

Making Places Better

BY GAYE HAMILTON, DIVISION OF THE ARTS

LOUISIANA COUNTS FIVE NEW CULTURAL DISTRICTS in the growing number of places throughout the state using art, culture and preservation for economic and community development.

The National Association of State Arts Agencies reports there is a growing trend among state agencies pursuing place-based creative strategies to develop economic outcomes through arts activities. Cultural districts are defined as well-organized mixed-use areas in which a concentration of cultural facilities and events serves as the anchor of attraction and robust economic activity. Americans for the Arts research shows that more than 500 communities in the country have designated cultural districts. Louisiana, among the early states to establish a statewide cultural district certification program, is well-represented in that number with a total of 83 certified cultural districts in 54 communities and in 35 parishes.

The cultural district program in Louisiana was launched in 2008 as a tool for local governments to encourage the creative production of art and cultural activity, to help revitalize neighborhoods, to create a sense of identity and to grow a healthy economy. These districts come in all sizes — some include only a few blocks while others are multiple square miles — and they can be as diverse and satisfying in nature as the ingredients in a gumbo. Some are in towns and large cities with distinct urban neighborhoods, and others are in tiny villages or rural agrarian areas.

As different as these imaginative places can be, they all benefit by employing creative placemaking principles, fashioning an art-positive environment, engaging cross-sector partners, promoting cultural activity and working to preserve a unique heritage.

The program is managed by the Office of Cultural Development under the Office of Lt. Governor Billy Nungesser, but local officials and residents decide on district boundaries that usually include existing cultural assets as well as areas targeted for preservation and economic growth. Once approved, valuable tax incentives are available within the boundaries of certified districts: Original visual art is exempt from two percent of state sales tax and the local sales tax, and renovation projects on older buildings may be eligible for state historic tax credits.

Learn about the five new cultural districts certified July 1, 2016, and their plans to use art and culture to make good places into even better places.

CITY OF SCOTT CULTURAL DISTRICT

Deservedly known as the Boudin Capital of the World, Scott was recently named Cajun Art Capital of Louisiana. Community leaders are implementing Scott's comprehensive master plan that considers the fast-growing developments along Interstate 10 as well as unique public landmarks, history, culture and way of life. Becoming a cultural district fit in with the master plan so well that, with the urging of the City Councilman Troy Bergeron, the city pulled together a team of civic leaders, historians and city planners — along with representatives from other places who ushered in cultural districts of their own — to map the cultural assets and the boundaries of what is now the City of Scott Cultural District.

The town is dotted with quaint cottages, Victorian homes and an interesting mix of mid-century buildings. A few art-selling businesses have naturally clustered together near The Coffee Depot, a popular gathering place. Stop by Scott and enjoy the Friday night jam sessions on the front porch of the Begnaud House Heritage Visitor Center, speak French with locals and don't forget to try some boudin.

FROZARD CULTURAL ARTS DISTRICT

IN ST. LANDRY PARISH

The Frozard Art and Cultural District is an unincorporated area between Arnaudville and Grand Coteau along La. Hwy. 93 in the heart of Acadiana. It is the newest link in the Corridor des Arts, filling in a chain of cultural districts from Breau Bridge to Sunset dedicated to cross-promotion, French heritage and some of the most eclectic experiences and art.

Frozard hit the ground running in its efforts to create its cultural district. Residents and business owners were told about the new district to raise awareness and garner support, and along the way even more artists and musicians were discovered. The cultural district team adopted the mission, "To honor the old, discover the hidden, and provide opportunity for the next generation of creative minds, to embrace our culture and unify the community."

The district has already launched its inaugural event, Bike to Breakfast, a casual family bike ride along country roads beginning and ending at Frozard Planation with a delicious pancake breakfast. Plans are also well underway for the first Fete Lou Lou Fiddle Festival next March.



LEFT The city of Scott pursued the cultural district program to coincide with the implementation of its comprehensive master plan. Photo by Gaye Hamilton **RIGHT** Ruston joins the cultural district program after more than 25 years as a Main Street community. Photo courtesy of Haley Perot



RUSTON CULTURAL DISTRICT

It is not surprising that 24 of Louisiana's cultural districts are also Main Street communities, as the programs are complimentary. Main Street's successful four-point approach to revitalization focuses on economic development, design, organization and promotion of a place's unique assets. A cultural district's art, social and cultural focus is a perfect partner to identify local talent and ignite fresh activity. Ruston has been a Main Street for more than 25 years, with a robust downtown offering a great example of the positive results that attention to a place creates.

Home to the North Central Louisiana Arts Council, Louisiana Tech University, Dixie Theater and long-standing traditions such as the Ruston Peach Festival, there is strong community support and a wealth of talent and initiative. There are plans underway to renovate the historic Federal Building and transform it into the Ruston Community Art Center, with the potential to be an art incubator that will provide a valuable venue and market for artists in the area.

CINCLARE CULTURAL DISTRICT

IN WEST BATON ROUGE PARISH

The Cinclare Cultural District is a developer's dream. The magnificent bones of the iconic sugar mill, along with its many historic structures, is a setting that offers the nostalgia, inspiration and reflection that draw countless visitors, photographers, artists, writers and filmmakers. The cultural district was approved with plans well underway to turn the grounds of the 138-year-old Cinclare Plantation, central factory, blacksmith shop and residents' houses into a multiuse development. A potential use of the 50,000-square-foot sugar storage warehouse would be to house condominiums and a sound stage. The historic green mule barn may be transformed into a rental venue or location for a local farmer's market. Richard Sexton, author of *Vestiges of Grandeur*, suggests the preservation and reuse of these cherished artifacts of a prior era will serve to tell the story of the lower River Road, home to one of the most significant industrial and shipping corridors in the U.S.

HOMER CULTURAL DISTRICT

The Homer Cultural District is one of the smallest districts at only three square blocks, but it is big in significance. Anchored by the historic 1860s Claiborne Parish Courthouse in the center of the celebrated town square, the district contains the Herbert S. Ford Memorial Museum, Homer City Hall, two of the oldest wooden-frame commercial buildings in the state and a community garden. The courthouse square is a popular gathering place and home to art events and music festivals year-round. The new district is building partnerships with long-standing events such as the Claiborne Jubilee, the Great Louisiana Harmonica Festival, Taste of Homer, Music on Main and Reunion and Rhythm Festival, with plans to add classes, lectures, workshops and art contests throughout the year to encourage creativity and cultural activity. The pedestrian friendly square can attract even more culinary, gallery and music venues and ventures, resulting in a better vision for underused properties in the surrounding area.

Cultural districts can be a powerful contributor to economic growth, and they are increasingly used to leverage art activity for civic and quality-of-life benefits. The Louisiana cultural district program has proven to be an important vehicle to aid in marketing unique cultural products, help brand a community's local identity, embrace its historic significance and make a good place better.

FOR A COMPLETE LIST AND MAPS OF THE
CULTURAL DISTRICTS IN LOUISIANA, VISIT

www.crt.la.gov/cultural-development/arts/cultural-districts

TOP An oil painting depicts the Cinclare Sugar Mill, part of the Cinclare Cultural District. Photo courtesy of Nanci Charpentier **BOTTOM** The historic Claiborne Parish Courthouse sits in the center of the town square in Homer Cultural District. Photo courtesy of Ray Scriber



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