



Leadership through Collaboration

COOL Strategic Plan 2017-2020

**Draft 2A
February 15, 2017**



BACKGROUND

Introduction to COOL

The Cultural Organization of Lowell (COOL) was founded to help develop and promote a vibrant Arts & Culture District in Lowell and to provide support for the growing network of museums, galleries, performing arts organizations and artists settling in the city. COOL has developed programs to boost audience participation at existing venues, created programs and events that feature visual or performance artists, and helped develop artist workshops to enhance techniques or skills.

For approximately five years, until June, 2016, COOL was contracted by the City of Lowell to staff and perform the role of the City’s Cultural Affairs Office. During this time, COOL continued its work by adding more artist ‘events’ at city events like Winterfest. When the contract ended, COOL moved into a new downtown location and opened The COOL Place, an arts and culture community hub. At this new location visitors and residents can find information about activities around the city as well as shop in the retail store purchasing art from local artists.

Arts and Culture

COOL holds an inclusive view of arts and culture. COOL considers arts and culture to include but not be limited to creative expression in all its forms as well as history, lifestyle and ethnic culture.

Strategic Planning Process

In 2016, with the change in its relationship with the City of Lowell, the COOL Board of Directors decided it was time to engage in a process to re-evaluate COOL’s mission and programs and chart a course for the future. The process began with the formation of a strategic planning committee drawn from COOL’s Board of Directors.

Members of the COOL Strategic Planning Committee were:

- Celeste Bernardo
- Rod Griffith
- Andrew Jacobson
- Janet Leggat
- Jim Lichoulas

Strategic Consultant: Tamasin Foote



The strategic planning committee undertook a series of interviews and focus groups with arts and culture stakeholders from numerous organizations and the City. These focus groups and interviews were held to assess the current state of COOL as well as its future direction and to understand where stakeholders believe COOL can offer the most value to the arts and culture community in Lowell. More than 60 people were involved in the process.

STRATEGIC ANALYSIS

Where is COOL today?

Using the information collected through focus groups and interviews, the committee developed a clear picture of COOL and the arts and culture community in Lowell. The highlights of that analysis are shared below.

The Context

The last year brought major changes for COOL:

- COOL’s contract with the City of Lowell expired, reducing COOL’s funding and programming by 50%
- COOL Place opened giving COOL a physical presence in Downtown Lowell
- COOL’s Executive Director left and the Board Chair has been serving as acting Executive Director

State of the Arts and Culture Community in Lowell

- There are many successful arts and culture organizations in Lowell
- Lowell enjoys unique assets including established museums and arts groups as well as cultural institutions such as the National Park
- Cultural activities are numerous and diverse
- This is a complex community, not easily navigated
- Stakeholders spoke of the arts and culture community as fragmented and disconnected; lacking a common or unifying vision and mission
- Stakeholders spoke of a weak alignment of the City and the arts and culture community
- Arts and culture organizations and events are primarily focused on downtown Lowell
- Arts and culture organizations in Lowell feel underfunded

Main Themes

Looking to the future, the arts and culture community clearly indicated the overriding concern is the need for an economic focus i.e. for more people to spend more money on arts and culture in Lowell. Specifically, the planning process identified the desire and need for a unified vision and plan to market to audiences beyond the City of Lowell.



Two other primary themes emerged: the desire for significantly improved communication and collaboration among arts and culture organizations and the desire for effective advocacy on behalf of arts and culture in Lowell.

State of the Organization

The committee looked at the strengths and areas for growth and improvement for COOL keeping in mind the unique challenges and opportunities at this stage of organizational development.

- COOL is seen as *neutral* and taking an *umbrella* role within the arts and culture community
- COOL knows the players and is seen as speaking on behalf of all in the arts and culture community
- COOL has enjoyed a solid reputation
- COOL's recent change in its relationship with the City has caused uncertainty as to COOL's role and purpose
- Culture organizations are under-represented within COOL
- COOL faces uncertain funding and a lack of institutional support

Key Findings and Conclusions: The Opportunity

The strategic planning process affirmed that COOL is still an important part of the community and can play a critical role. The arts and culture community actively wants a leadership organization to step forward on their behalf. There is a widespread belief in the value and focus that COOL can offer. The strategic planning process also affirmed COOL's existing direction and focus.

COOL is well positioned to step boldly into a strong leadership role.

Envisioning the Future and Setting Direction

Considering the interests of the arts and culture community and COOL's strengths and role in the community, COOL has the opportunity to provide effective leadership. COOL has the opportunity to be a unifying force, acting as a liaison and fostering communication and collaboration. Further, COOL is well positioned to advocate on behalf of arts and culture in Lowell. To do this, COOL needs to take a more proactive and strategic approach with its programming and to expand its focus and programs to directly address the themes and opportunities identified in the planning process.

Vision for the Future: A vibrant and prosperous arts and culture economy in Lowell

Mission: To strengthen the vitality and economic growth of arts and culture in Lowell



Goals and Objectives

Goal 1: Strengthen the arts and culture community in Lowell

- Foster and enable a culture of communication, collaboration and support for all arts and culture organizations in Lowell
- Establish regular opportunities to bring arts and culture organizations together
- Develop and nurture opportunities for collaboration among arts and culture organizations
- Foster training opportunities and develop a library of resources for arts and culture organizations to operate more effectively
- Advocate on behalf of arts and culture in Lowell

Goal 2: Promote arts and culture to audiences both inside Lowell and beyond

- Facilitate the development of a unified marketing approach and branding strategy for the arts and culture community to attract people from beyond Lowell.
- Develop, expand and enhance promotion platforms for arts and culture organizations to participate (for example: website, database)
- Expand focus beyond Lowell to bring people to Lowell
- Actively seek engagement with people living and working in Lowell to take advantage of arts and culture opportunities
- Facilitate collaborations to create arts and culture opportunities (for example: the Art and Maker Festival, public art)

Goal 3: Strengthen COOL's organizational structure

- Hire an Executive Director
- Revamp COOL's governance structure by 1) reconfiguring the Board of Directors to include more culture organizations, diversity and functional members (for example, accountant, attorney, etc.,) 2) establishing appropriate advisory bodies and 3) redefining what is expected of board members
- Evaluate the strategic value and determine the future of COOL Place
- Establish sustainable funding

With these goals, COOL is prepared to move boldly to achieve its vision and mission.