

New Bedford Designated a State Cultural District



At a board meeting of the Massachusetts Cultural Council (MCC) held at the Worcester Art Museum on March 18th, 2014, New Bedford received approval of its application to establish a state designated cultural district in its downtown. The New Bedford Seaport Cultural District is the only cultural district in Southeastern Massachusetts recognized by the state.

“Anyone who is familiar with New Bedford knows that our downtown is a natural fit for this MCC designation. It’s an attractive, diverse, walk-able place with many cultural assets, deeply rooted in the arts and supported by a dedicated group of leaders committed to fostering and enhancing its cultural vitality. The cultural district designation provides a means for better capitalizing on these assets through marketing, data collection, and sharing best practices. Perhaps most importantly, it provides our thriving arts and culture community a more formalized structure for collaboration. I appreciate the time and energy the Steering Committee has invested in the application process as well as the support New Bedford received from Senator Montigny and his staff.”

“New Bedford has been a national model for cities seeking to harness the power of arts and culture to revitalize their downtowns,” said Anita Walker, MCC Executive Director. “The New Bedford Seaport Cultural District takes this effort to a whole new level. It promises to bring more activity to the streets, attract more business – and businesses – to New Bedford, and widen the public’s engagement with the arts as a way to celebrate community.”

Senator Montigny, whose legislative efforts, including his Star Store legislation, have contributed to Downtown New Bedford’s renaissance as a center for the creative economy stated, “Vibrant arts and cultural districts not only improve the quality of life in communities but also are a strong economic development tool. The establishment of the New Bedford Seaport Cultural District is another milestone in Downtown New Bedford’s rebirth as a thriving art, cultural and entertainment center.” The Senator further added, “I am pleased to have worked with the Mayor and the Cultural District Steering Committee in securing the District’s designation which will ensure that good jobs, lasting development and an improved quality of life are provided to the citizens of New Bedford and the surrounding towns.”

New Bedford has grown over the years in the number of venues, events and organizations devoted to art, culture and history. Cultural programming and institutions such as AHA!, the Zeiterion, and a rich collection of galleries, museums, and historic sites all contribute to the City’s vibrancy. Recently, The Atlantic magazine named New Bedford the “7th most artistic city in the country.” Downtown New Bedford is also home of one of the nation’s urban National Parks.

Other cities in the Commonwealth with cultural districts have received assistance from a number of state agencies for improvements in their district. The New Bedford Seaport Cultural District designation is expected to help New Bedford advance toward its goals of increased tourism and business

development.

Dagny Ashley, Tourism Director for New Bedford is excited to have the opportunity to market and promote the city's cultural assets utilizing the state cultural district initiative. "Cultural districts have been proven to attract more tourism, enhance the experience for visitors and attract more visitor dollars," she said.

New Bedford's Seaport Cultural District is comprised of about 20 downtown blocks from the waterfront to North Sixth and Seventh Streets, and from Elm and William Streets to Union and Spring Streets, and includes the New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park. The New Bedford Seaport Cultural District contains 49 cultural attractions and 29 creative economy businesses (including 12 galleries, 10 restaurants, 11 shops). In addition, there are 18 district partners or businesses that are located outside the district but conduct programming within the district.

Many stakeholders partnered with the City to pursue the Seaport Cultural District designation and their dedication throughout the 11 month application process has been invaluable. A 30-member Steering Committee comprised of arts, culture, and business representatives, co-chaired by Mark Hess, VP of Acquisitions and Development at Hallkeen Management and Adrian Tio, Dean of UMass Dartmouth College of Visual and Performing Arts led the application process. The Steering Committee was supported by Senator Mark Montigny's staff and University of Massachusetts Dartmouth intern; City's Consultant, Michael Metzler; Angela Johnston, New Bedford Economic Development Commission and Dagny Ashley, City of New Bedford Director of Tourism and Marketing.

The Massachusetts Cultural Council oversees the designation process and emphasizes its goal of increasing economic activity through what is often referred to as the "Creative Economy." Many cities and towns have seen significant economic

impacts derived from activity in arts and culture.

About the Massachusetts Cultural Districts Initiative

The evidence is clear: A thriving creative sector is one of our Commonwealth's most powerful economic development assets. Recognizing this, the Massachusetts Legislature authorized MCC's Cultural Districts Initiative through an economic development bill in 2010. MCC launched the program April 2011, and has since designated 23 districts across the Commonwealth.

A cultural district is a specific geographical area in a community with a concentration of cultural facilities, activities, and assets. It is a walk-able, compact area that is easily identifiable to visitors and residents and a center of cultural, artistic and economic activity. The program celebrates and enhances the distinctiveness and cultural diversity of Massachusetts' cities and towns.

Cultural districts enhance experiences for visitors and thus attract more tourist dollars and tax revenue. They also attract working artists, cultural organizations and entrepreneurs of all kinds – enhancing property values and making communities more attractive. And they help local arts, history, and science organizations improve the quality and range of their public programs so that more local families can benefit from them.

The statute that created cultural districts has specific goals. They are:

Attract artists and cultural enterprises

Encourage business and job development

Establish the district as a tourist destination

Preserve and reuse historic buildings

Enhance property values

Foster local cultural development.