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Drawn Together

By Susan Soroko

ARTS & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Attracting and retaining businesses takes economic development authorities to new creative levels. Learn how tracking local makers, artisans, and entrepreneurs can contribute to sector diversification and stability. Agility and community relationships are the hallmarks of the way many creative businesses thrive, especially during unforeseen challenges.

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“The creative economy is recognized as a significant sector and a meaningful contributor to the national gross domestic product. It has spurred innovation and knowledge transfer across all sectors of the economy and is a critical sector to foster inclusive development.” – *United Nations Conference on Trade and Development*

INTRODUCTION

When businesses and creatives collaborate beyond traditional exhibitions, performances or embellishments, new outcomes are the catalysts for a competitive advantage. For every sized community, assessing its assets, opportunities, and untapped business relationships is core to new sector development. In Arlington County, Virginia, keeping a pipeline of new industries that impact and influence other sectors is key to diversifying the business base for long term gains.

WHAT IS THE CREATIVE ECONOMY?

If you ask an economic developer, an urban planner or an artist to define the creative economy, you'll probably get three different responses. It's not that the creative economy is undefinable. While it is deeply rooted in industry and occupation codes (Bureau of Economic Analysis Arts and Culture Satellite Account), creative economy initiatives of-

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TAKEAWAYS

- Regardless of economic standing, every community has creative assets that often exist independently. Artists and artisans exist everywhere. When featured, supported, promoted on social media, and held up collectively, these individuals and businesses form the basis of a sector that can set the community apart.
- Relationships with community members are essential to growing support for a creative sector. Whether a project idea can be implemented immediately or in the future, take stock of individuals and companies that are willing to host, sponsor, and promote. Stay connected until the time is right to launch a program, talk or workshop.
- Higher education, whether it's a community college or the main campus of a university, is key to workforce development. Find the departments that are training creative workers, ask them what they're preparing their students for, and make them an asset for businesses looking to move to your area.
- Why look at the creative economy now? As municipalities revisit their economic base post pandemic, supporting businesses that thrive on agility and creative problem solving will be essential.

ten evolve from placemaking, small businesses and maker spaces sprung from new technologies. It actually took someone with a background in international relations and urban design to put the first stake in the ground about how to define creative economy. Now, much of how creative economy is defined harkens back to the essence of what John Howkins posited as the title of his 2001 book *The Creative Economy: How People Make Money from Ideas*.

In 2013, researchers led by the National Creativity Network and supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts set out to establish definitions, purpose, and impact to frame this evolving sector. Seeking commonalities of industries, occupations, and practices, *America's Creative Economy* report noted that “creative economy involves both individuals and entities who engage in activities that add value to society in one or more

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ways through the provision of goods and/or services that are inextricably linked to human creativity manifesting itself in one or more dimensions throughout the process of ideation, creation, production, distribution, and use." From architects to media specialists, makers and chefs, the creative economy serves to both accentuate an area's assets and leverage its unique business models.

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Creative sectors are relevant to any size community, growing or mature, urban or rural, service or industrial, academic or agricultural. Many may know Arlington, Virginia, as the new home of Amazon HQ2, but in 2005, it had just been ranked first in the creative class index introduced by Richard Florida in *The Rise of the Creative Class*. Talent, transportation, and placemaking were heralded as key factors for urban planning and Arlington had them all.

With its proximity to the nation's capital, Arlington had grown into a comfortable suburb with many residents who worked for the federal government. It was also a natural place to launch many service companies that are largely defense contractors and government support agencies. Its rank in the creative class index was a direct result of astute and forward-thinking transportation planning, including the Washington Metro subway system, placemaking that included world-renowned public art, and a smart workforce that stayed because those index attributes also made Arlington attractive to both businesses and residents.

In today's competitive talent environment, a creative sector initiative stands as the next key to innovation and business diversification.

IMPORTANCE OF COLLABORATIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS

When it comes to sector development, a municipality needs partners. Arlington began by reaching out to people and organizations in the community and identified partners internally, like the Department of Parks and Recreation, and external ones like financial institutions, developers, universities, and housing companies. The first opportunity to explore a unique creative collaboration was at the Arlington Mill Community Center, a new

recreation and community facility with a street facing retail space that was unfinished and vacant. The neighboring community was anxious to have an anchor there, like a local café or restaurant, to attract the community as a gathering place and bring vibrancy to an area that had no Metro station.

Arlington invited attention to the space first through traditional real estate leasing agents, then with familiar community development partners, programs, and a few temporary uses. These efforts failed to find a tenant and the Economic Development Department was asked to help activate the space. What started with a photography exhibit documenting the community kicked off a facility-wide day-long festival. The photography exhibit of over 80 prints from Lloyd Wolf's book *Living Diversity* reflected the character and faces of the neighborhood. The prints were professionally installed (on unfinished dry wall) and became the colorful backdrop for dozens of other interim programs. From recreational art programs, author talks and history lectures, the space, which already had electricity, heat, and air conditioning was furnished with repurposed gallery lighting and became the starting point for other larger projects.

The unusual space was the genesis for a focus on supporting small local creative businesses. When the new Made in Arlington initiative was established with a nod to discovering local artisans and makers, the first Made in Arlington pop-up market was launched in the space as a mini one-day retail shop for Arlington makers and entrepreneurs. The sunny large windowed space also became a welcoming home to a trial run of a library pop-up. A place to pick a book, drop off a book, or sit down for story time provided the library with a perfect spot to test an upcoming temporary use of another, larger vacant retail space in Arlington's Crystal City neighborhood.

True to its intent, the pop-up markets and temporary uses resulted in finding a permanent tenant, which was great for the space, but left this segment of Arlington's



Arlington Mill Community Center, Made in Arlington Pop-Up shop.

Image by Lloyd Wolf

creative economy without a home. Not far away, however, were two unique opportunities for partnerships.

DOES ART NEED TO BE IN A GALLERY? FINDING CREATIVE VENUES

For the duration of the temporary space at Arlington Mill, the photography installation drew attention from just about everyone who came into the space. Although it had to be dismantled and returned to the photographer once a tenant was secured, the notion of an exhibit on some other existing wall space was still top of mind.

A credit union may not immediately come to mind as a community partner for an art installation, but without a lot of convincing, they were perfect. The Arlington Community Federal Credit Union had a similar mission to a nearby artist's studio. At their core, both were serving Arlington. When the Credit Union's CEO attended the nearby Columbia Pike Artists Studio open house, it became easy to imagine an exhibit in the Credit Union lobby.

With collaboration from Arlington Economic Development, the Credit Union received guidance to host original artwork in their main headquarters and in a branch office. The artists, famously introverted, had a new venue to help sell their work, be visible in the community, and even get a few commissions. Walking in to a previously non-descript lobby, the Credit Union employees were pleasantly surprised that they felt differently about their workplace. Perhaps most valuable were the business members, the customers, and the board of directors who took notice of how these two separate institutions were serving their community in a very unique way.

What came next was a project that had impact beyond expectation. Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing (APAH) is primarily a real estate developer, but they're also a community builder. When they were about to open a new property at Columbia Hills, APAH wanted to demonstrate a bigger connection to its residents and the neighborhood. With a dedicated budget to purchase



Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing.

Staff image. Painting by David Carlson

local art and a commitment to the community, APAH sought guidance, curation, and input. Working with Arlington Economic Development to connect to Arlington artists, they installed original art in all of the common areas and added new art-based programming to their properties.

The initiative opened the door in unexpected ways for an affordable housing organization to build a different relationship with the creative community. What began with installing art throughout the property and continuing with artist-led programs, APAH is now in the process of establishing an artist-in-residency program with Arlington Cultural Affairs through a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

INTERNAL PARTNERS

These project examples built a body of evidence that partnerships and opportunities really are everywhere. After the pop-up market activation that filled the vacancy at Arlington Mill succeeded in attracting a tenant, the signature Made in Arlington initiative needed a new home. The individuals and small businesses that got an opportunity to test their products in a new marketplace were ready for more. A few, like pie bakers and coffee roasters, had opened bricks and mortar locations, so exposing more vendors to the marketplace was an important component of the program. By extending the marketplace experience with a combination of partners and an existing economic development resource, Arlington had created an inclusive, diverse platform to grow artisan businesses and needed what many startups needed, a space to continue.

As it happened, the public library has a small retail shop within the branch location in Arlington's main government building lobby. Was it possible to dedicate a section of the library shop in this public government building to vendors whose items were made in Arlington? Taking cues from big retail, it would be modeled as a shop within a shop. For the library, this would not displace the many Arlington County logo t-shirts, water bottles and hats sold to visitors and some employees. In-



Arlington Community Federal Credit Union.

Staff image

stead, it would be another way to have something unique in the shop, a show of support for local businesses and branded as Made in Arlington.

To bring attention to this new collaboration and extend the exposure of some vendors not suited to a small shop (furniture, food, perishables or pricier items), an assortment of holiday and special occasion pop-up markets was established right outside the library. The lobby in the government building is a very wide corridor where people come and go, whether they're registering to vote, voting absentee, taking their business plans up to zoning or paying their taxes. There's a lot of foot traffic and no outdoor festival weather insecurities. With the help and support of the library and the building management that supplies tables, chairs, and indoor and outdoor signage, Made in Arlington is able to conduct regular ongoing pop-up markets featuring new and established artisans. Pay your taxes, file your site plans, buy some chocolates.

FOR-PROFIT CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

Business attraction/retention and workforce development remain key features to any sector development. So, what about the for-profit creatives? These companies, such as the media, web and graphic designers, ad agencies, architects, film companies and more, didn't have a platform for showing off their collective impact on innovation. Like many industries, each segment tends to keep close company within their ranks. But now that we have Amazon HQ2 in our neighborhood, every business is in the position to increase their capacity to be more innovative and a catalyst for competition. What's their big advantage, collectively and individually? How will they stand as a sector? With that in mind, Arlington launched the Return on Creativity series.

PROGRAMS AND EXTERNAL PARTNERS

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The Return on Creativity program expands the impact of creative businesses in the community. Partnering with universities to host events and aligning with professional associations like The American Institute of Graphic Arts; the American Advertising Federation, DC Metro Chapter; and the American Institute of Architects has widened the door between the disciplines. Among those, many have been tapped to join as program partners for topics and content that are timely and relevant to their industries.



Arlington Mill Community Center; Living Diversity photo exhibit opening.

Photo by Duy Tran.

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Arlington hosts regular events after work, networking series highlighting placemaking, branding, marketing, urban design, architecture, media and more. Our business organizations often support the programs with food from local restaurants, another way they bring value to their members. When a business improvement district fast tracked occupancy of a vacant retail space into a temporary creative oasis, nearly a dozen public and private stakeholders had good reason to take credit.

These Return on Creativity networking events culminated in a day-long summit called Return on the Future. If there's one thing creative entrepreneurs do well, it's keep a phenomenal network of connections. From this network, the program team representing advertising, marketing, media, and a university invited an array of panelists from real estate developers, media, AI specialists, hospitality leaders, association strategists, and many more who were willing to come together and talk about how they differentiate themselves with creative strategies. Set in an expansive co-working space, this event provided a glimpse at what cross-sector interaction can generate for innovation.

The feedback from the organizers, the attendees, and the panelists was that this was such a rare opportunity for them to collaborate and talk to people who were not just professionals in their respective industries. It was intentional cross-sector programming, bringing people together and using their creative skills across many different sectors.

STEPS TO DEVELOPING AN INITIATIVE

Where do you go to launch a creative economy initiative? Starting points are typically available in most communities no matter what size or maturity. Begin by taking advantage of existing programs or resources that both

Around the country there is a groundswell of “Made in” programs that are cookie cutter in name only. Discovering unique talent in any community will set these makers, artisans and entrepreneurs apart. Rarely are any of the individual makers able to afford a standalone retail shop but together they bring a variety of products to a marketplace where they can begin to test their viability and scalability.

businesses and artists can take advantage of. Track what’s already in your jurisdiction. Look at what other municipalities are doing (like Seattle and Denver). The Chamber of Commerce is one example. Other groups that typically have chapters or representation in just about every community include the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE), originally founded under the federal Small Business Administration. SCORE offers many free and low-cost business resources, both online and in-person. In many communities, SCORE offers a free one-on-one mentoring program, a significant supplement to Arlington’s small business division, BizLaunch, working with entrepreneurs and startup businesses on every aspect of business planning, funding, capacity building, and marketing.

Arlington also works with business partnership organizations and business improvement districts. Not every municipality may have a business improvement district which typically has their own special taxing capacity. But these organizations, even if they’re on the smaller scale and don’t have giant budgets, can help with event support. Partnership organizations may do a mural project, a festival or community fairs. Often with a slim staff themselves, these organizations rely on experts from both the public and private sector for content that’s of value to their constituents.

Around the country there is a groundswell of “Made in” programs that are cookie cutter in name only. Discovering unique talent in any community will set these makers, artisans and entrepreneurs apart. Rarely are any of the individual makers able to afford a standalone retail shop but together they bring a variety of products to a marketplace where they can begin to test their viability and scalability. Using a space without overhead cost, deploying an inexpensive marketing plan, complemented on an existing government website and having the participating vendors heavily use social media have made the most of the assets in place. Beyond a government center space, there are explorations for pop-ups in different kinds of venues like hotels, office building lobbies, or even a hospital lobby, all to bring support to small business and a unique market to visitors.

The Made in Arlington program fits under the small business support umbrella, so the vendors aren’t charged a fee for the table space. They manage their own sales, pay their sales tax, and get some promotion. Through observation and feedback, they are guided into programs that can help them expand their business, solidify their marketing, teach them how to do social media or whatever they need to do to prosper beyond having a table in a pop-up space. Nothing can guarantee success, but offering an array of tools and resources is likely more than what they’ll have on their own.

FUTURE/ CHALLENGES/LESSONS LEARNED

In order for any initiative to succeed, the conditions have to be favorable and members of the sector need conditions that support them. Incentives, access to affordable space, investment, marketplace, marketing, health insurance – all of the elements critical to any industry sector – are especially important to creatives who often work alone.

Any initiative starts with taking stock of both the challenges and opportunities that exist in the municipality. Arlington’s path has not been without its challenges. In 2010, a publicly supported contemporary arts center opened and in 2015, it closed. Public support of the arts can be fragile. It’s important to know what the community support is and who the champions are. Identifying allies and reaching out to those members of the community is critical. It may be a banker. It may be a developer who’s amenable to short-term retail vacancies that could be used for popups or other unique uses.

Does the community have favorable zoning with permits that can support small scale manufacturing? Small scale manufacturing can be anything from breweries to 3D printed products to that special jam made at the favorite bakery. What funding, incentives or grants are available that will help spark more collaborations between creatives and businesses?

There are a growing number of reasons that communities of all sizes are pursuing creative economy initiatives but some of the most striking are surfacing in the wake of the massive, unanticipated disruption by the coronavirus. Placemaking, activation, revitalization, small-scale manufacturing, tourism, and customer experience have been showing up in many aspects of urban and community planning for decades now. But the relevance and value of a creative sector in the midst of a global pandemic? This flexibility of space and facility use are now key to recovery. Some of the most unique ways that businesses are shifting their model to stay afloat are coming from a groundswell of creative and design thinking.

A creative workforce is more important than ever to solve problems, stabilize economic shock, innovate for the long game, and provide economic developers with another tool. There is no more business as usual.

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At the end of the day, it's important to start by keeping track of the impact of these efforts. One of the programs that's popular within our economic development department as a whole is Salesforce, which is a program that probably not everybody uses, but we certainly do, and a lot of other large organizations do.

I've worked with partners here within economic development to establish a section of Salesforce that tracks the creative economy. It becomes part of the infrastructure of the kinds of industries that we serve and industry sectors that are really important to us. Because at the end of the day, municipalities need to keep businesses, they need to attract businesses, and they need to engage businesses. The creative sector portion of that is really what is sparking a lot of innovation. It's the partnerships between businesses and creatives that make companies want to move and it makes them want to stay. 🌐

RESOURCES

Americans for the Arts (AFTA) pARTnership movement: Why businesses partner with the arts. <https://www.partnership-movement.org/>

America's Creative Economy; a primer to a definition, industries and occupations. <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/Research-Art-Works-Milwaukee.pdf>

Taking Root: The Growth of America's New Creative Economy. <https://www.recreatecoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/ReCreate-2017-New-Creative-Economy-Study.pdf>

The Create Act, proposed legislation. <https://www.americans-forthearts.org/sites/default/files/Arts%20Advocacy%20Day%202018%20-%20The%20CREATE%20Act.pdf>

New England Foundation for the Arts: Jobs in New England's Creative Economy and why they matter. <https://www.nefa.org/jobs-new-englands-creative-economy-and-why-they-matter>

Otis College of Art and Design: reports on California's creative economy. <https://www.otis.edu/creative-economy/2020>

There's Something About Seattle: Creative economy report. <https://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/FilmAndMusic/Creative%20Economy%20Report%20Final.pdf>

National Main Street Center. <https://www.mainstreet.org/home>

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