



COMMUNITY LIFE AND THE ARTS

Portsmouth, New Hampshire
Cultural Plan



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**PORTSMOUTH, NEW HAMPSHIRE
CULTURAL PLAN**

**A PRODUCT OF THE MAYOR'S BLUE RIBBON
COMMITTEE ON ARTS AND CULTURE**

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Seal of the City of Portsmouth, which hangs in the City Council Chambers, rendered in wrought iron by Peter Happy

COMMUNITY LIFE AND THE ARTS: PORTSMOUTH'S CULTURAL PLAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Mayor's Blue Ribbon Committee on Arts and Culture was created in the fall of 1999 to develop a cultural plan to be incorporated into the City's master plan. The committee comprises Portsmouth, New Hampshire citizens representing business, cultural, community service, and education sectors. After a full year of focus groups with members of Portsmouth's academic, civic, cultural, and religious organizations, the Blue Ribbon Committee synthesized the major themes from these discussions into the following goals. These goals represent various steps Portsmouth and citizens can take to preserve and grow the city's cultural assets.

Preservation

Identify and preserve buildings and open spaces contributing to the unique character and cultural assets of Portsmouth

Space

Expand and support spaces for cultural activities and events, including affordable space for artists, and venues and space for performances, exhibitions, meetings, storage, rehearsal, and education

Youth

Engage young people in arts and cultural opportunities in all aspects of their life, including educational, recreational, and social settings

Business

Engage businesses with the arts and cultural community

Marketing

Market Portsmouth as a business and cultural destination

Agency

Create an arts and culture agency to act on the City's behalf on all matters related to arts and culture

INTRODUCTION



MERGING THE PRESENT WITH THE FUTURE: PRESERVING ARTS AND CULTURE IN PORTSMOUTH

We must insist upon the idea of culture-in-action, of culture growing within us like a new organ, a sort of second breath...the distinction between culture and civilization is an artificial one, providing two words to signify an identical function.

French theater critic Antonin Artaud (1896-1948)

During the two years the Mayor's Blue Ribbon Committee on Arts and Culture was involved in discussions on the "arts and culture" communities of Portsmouth, we soon realized just how expansive these definitions could be. The arts are, of course, those examples of paintings and photographs hanging on the walls of many boutiques and restaurants downtown.

The word "culture" can include the popular activities at Prescott Park as well as the more esoteric searches for information at the Portsmouth Athenaeum.

Those examples come easily. But what do we do, then, with our architecture, our old churches, our 250-year old cemeteries? How do we preserve what little waterfront we have? And does not the ancient fishing industry that still thrives in Portsmouth come under the heading of both arts and culture?

It can, and it probably should. As the definitions of arts and culture expanded, the Blue Ribbon Committee recognized that the preservation and, indeed, the nourishment of these communities is an ambitious and extraordinary project. The Committee recognized that the continued success of these endeavors, as well as the preservation of Portsmouth as a seaside town with a personality and ambience all its own, will require an ongoing and energetic marriage of governmental commitment, and civic planning, on a grand scale.

In other words, if Portsmouth wants to remain a small town with its own unique culture, it will have to do so consciously. And someone will be needed to watch over these much needed institutions.

On the wall in Portsmouth City Hall is a painting depicting the city as it looked in the early 19th century (see page 8). In the painting a couple - a man and woman, alone with their small dog - is standing on the bank of the Piscataqua River. There is a basket between them; perhaps they have been collecting the lobsters that were once so plentiful they walked right up out of the river onto the land. The city of Portsmouth is behind them, in the distance, dark and slung low but still familiar. It is 1830.

It is of course impossible to know just what our visitors were thinking. But they were more than likely enamored of exactly the quality that attracted the painter to the scene in the first place: the physical beauty of the area is striking.

This painting in City Hall reminds us of two things.

The existence of this art is a concrete example of artistic and cultural preservation. The only reason a painting survives 170 years after the artist completed his vision is because succeeding generations of people saw to it that the painting was not destroyed.

The second thing we are reminded of is how much the view of Portsmouth has not changed. If our visitors were to find themselves on that same spot on Freeman's Point today they would see a vista altered, certainly, but not dramatically. They would find Portsmouth noisier and busier, of course. They would find three metal mechanical bridges spanning the width of the Piscataqua instead of just one wooden drawbridge. They would find the shores clotted with homes and the traffic would seem, to them, unmanageable.

But after the initial shock, after our visitors had sat themselves down on the edge of the river, they would be perhaps surprised by just how much they recognized. Our visitors would find that a few of those buildings and homes are still in their same spots on the map. They would still find cemeteries, now expanded, in the same

place. And they would find that the roads leading in and out of the City are more or less intact, only now wider and paved.

There would be, in other words, comfort in the fact that Portsmouth remained recognizable almost 200 years later. The churches and shops, the taverns and bookstores, the theaters and parks would all remind our visitors that Portsmouth is still a place where they would feel welcome and not out of place.

Portsmouth has continued to recognize the importance of its cultural and artistic institutions, and that is why so much of the past has endured. And this preservation of

to its size, was ripe for an effort such as this.

In recognition of this need and, yes, duty, Mayor Sirrell empaneled a group of residents to begin the process of understanding what was needed to fulfill this goal.

It is also important to note that this committee, from its beginning, was supported by the Greater Piscataqua Community Foundation.

Sixteen residents began the task in January 2000. Given the full support of Mayor Sirrell, City Manager John Bohenko and the members of the City Council, the Mayor's Blue Ribbon Committee on Arts and Culture

The nurturing of culture happens every day in countless and unseen ways in Portsmouth

space, this indexing of what illustrates life in Portsmouth within the boundaries of its 15 square miles, is just as important, if not more important today, than it was 170 years ago.

The nurturing of culture happens everyday in countless and unseen ways in Portsmouth. A short list of our cultural and artistic institutions, both obvious and obscure, includes: the Poet Laureate program, the Button Factory, the Music Hall, the Colonial mileage marker on Islington Street, the Children's Museum, the Black Heritage Trail, the Portsmouth Public Library, the alarm bell on the Memorial Bridge, the Art Rocks! stage, independent and foreign film festivals, the public gardens in Prescott Park, the North Church steeple, the Fisherman's Cooperative, our horse drawn carriages, candlelight strolls, pocket garden tours, the tugboats and Portsmouth's working port, Strawberry Banke Museum, The Portsmouth Athenaeum, and examples of public art.

As important as these efforts are, Portsmouth Mayor Evelyn Sirrell saw the need for a unified and concerted effort to preserve and nurture both the artistic and cultural elements of this city. A city that is changing, but also one that has limited natural and civic resources, due

convened and almost immediately began the task of meeting with groups and individuals who were involved in all aspects of City life. These organizations included representatives from the local Chamber of Commerce, members of various artistic associations, the directors of historic institutions, and specific demographic groups, such as senior citizens and high school students.

It is a testimony to the vibrant cultural life of Portsmouth that there was no shortage of groups to talk to, or people who were able to offer informed and insightful commentary on the conditions of these communities.

From these extensive focus groups, the Committee began, during monthly and, later, more frequent meetings during a 24-month period, compiling lists of what residents felt the city should do to keep its artistic and cultural communities intact. This report is the result of those surveys and comments.

The Mayor's Blue Ribbon Committee on Arts and Culture, with the financial support of the City, also began the process of quantifying just how important arts and culture are to the City. The Americans for the Arts surveys were handed out to audience members of various

concerts, plays, and other cultural events during the past year. This information will eventually be used to compile what will amount to an economic portrait: how much do the arts contribute to the fiscal health of the City? This information will be a useful tool in aiding the city toward its cultural and preservation goals.

During the time the Committee was engaged in its work, the economy of the nation, region, and state was strong, but, as the group's task was nearing completion, showed signs of faltering. The Committee was also cognizant of the fact that Portsmouth, while seeing the number of artistic and cultural productions and events remain virtually unchanged throughout the two-year existence of the group, experienced an exodus of its artisans and musicians. This exodus was largely due to rising rents and general lack of affordable living spaces.

The Committee was conscious of its duty to reverse the loss of artistic talent, and to maintain the places where artists are able to ply their craft, i.e., working space for rehearsals, gallery space, and studios.

It is in this context that the Committee wishes to formally recognize the continued commitment of both City government and the ongoing efforts of City residents to maintain a cultural life that is exciting, healthy and highly original.

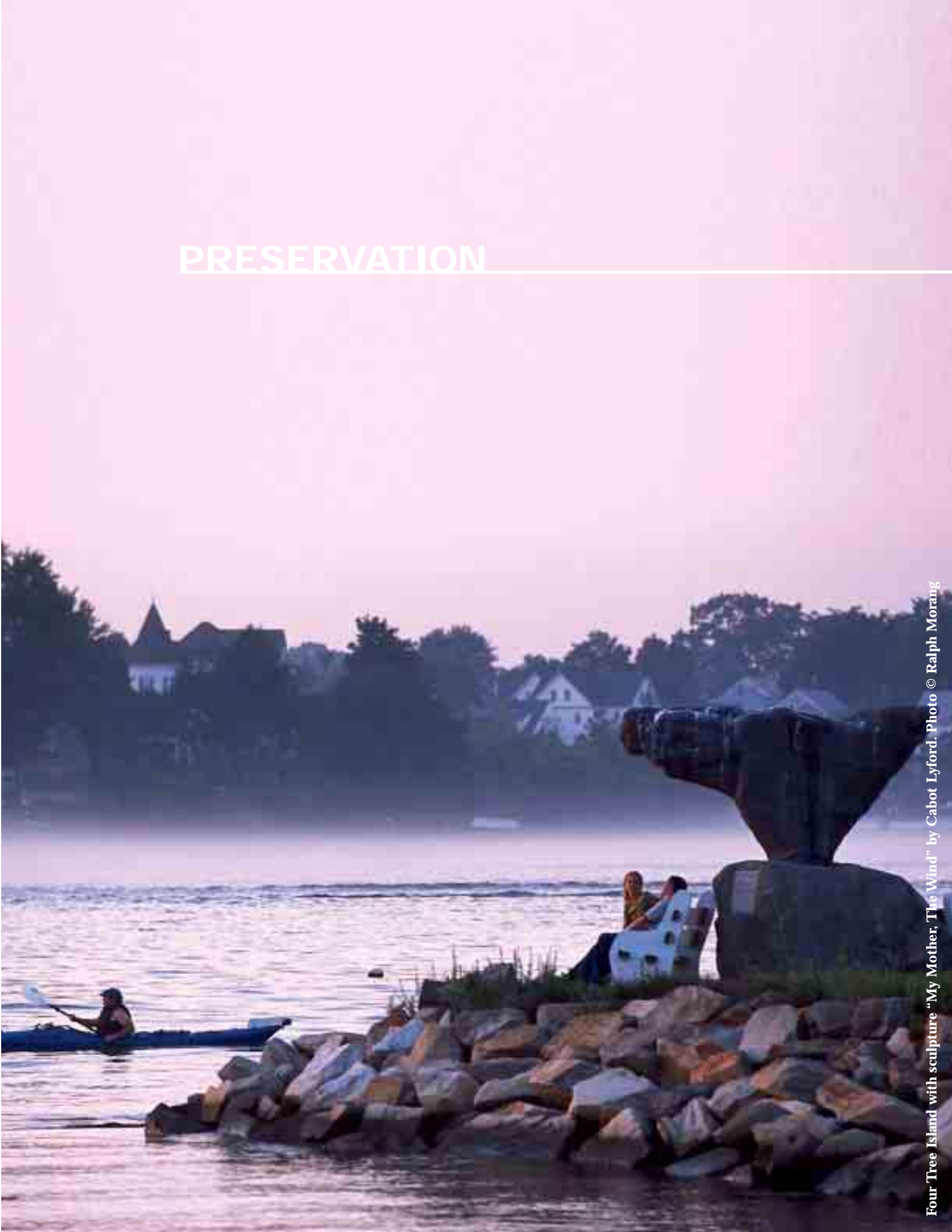
And it is the hope of the Committee, with the following section added to the City's Master Plan as a guide, that the City continues on as a vibrant, diversified City, a City teeming with talent and cultural life; and a place with identifiable neighborhoods, all of which add to the distinct, rich flavor of Portsmouth.

The Mayor's Blue Ribbon Committee on Arts and Culture
December 2001



View of Portsmouth from Freeman's Point, currently hanging in Portsmouth City Hall.
painted by John S. Blunt, 1830
Photo by Jason page

PRESERVATION



Four Tree Island with sculpture "My Mother, The Wind" by Cabot Lyford. Photo © Ralph Morang

IDENTIFY AND PRESERVE BUILDINGS AND OPEN SPACES CONTRIBUTING TO THE UNIQUE CHARACTER AND CULTURAL ASSETS OF PORTSMOUTH

Portsmouth's character and appeal depend, in large part, on the city's architecture and landscape. Past preservation efforts have spawned a tourism industry that includes tours of historic homes and sites on the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail and the Portsmouth Harbour Trail, walks through local burial grounds, lectures, cruises on Portsmouth Harbor, and the establishment of the 40-acre outdoor history museum, Strawberry Banke.

The need to preserve buildings and open spaces received the most votes in an arts survey of Portsmouth citizens conducted as part of the cultural planning process. And, in the cultural planning focus groups, this goal was consistently the topic of great concern. Much of the concern is on the fate of publicly-owned buildings. Other comments noted the need to improve awareness of the cultural and economic benefits derived from Portsmouth's historic architecture and the preservation of the City's open spaces. Still others believed there was a need to review the City's regulations and policies within the context of arts, promotion, and historic and open space preservation. The interest shown by citizens in historic preservation suggests that there is now an opportunity to broaden the involvement of organizations and residents in decision making regarding city buildings, neighborhoods, streetscape improvements, and regulatory changes.

Engage the community in preservation and cultural issues

- Inventory buildings and open spaces that define the unique character and culture of Portsmouth.
- Leverage funds for preservation or acquisition of buildings and open spaces using grants and other sources, e.g., NH Land and Community Heritage Investment Program, SOS!, Land and Water Conservation Funds (LAWCON), Community Development Block Grants.
- Develop training programs on preservation and make them available to all people involved in local decision making, such as members of local boards and neighborhood groups.
- Publish information about the location of public art and cemeteries.
- Create and promote the use of non-traditional performing spaces.
- Create a task force to identify new spaces for public art - both permanent and temporary - and develop criteria for its creation, funding, and selection.
- Nominate eligible sites for the National Register of Historic Places.
- Explore the designation of a National Park district similar to that of Salem, MA and Lowell, MA.
- Provide opportunities to create neighborhood overlay districts that will preserve community character.

- Inventory and preserve the community's visual/photographic heritage.
- Collaborate with cultural organizations to design standardized signage and to develop a "way-finding" system to locate cultural venues and points of interest in the city. Support with an easy-to-read map.

Commit to preserve the City's cultural assets

- Examine zoning regulations impacting the arts and develop a pro-culture approach to land and building use.
- Hire a municipal preservation planner.
- Provide incentives to developers for allowing public access to property along the waterfront and property with a scenic or culturally significant view.
- Fund and build a Riverwalk along the Piscataqua River behind Bow Street. Link it to the Portsmouth Harbour Trail and Prescott Park.
- Establish a revolving loan fund with program guidelines for owners to preserve their property. Update loan eligibility criteria to reflect evolving historic significance.
- Continue the municipal practice of not taxing nonprofit cultural entities.

SPACE



Piscataqua Faire, a Prescott Park Arts Festival event, at Four Tree Island. Photo © Ralph Morang

EXPAND AND SUPPORT SPACES FOR CULTURAL ACTIVITIES AND EVENTS, INCLUDING AFFORDABLE SPACE FOR ARTISTS, AND VENUES AND SPACE FOR PERFORMANCES, EXHIBITIONS, MEETINGS, STORAGE, REHEARSAL, AND EDUCATION

The severe shortage of affordable space in Portsmouth is the greatest challenge facing artists and cultural organizations. Focus group participants were concerned about the ability of individual artists and cultural organizations to maintain their places in Portsmouth. Most existing facilities are operating at, or near their capacity, yet the demand for additional activities is growing. The high rental and real estate purchase prices are limiting the growth of cultural entities and, in some cases, resulting in an exodus to more affordable space outside the City. In order for the cultural community to continue to develop and for Portsmouth to maintain the economic vitality derived from this sector of the economy, we need to think creatively about the opportunities available in the community for cultural development and expansion.

We propose learning from and building on existing public-private partnerships that have provided creative space solutions, such as the Player's Ring, Children's Museum, and Ballet New England's use of the Connie Bean Center. The City's arts agency will create an inventory of potentially usable spaces.

Create new and support existing partnerships to develop space for cultural uses

- Using the City's consolidated planning process, create neighborhood arts centers that serve the needs of specific areas of the City, similar to the approach to parks and recreational facilities; an example would be the Rock Street Park facility.
- Provide incentives for the business community, schools, and the nonprofit community (arts and non-arts) to provide meeting, display, performance, and storage spaces to the cultural community and young artists as a donation or at low cost.
- Encourage permanent and temporary cultural activities in natural settings; examples could be an outdoor sculpture park at the Pease Tradeport or an arts center at Creek Farm.

Extend public properties for cultural uses

- Create a centralized cultural arts center in a facility owned by the City; possibilities could be expansion of the Connie Bean Center or re-use of the library.

- Integrate cultural facilities into all new municipal building projects, such as the library, as well as renovations of existing spaces, such as the high school; examples include theatre space and visual arts studio space at the high school that could be used by the public or foundry space at City Yard.
- Enhance and increase the pedestrian-friendly areas in the City.
- Link transportation to cultural facilities, working with COAST and the school department.

Provide affordable living and working space for artists

- Address zoning issues and building codes that are barriers for artists, including limitations on combining living and working space, need for higher density and smaller living spaces, and provision of signage in areas zoned residential.
- Address housing for artists, using appropriate funds and partnerships, including working with Portsmouth Housing Authority to provide subsidies.

YOUTH



Eric Cagnon rehearsing the Portsmouth High School Band. Photo © Rich Beauchesne

ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE IN ARTS AND CULTURAL OPPORTUNITIES IN ALL ASPECTS OF THEIR LIFE, INCLUDING EDUCATIONAL, RECREATIONAL, AND SOCIAL SETTINGS

Children growing up in Portsmouth deserve the life-long benefits that early and continued exposure to the arts offers, that is, the development of their full creative and expressive potential. They need to know that Portsmouth is "their City" and that the cultural resources of the City belong to them as well as to the adults in the community. To make this vision a reality will take effort on the part of schools, the cultural community, and parents - grounded in a shared belief that the arts are a basic part of every child's education and development. Portsmouth's cultural depth can be tapped in new ways to provide cultural advantages for our youngest citizens.

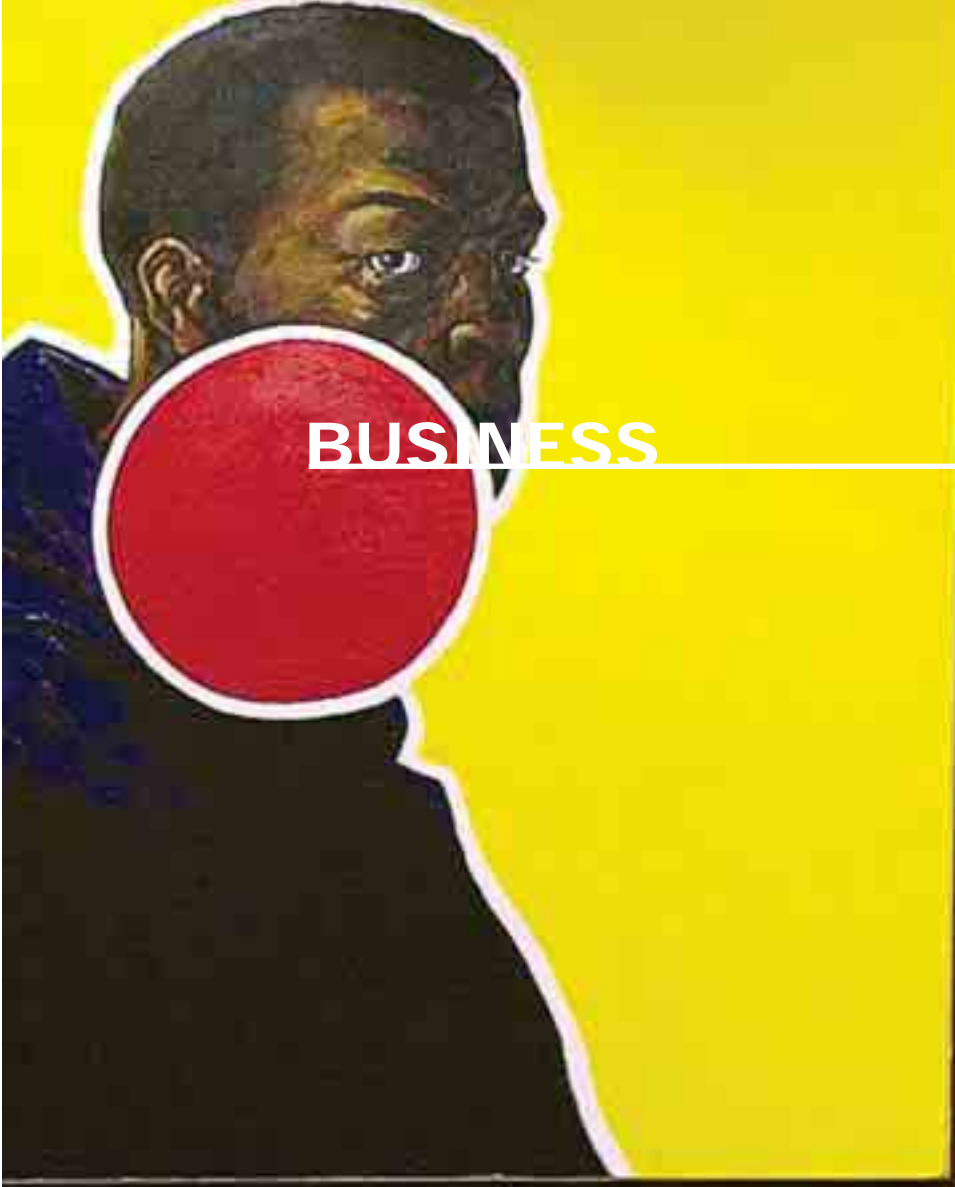
Within the schools, provide facilities and programs for students to take an active part in culture

- Continue to use the statewide arts curriculum learning standards as a guide, creating curriculum activities and materials that focus on Portsmouth's cultural institutions.
- Establish several master/mentor programs where teachers would work in collaboration with the Department of the Arts supporting classroom teachers who integrate arts and culture into other subject areas. Classroom teachers could choose this intensive staff development experience to learn new approaches to teaching.
- Foster relationships among local cultural organizations, schools, and artists. Provide funding to bring cultural activities and artists into the schools as well as to have students visit Portsmouth's cultural organizations.
- Encourage development of long-range plans to ensure that all Portsmouth schools include space for performances as well as for the creation and display of visual art. When undertaking facility design, plan for facility use by the broader community when the schools are not in session.
- Expand cultural offerings within the schools so that each child has a daily opportunity for creative expression.
- Create non-traditional cultural internships that allow high school students to meet graduation requirements while taking advantage of the expertise of cultural organizations and artists in the community.

- Underwrite transportation to local cultural venues for students during and after school hours.
- Promote the value of training in the arts for multiple career paths.

Outside of the schools, encourage the development of cultural programs and facilities with a focus on youth and families.

- Expand after-school programs offered at the elementary and secondary schools to include additional cultural programming.
- Encourage cultural organizations to create programs of interest to teens and create center or centers where young people can engage in cultural programming and create visual, performing, and literary arts.
- Through the City's recreation department, offer mixed-age trips to cultural resources outside the community. Subsidize the fees of young people.
- Promote the development of an independent community arts school to expand the professional arts opportunities available to youth (and adults). The school would be modeled after community music schools; an example is the Bell Center in Dover.



BUSINESS



Artist Zach Dawson with paintings hanging in the 100 Market Street hallway gallery. Photo © Rich Beauchesne

ENGAGE BUSINESSES WITH THE ARTS AND CULTURAL COMMUNITY

The Portsmouth business community has long recognized the value of arts and culture in the City through its support of local organizations and sponsorship of cultural events. In fact, many businesses locate in this area precisely because of the cultural opportunities and their attraction to employees. As the Portsmouth economy diversifies, it is important both to continue and to create partnerships among cultural organizations and businesses. Such cross promotion of Portsmouth as a culturally diverse and rich place to work and live will benefit both the business and arts communities.

Create opportunities for collaboration between the cultural and the business communities

- Strengthen the linkage between business organizations and cultural organizations, such as those being developed by the Chamber of Commerce Tourism Committee. Other examples: encourage the Chamber of Commerce to include nonprofit cultural organizations on its committees; develop membership fee structure that is feasible for artists and cultural organizations.
- Create programs that link businesses with individual artists or cultural organizations, such as a cultural resource bank that provides businesses with access to art work and cultural performances for workplaces and conferences, Business After Hours cultural showcases and performances, promoting tickets as employee awards and performance incentives, and a local chapter of Business Volunteers for the Arts to encourage business representatives and employees to volunteer for local cultural organizations.
- Survey businesses and cultural organizations that already have successful partnerships to determine the benefits of partnerships; use them to create models for others.

Recognize and celebrate successful business/arts partnerships that promote the community

- Recognize businesses that do an outstanding job supporting cultural programs and performances with annual awards.
- Acknowledge artists and organizations that do an outstanding job of fostering partnerships with the business community with annual awards.
- Show appreciation through an awards program for individuals who serve on the boards of and volunteer for nonprofit cultural organizations.



Learning about Portsmouth's maritime history while cruising the Piscataqua River on "The Heritage" tour boat

MARKETING



MARKET PORTSMOUTH AS A BUSINESS AND CULTURAL DESTINATION

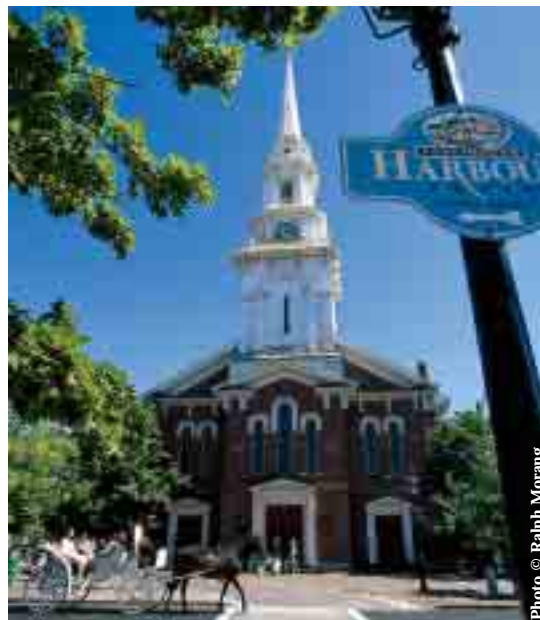
It is easy to take our cultural richness for granted and forget that others may not be aware of the range of cultural opportunities that Portsmouth offers. Remaining a dynamic center of cultural activity requires active promotion of cultural assets, which, in turn, takes commitment of time and money and collaborative effort. Knowledge is the first step toward active engagement.

Promote Portsmouth's culture to local and regional citizens and tourists

- Create a directory and map of cultural attractions accessible to the public in local businesses as well as in galleries, parks, and other public venues. Expand kiosks and distribution racks to disseminate this and other cultural information.
- Coordinate programs, such as artists-in-residence programs in businesses, open studios, and sampler tours to learn about local arts and culture first hand.
- Aggressively promote local business and cultural products through joint advertising.
- Encourage the Chamber of Commerce Tourism Committee to recruit members of the cultural community.
- Coordinate and fully use web-based information about cultural organizations and events.

Collect information regarding the cultural community's impact on the economic vitality of Portsmouth; use it to promote Portsmouth and the region

- Complete the economic impact study through Americans for the Arts and widely circulate the report. Update the report every three to five years and incorporate it into all materials and media used to promote the City's quality of life and economic vitality.
- Create a reference bank of information about the impact of cultural tourism and share it with local and state organizations. Annually update the information. Incorporate information into the City's annual report, master plan, and business recruitment efforts. Sources are the City's Economic Development Department, Department of Resources and Economic Development, Tourism Commission, and Chamber of Commerce.



The Portsmouth Chamber of Commerce
Harbour Trail

CREATE AN ARTS AND CULTURE AGENCY

Portsmouth is a community with an impressive arts and cultural infrastructure. With more than 35 independent cultural organizations, the community needs an entity to represent, coordinate, and advocate for the cultural life of the City. In recognition that Portsmouth is a cultural center for a larger area, the agency would also work with nearby communities to develop a regional cultural plan.

Establish an arts and culture agency to act on the City's behalf on all matters related to arts and culture. The purpose of the agency will be to:

- Promote public appreciation, participation, dialogue, and support for the invaluable contribution that arts, culture, and history makes to our City's economic vitality and quality of life.
 - Serve as an advisor to all departments of City government on arts and cultural issues, e.g., work with the City to develop plans for alternative transportation to arts events and venues.
 - Perform a coordination function for local cultural organizations and advocate on their behalf at the local, state, and national level, e.g., development of a master calendar of events, identifying interest in sharing or coordinating various services, such as administrative support.
 - Market and promote Portsmouth as a cultural destination.
 - Create, maintain, and prioritize an inventory of the City's cultural assets for preservation purposes.
 - Create new resources to support local artists and cultural organizations, e.g., develop a percent-for-arts program as a revenue support for public art, promote the work of local artists to residents and tourists, explore ways to develop stable funding such as a United Way for the Arts.
 - Prepare annually a state-of-the-city cultural report for the City Council.
- Implement and periodically update the cultural plan.
 - Convene an annual forum for community dialogue related to arts and culture.
 - Introduce new businesses to expectations of supporting the cultural community.
 - Collaborate with regional and state arts and cultural organizations, e.g., NH Office of Tourism, NH Division of Cultural Resources, NH Humanities Council.

We propose that the agency have independent nonprofit status, receiving financial support from public and private sources. The agency will serve as the City's local arts agency. Staff will support the agency's activities. Suggested Commission composition:

- Up to 13 members who represent such entities as the arts and cultural community, education, businesses, city government, Chamber of Commerce, Pease Development Authority, and community residents,
- All members would have a personal, professional, and/or financial stake in the City,
- At least 50 percent would be City residents,
- Members will serve for no more than two consecutive three-year terms.

CREDITS



CREDITS

Community Life and The Arts: Portsmouth, New Hampshire's Cultural Plan

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December 2001

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Our sincere apologies to anyone whose name was inadvertently omitted.



Hand Painted Silk Fabric by Lisa Grey
Photo of North Church by Ralph Morang