



**Arts Councils and Commissions of Fairfield County
Convening, December 5, 2018
Greenwich Arts Council**

The nine arts councils attending were:

Greenwich Arts Council (Tatiana Mori),
Milford Arts Council (Paige Miglio),
Newtown Arts Commission (Laura Lerman),
Norwalk Arts Commission (Susan Wallerstein),
Ridgefield Arts Council (Jennifer DiLaura),
Stamford Arts and Culture Commission (Lou Ursone, John Varamo, and Jennifer McIntosh),
Stratford Arts Commission (Bruce Hirsch),
Westport Arts Advisory Committee (Nancy Diamond), and
Wilton Arts Council (Beth Schneider).

Arts Councils unable to attend were: Bridgeport Arts and Cultural Council, Easton Arts Council, Trumbull Arts Commission, and Weston Arts Council.

After welcomes from David Green and our host Tatiana Mori of the Greenwich Arts Council, the group introduced themselves with 3 or 4 keywords to describe their character and current situation:

- CAFC: expansive; responsive; always-on.
- Greenwich: support, help; community outreach.
- Milford: enrich community through creativity and experiences.
- Newtown: supporting the arts, artists and events with scholarships and grants; sponsoring an arts festival.
- Norwalk: newly official; all-volunteer; stewardship; engagement; and advocacy.
- Ridgefield: re-evaluation; expansion; awareness; and integration.
- Stamford: defining our mission; reaching out; infancy; crawling; learning; trying to grow.
- Stratford: to be or not to be...
- Westport: initiators; invested; supporters; collaborators.
- Wilton: engage the public; struggling with volunteers.

David Green (DG) drew attention to several salient facts from the survey (report attached): there were 6 councils, 6 commissions and 1 committee; groups were founded between 1971 and 2016; 8 were part of government and 5 not; 10 have a budget, 3 do not; 6 have staff and 7 do not; 9 have databases of between 50 and 5,000 people and 4 do not. 9 offer special events, 8 gallery exhibits, 6 presentations, 3 rent facilities, 2 offer grants and 1 a small scholarship. 8 offer mentorship/advice. In terms of what respondents thought was most effective in fulfilling

their mission, the range was very wide: from professional development to facility rentals, putting on events, festivals, a photography show, discounted services, networking, and mentoring.

Notable services/projects include: Norwalk, Milford and Newtown have poet laureates, Westport maintains its extensive town art collection, and Norwalk has (and Westport and Greenwich are developing) an Otocast phone app. audio tour of cultural highpoints of the town; Ridgefield has a project putting together schools and creatives in the community, and Greenwich also works closely with schools and the Board of Education.

DG pointed out that as the arts councils and commissions were important nodes in the cultural infrastructure of Fairfield County it was important to get to know each other, learn from each other and see how they might work together. A parallel track was how the Cultural Alliance might adapt and better serve the councils.

The following are brief self-portraits of the salient achievements and challenges of each council/commission (in alphabetical order):

Easton: The Easton Arts Council was founded in 1996 when a group of concerned citizens got together with the following goals: 1) Showcase community artists; 2) Foster communication between the schools and the community; 3) Develop cooperation among local community organizations and the arts community; and 4) Recognize young artists in the community. To that end we feel we have been reasonably successful in fulfilling our goals. We have several **annual events** which have become community staples including **Member Art Show** and **Winter Celebration of the Arts**, a **Youth Framing Workshop** and **Youth Art & Talent Show**, **A Readers Theatre**, a spring **Juried Art Show and Artists celebration**, **Annual Recognition Awards** to High School and Middle School students, a fall **musical presentation** and a fall **Photography Contest and Show**. We put out a yearly newsletter and yearly calendar of photos from our photo contest. We are a small, non-profit 501(c)(3) organization and not associated with the Town Government. We survive on membership fees and donations and have a very small budget. We have no employees. Our volunteer board meets monthly. We have a good relationship with the Town Library and all our events take place there. We have no community space of our own. One of our main concerns is getting new **members**. The small board is highly active and works very hard to present these activities. We are concerned about publicity with the recent demise of our town paper and we have had difficulty reaching out to **young people**. In 2016 we celebrated our 20th anniversary and our First Selectman proclaimed May 21, 2016 as Easton Arts Council Day in recognition of our service to the arts in Easton.

Greenwich: Population 63,000. Tatiana Mori is the new executive director of the Greenwich Arts Council (GAC), having worked as curator there for the past 18 years, so knows it well. She pointed out that their space is the former Greenwich Town Hall and serves as an **umbrella** for many local arts organizations, including Greenwich Art Society, Greenwich Symphony and its Chamber Players, Greenwich School of Music, Greenwich Choral Society, and Young Artists Philharmonic. They hold events and fundraisers, but they are also committed to their tenants, trying to **reach out to new audiences** for all. GAC is now more consciously reaching out to other organizations in the area - going back to its 1973 mission statement. GAC has a large **database** (5,000), and other organizations can include their events in the GAC Newsletter, which serves to attract new members, new concertgoers, etc. The **newsletter** is published in

hardcopy twice a year and is emailed every month. Tatiana stressed that though they are lodged in a government building for \$1 year, there is no other support from the City.

Milford: Population 55,000. Paige Miglio has been ED for 7 years; the Milford Arts Council (MAC) was founded 50 years ago, in 1971, as a coming together of different groups (theatre; visual arts; producers of performances and live music in churches and schools) and today MAC is still supporting those groups. Budget: \$200,000 with 3 part-time staff. MAC is not part of the town **government**, but is supported by a hefty municipal grant (\$70,000 last year). Biggest challenge: board development and engagement and staff growth. Biggest success: MAC runs over 220 events a year at 2 venues: the Milford Arts Center (“The MAC”), residing in the eastbound train station, and Firehouse Gallery. Both have been renovated in the past 3 years, with a lot of behind-the-scenes work. Once you get a venue - then it becomes a business, and that dictates the programming, versus the tail wagging the dog, as it has been. MAC recently employed a new Marketing Director and **social media exposure has exploded driving** big success selling out events. The Firehouse Gallery was running 8 exhibits a year, **supporting** local **artists**. It is now more focused on being a space for pop-up exhibits and pop-up shops, with four themed juried exhibits a year. A **permanent art collection** has 250 catalogued artworks in the Parsons Government Center. Art restoration: MAC raised \$8,000 for restoration of a rescued section of a WPA mural. MAC **collaborates** with the Stratford Coastal Arts Guild in co-curating Firehouse Gallery shows, and with the Library, with City Hall, and with the Economic Development Commission. Paige has a seat on the Economic Development Commission, the Tourism Commission and the Board of the Chamber of Commerce. Milford has a **poet laureate** who runs a writing group, which, in trying to get more involved with the art shows meets in Firehouse Gallery so sometimes uses art as prompts. Also MAC **collaborates** with Westport Community Theatre on the “East-West Playfest.” MAC aims to be a “hyper-hub” with outreach to organizations in neighboring communities that should bring more business to their region - and **supporting tourism** along the train line....

Newtown: Population 28,000. The Newtown Arts Commission is a part of government; founded 10 yrs ago. It has a budget of \$2,500; no staff; all volunteers. There are 9 members on the commission and 100 **volunteers** for the weekend **Arts Festival**, recently extended to a month of activities to coincide with National Arts Month in October. Original goal was to raise money for **student scholarships** (give 3-4 \$1000 scholarships to local high-school graduates who will major or minor in the arts, plus 2 \$1000 grants to arts or other organizations that encourage the arts). The Commission is in its 2nd term of having a **Poet Laureate**. It curates the Municipal Art Gallery, which is largely a repository of the art donated in response to the Newtown tragedy. \$10 million was given by GE for a new community center (with an attached aquatic center) in which the Commission hopes to install a gallery (dependent on humidity report) and be an agent in its programming.

Norwalk: Population 80,000. Susan Wallerstein has been in Norwalk for 47 years and first heard about an “Arts Council” in the 70s, primarily prompted by the development of South Norwalk, with Mayor Collins and the Collins Development Corporation. Some form of council or commission has been around for 50+ years but the current Arts Commission’s recent success was, in July 2017, becoming an **official municipal commission**. It has a budget of \$16,000 and, taken out of the Parks & Rec. Department (“we were eclipsed by athletics”) the commission is still hoping to be nested within Economic Development. Overall successes: high

level of energy and diversity - the Commission reflects the demographics of the community (gender, age, art forms, race), not in any intentional way, it just fell into place. Second success: the commission has built the infrastructure that led to the Ordinance creating the Commission. It strategically used its budget to hire consultants to **create inventory of all public art** (550 pieces), including “traffic graphics” and murals. Secondly, inspired by New Haven, it drafted a **Public Art Policy** - approving it as an advisory commission, but then behaving as if it were the law. In the vacuum, it became very useful in many circumstances for the government to have as a guide to how to respond to certain situations. Willing to share with others. The third part was engaging a consultant and researching how to produce mobile guides to the public art. They identified Otocast and 60 “points of interest” with video/audio commentary. The legacy implications of this are very important: making sure everything is cataloged and labeled. Now the commission owns the digital files and has a firm base for future projects. Other successes - the Mayor approached the commission, which **partnered** with the Public Library to create the **poet laureate** position. The poet, Laurel Peterson, has among other things worked on “ekphrastic workshops” - teaching poetry in response to visual art. The poet is unpaid but has a budget of \$1500. Challenges: the commission is now “the victim of its own success,” in that they are now regarded as the experts, especially in public art. After a recent mural debacle, the commission is adding a murals section to the Public Art Policy and it will become an ordinance: so any developer who wants to do a mural will go down the Arts Commission review path; if it’s signage - it will go to Planning & Zoning. Have built an infrastructure and a reputation for being a collaborative partner. Next is to do an **inventory of public-sector venues** - many of which are administered and rented differently one from another - examining assets and what deals have been cut - and to regularize. Making public assets equitable and transparently available. In answer to a question about how the commission markets itself, Susan remarked, “I’m not a fan of **newsletters** and **calendars** (they’re out there; use them, don’t duplicate.)” Strongly felt commissions should not use volunteers to build a website - you want them to work with City IT and make it work for the arts. [Newtown commented that they discovered a benefit of having volunteers is the discovery of expertise that you need]. The commission took over the annual public schools art show, employing graduates of the public school system, who are now artists, to judge the contest: “It’s bringing legitimacy to the process. That’s how you get to schools most effectively.”

Ridgefield: Population 25,000. The Ridgefield Arts Council was founded in 1997 as a town-appointed committee. \$1500 budget just increased to \$2000. It works with 20 cultural nonprofits+20 arts businesses + huge number of creatives in town. The council runs a number of **programs**: *Our Artists Our Schools*: builds relationships between **nonprofits and schools**; in addition it runs day-long seminars bringing creatives into mostly high schools; *GENERATOR* is a series of networking events for artists; *Behind-The-Scenes Honors* award show, once a year, honoring volunteers. It also awards, for its second year, small **scholarships**. Have quarterly *Executive Director Roundtables*, where EDs of the local nonprofits talk about what they’re doing; what they need etc., which has created partnerships between the groups. Additional activities are as needed - act as information hub for individuals, new business, etc. on the arts. Challenge: not to compete with members - so no fundraising. Have a very successful **planning calendar, used by the nonprofits to plan events and avoid conflicts** and get events several months in advance (currently working on 2020) so people have time to think about partnerships. **This online calendar** on the RAC website resides on the town server with a link to a calendar the RAC prints in a newspaper/ad/poster. Big challenge is

lack of funding, and as a town, running out of space for the arts community. Town finally recognized that the arts are an **economic driver** and the entire town is getting together to talk about a 10-year plan for Ridgefield and the RAC will be a part of that. What caused this? With the release of the impressive results from the recent national economic impact study designed by Americans for the Arts, and conducted by the Cultural Alliance of Fairfield County, in conjunction with Cultural Alliance of Western Connecticut, and the arts people talking it up, the Town finally took notice and now take it seriously.

Stamford: Population 131,000. The Arts & Culture Commission was formed less than a year ago. In year one, the Commission's successes have included creating a database with 100+ arts and cultural organizations; cataloging all 50 works of public art owned by the city; partnering with Burbio to create a community calendar; and disbursing \$100,000 of CAP grants to arts & cultural organizations. That's the groundwork. The challenge now is how to further engage the arts community and provide guidance. John Varamo is a paid employee of the City - an analyst at DECD. The Stamford Arts & Culture Commission has been nested into that department. The Commission itself has no budget - but they have Varamo.

Stratford: Population 52,000. The Stratford Arts Commission is a part of the government with a budget of \$25,000 that is spent mostly on the Shakespeare Festival, that has been held on the grounds of the **Shakespeare Festival Theatre**. Bruce is a member of the Commission and feels the only thing that could save the Town of Stratford is the Theatre. The Shakespeare Guild formed after the Theatre had closed in late 1970s. New blood tried to replace the loss of the theatre with the annual Festival held during the summer. It was well attended and mostly successful, but was just for 2 weeks. Commission did little else - no real outreach. Two years ago a new regime took over and the summer **Festival** was cancelled with the explanation that it was too costly, with too little return. Now more outreach, including monthly well-attended showcases of local artists hosted by local restaurant. Also the commission gave **scholarships** to students from 2 high schools. **Collaborated** with the Police Athletic League, working with young people (cartoon classes). Also partner with the **Library**, and Sterling House. The commission includes art teachers and music teachers. Often hard to get things accomplished because of the nature of the town. Last two years have held a successful Renaissance Fair on the grounds. Try to get the commission more involved with the people.

Westport: Population 28,000. Westport Arts Advisory Committee (WAAC) is comprised of 15 individuals appointed by the First Selectman, founded 25 years ago "to preserve Westport's Legacy as an arts community." For the first 20 years, the Committee was mostly concerned with **preserving the past** - with little thought about the present. The committee is unique in that it owns **an arts collection** of 1400 pieces, placed all around town, including in the schools. The committee was active from the beginning in **integrating the arts into the schools' curriculum**. Teachers now regularly reach out to volunteer committees that handle the day-to-day operations of the artwork (the Westport Permanent Art Collections (WestPAC) Committee) to bring art into the classroom to complement curriculum. The committee has a \$15,000 annual budget, much of which goes to maintain the collection. It had to retroactively create documentation ("a wonderful group of ladies in the '70s kept all their records in boxes and refused to give up control of them") Now the committee has re-created the records and a database, and an accession and de-accession policy. Not yet written **public art policy** (riding on coattails of Norwalk). 25 nonprofits in a town of 25,000 - from a community band to the

Westport Country Playhouse. Convened a group call "Let's Connect" to encourage **collaboration** - expanded vision to initiate **ways of increasing the visibility** of the arts in the community and to **advise the First Selectman on policy matters**. Have a lot of leeway to do what we want. Do take part in a monthly *Let's Celebrate Westport* that includes other nonprofits - but the **Library** also has an extensive **calendar** and they tend to use that. Produce one event a year - the **TEATALK** (Teachers Educators Artists Talk) since 2014 - a moderated discussion with a broad range of talent to draw from. 200-300 people attend and this helps build the committee's database. Successes: piggy backing on Norwalk to develop a **mobile guide, using Otocast**: now have three walking tours, just launched "The Art in Westport" - geographically based. A separate tour will be of the schools' **arts collection** - lot of WPA - that will be able to be accessed virtually; and a fifth tour focuses on Westport's natural beauty. Increasingly the committee is acting as **initiators** in partnering with other arts organizations in town and helping to not just promote, but to give a stamp of approval; offer **mentoring** wherever they can. One example is a project that came out of CAFC's Shaping Community that the Westport Arts Center has taken on. The committee gave the Arts Center a little seed money and they are doing the exhibition (Tete a Tete: Conversation Bench). Challenge: the **visibility** of the committee, of the art collection, and art in general - in competing with the soccer fields. Also it's a tough challenge in Westport to increase the **diversity** of the committee. Always had strong support of Selectman - bi-partisan; no trouble getting **volunteers**. Have collective skillset to do whatever they want. Stamford asking about budget: Committee paid for art restoration. Stamford comments "Now we have an inventory, we need to work on prioritizing what needs to be restored and how much it will cost." Westport: another challenge is that people love to try to donate their work (especially in December). However, they have a process - and can't turn work around in 3 weeks. Sometimes the restoration costs in accepting a donation are too high (rusty sculpture). Question: where is it exhibited; does it travel? Answer: No, it doesn't travel because of insurance; art is hung in all the schools, in Town Hall, in Firehouse and Municipal Buildings. There's a lot of art in closets. They try to rotate the pieces. Have a new gallery space at the Westport Country playhouse, shared with the Artists Collective of Westport.

Wilton. Population 18,000. The Wilton Arts Council used to organize a very wide range of arts activities. In 1999, a month-long **Celebration of the Arts** was run by the council with numerous events ranging from art and sculpture exhibits, to poetry and play readings, to people opening their homes for chamber music concerts. Many of such activities have since been replicated by the Wilton **Library**. The council organized monthly art exhibits for its members (sole artist exhibits) at a restaurant for many years - but it was sold and the dining room closed. Group art exhibits for its members were hung around the performing arts center in the high school until the school was locked for security purposes, greatly limiting public access to the art. The council tried to pair artists with some of the businesses around town - a little like Ridgefield. But then a lot of businesses closed or moved out of town before it could be done a second time. Given the decline in volunteers (primarily due to age and illness) and lack of venues, the council's remaining major activity is a very successful annual photography exhibit (FOCUS), running for some 20 years. Open to everyone including young people. Success: getting kids involved in photography. Challenge: to get youth aware they can enter. Challenges for holding other events: getting volunteers and finding venues. Suggestions provided by attendees: use social media with hashtags to get attention of young people; use

Key Clubs within the school to get younger people to volunteer and use Volunteers Match website.