts sector.
- Boulder generates more local tax revenue, while Tempe contributes more at the state and federal levels.
- Tempe has higher per-person spending, particularly among non-local visitors (\$71.88 vs. \$46.97 in Boulder).

Boulder, CO vs. Clearwater, FL

Total Arts Economic Impact

Boulder: \$115.1M (\$53.5M from organizations, \$61.6M from audiences)

Clearwater: \$125.6M (\$51.7M from organizations, \$73.9M from audiences)

Arts & Culture Employment

Boulder: 2,451 jobs (1,711 from organizations, 740 from audiences)

Clearwater: 1,810 jobs (725 from organizations, 1,085 from audiences)

Audience Attendance & Spending

Boulder: 1.85M attendees | \$33.28 per person (\$25.59 local, \$46.97 non-local)

Clearwater: 1.85M attendees | \$39.88 per person (\$34.53 local, \$53.05 non-local)

Tax Revenue from Arts & Culture

Boulder: \$4.6M local, \$2.9M state, \$14.3M federal

Clearwater: \$4.36M local, \$4.7M state, \$15.5M federal

Event-Related Spending Per Person

Food & Drink: Boulder \$14.41 | Clearwater \$14.42

Retail Shopping: Boulder \$4.28 | Clearwater \$5.97

Overnight Lodging: Boulder \$3.93 | Clearwater \$7.04

Benchmarking: Clearwater vs. Boulder

Similarities

- Both cities have strong arts economies with over \$100M in total arts-related spending. High audience engagement, with nearly 1.85M attendees annually.
- Significant impact on jobs and tax revenue contributions.

Differences

- Boulder has a stronger nonprofit arts organization base.
- Clearwater generates more state and federal tax revenue.
- Clearwater has higher visitor spending, particularly on lodging and shopping.

Boulder, CO vs. Alexandria, VA

Total Arts Economic Impact

Boulder: \$115.1M (\$53.5M from organizations, \$61.6M from audiences)

Alexandria: \$111.5M (\$55.8M from organizations, \$55.6M from audiences)

Arts & Culture Employment

Boulder: 2,451 jobs (1,711 from organizations, 740 from audiences)

Alexandria: 1,533 jobs (977 from organizations, 556 from audiences)

Audience Attendance & Spending

Boulder: 1.85M attendees | \$33.28 per person (\$25.59 local, \$46.97 non-local)

Alexandria: 1.61M attendees | \$34.59 per person (\$26.11 local, \$39.79 non-local)

Tax Revenue from Arts & Culture

Boulder: \$4.6M local, \$2.9M state, \$14.3M federal
Alexandria: \$4.86M local, \$2.2M state, \$12.7M federal

Event-Related Spending Per Person

Food & Drink: Boulder \$14.41 | Alexandria \$12.08
Retail Shopping: Boulder \$4.28 | Alexandria \$7.89
Overnight Lodging: Boulder \$3.93 | Alexandria \$2.98

Benchmarking: Alexandria vs. Boulder

Similarities

- Both cities have strong arts economies.
- High audience engagement.
- Significant tax revenue contributions.

Differences

- Boulder has a larger arts workforce.
 - Alexandria is more reliant on non-local visitors.
 - Boulder has higher per-person spending in food and lodging, while Alexandria's is higher in retail.
-

Boulder, CO vs. Tacoma, WA

Total Arts Economic Impact

Boulder: \$115.1M (\$53.5M from organizations, \$61.6M from audiences)
Tacoma: \$162.9M (\$87.1M from organizations, \$75.9M from audiences)

Arts & Culture Employment

Boulder: 2,451 jobs (1,711 from organizations, 740 from audiences)
Tacoma: 2,065 jobs (1,318 from organizations, 747 from audiences)

Audience Attendance & Spending

Boulder: 1.85M attendees | \$33.28 per person (\$25.59 local, \$46.97 non-local)
Tacoma: 2.23M attendees | \$34.02 per person (\$30.70 local, \$47.63 non-local)

Tax Revenue from Arts & Culture

Boulder: \$4.6M local, \$2.9M state, \$14.3M federal
Tacoma: \$5.18M local, \$6.49M state, \$17.01M federal

Event-Related Spending Per Person

Food & Drink: Boulder \$14.41 | Tacoma \$13.73
Retail Shopping: Boulder \$4.28 | Tacoma \$11.53
Overnight Lodging: Boulder \$3.93 | Tacoma \$1.41

Benchmarking: Tacoma vs. Boulder

Similarities

- Both cities have strong arts economies.
- High audience engagement.
- Significant tax revenue contributions.

Differences

- Tacoma's arts economy is significantly larger.
 - Boulder has a higher percentage of non-local attendees.
 - Tacoma visitors spend more on retail shopping, while Boulder visitors spend more on lodging.
-

Boulder, CO vs. Santa Fe, NM

Total Arts Economic Impact

Boulder: \$115.1M (\$53.5M from organizations, \$61.6M from audiences)

Santa Fe: \$353.8M (\$99.6M from organizations, \$254.2M from audiences)

Arts & Culture Employment

Boulder: 2,451 jobs (1,711 from organizations, 740 from audiences)

Santa Fe: 3,828 jobs (1,253 from organizations, 2,575 from audiences)

Audience Attendance & Spending

Boulder: 1.85M attendees | \$33.28 per person (\$25.59 local, \$46.97 non-local)

Santa Fe: 3.49M attendees | \$72.86 per person (\$52.98 local, \$111.50 non-local)

Tax Revenue from Arts & Culture

Boulder: \$4.6M local, \$2.9M state, \$14.3M federal

Santa Fe: \$6.47M local, \$13.78M state, \$26.7M federal

Event-Related Spending Per Person

Food & Drink: Boulder \$14.41 | Santa Fe \$18.95

Retail Shopping: Boulder \$4.28 | Santa Fe \$19.68

Overnight Lodging: Boulder \$3.93 | Santa Fe \$14.20

University Influence

Boulder: University of Colorado Boulder (34,428 students)

Santa Fe: St. John's College (400 students), Institute of American Indian Arts (600 students)

Benchmarking: Santa Fe vs. Boulder

Similarities

- Both cities have highly engaged arts audiences and over \$100M in total arts spending.

- Non-local tourism plays a major role in both economies, though to different extents.

Differences

- Santa Fe's arts economy is over three times the size of Boulder's, driven largely by tourism rather than local spending.
- Santa Fe generates far more tax revenue from the arts, especially at the state and federal levels.
- Boulder's arts ecosystem is university-driven, while Santa Fe's thrives on independent artists and visitors.

D: Initial observations

Building on multiple data sources, including research, observation, and community input, the consultant team shared preliminary insights regarding the strengths, challenges, and opportunities inherent in Boulder's creative ecosystem with the Advisory Committee in December 2024. The set of insights, as summarized below, is descriptive rather than prescriptive in tone and substance. It was intended as a means for stimulating feedback and ideation for municipal leadership, Advisory Committee, and key stakeholders – not as actionable recommendations.

These insights reflect points of alignment and disagreement among multiple segments of stakeholders; they are also grounded in rigorous data comparisons and analysis. They will be refined and expanded during Steps 2 and 3 as additional feedback and data are collected.

The good:

- Capable municipal arts and culture department
- Staffed, resourced, responsive
- Engaged and passionate arts sector
- Increased municipal funding
- Growing university enrollment
- Safe place for queer, trans, neurodivergent people
- High net worth individuals
- Appetite for change



Precedent: Preserving artist space: Humphreys Street Studio

- \$1.7M in municipal investment to preserve affordable artist workspaces and create new housing
- Funded through municipal and state partnerships
- Prioritizes affordability and accessibility for artists

The less good:

- Lack of philanthropic and private-sector champions
- Overreliance on municipal resources
- Overemphasis on existing sectors
- Monoculture of outdoor recreation, tech, higher ed
- Disconnection among cultural nodes
- Archipelago of campuses, downtown, NoBo
- Dependence on tourism
- Quality, content of art focused on the visitor market
- Complicated municipal processes
- Permitting and misaligned investments
- Missing histories of Indigenous culture-bearers
- Insufficient infrastructure and venues for creative expression



Precedent: Auto plant turned cultural community hub: Dreamtrot

- \$30 million mixed-use community, offering affordable housing, creative workspaces, and cultural venues
- Strategically located between Motown Museum and College for Creative Studies, enhancing cultural significance

The next:

- Elevate arts and culture into a cabinet-level position
- Identify and recruit private-sector arts champions
- Strengthen partnerships among sectors
- Seek aligned incentives across tech, rec, and higher ed
- Overlap municipal investment and development in key geographic nodes
- Reposition city-owned real estate and space assets
- Retell narrative of Boulder as a safe space for outsider, queer, and marginal identities
- Highlight existing artistic excellence in performing arts, music, Indigenous arts, etc.

