

Preamble (likely applies to all case studies): Canada's Creative City Network (a network of Canadian cities and towns), with support from community partners and other public entities (including various levels of government), is beginning to work collaboratively toward the development of stronger creative communities.

Research indicates that an investment in the creative community, enriched with arts and cultural experiences and expression, will contribute substantially to the overall quality of life and vitality of a town. More specifically, the value of the arts focuses on four significant benefits:

- Better health well-being of the town's residents
- Enhanced community identity and social cohesion
- Community revitalization and the redevelopment of urban centres
- Positive economic effects (e.g., increased commerce, added tourism and more desirable real estate)

Incremental changes in cultural strategies, intelligently applied, can lead to significant innovation. The Ontario government is encouraging municipalities to integrate cultural planning into their daily business, and to emphasize local arts, culture, heritage and libraries as they plan the future of their communities.

The Town of Ajax Integrated Arts and Cultural Plan

Of the 90,000 residents of Ajax, 44% belong to families of mixed heritage. Residents between the ages of 25 and 54 make up the largest segment of the population (48%), followed by youth under 25 years of age (38%). The smallest segment, 14%, comprises people aged 55 years and older.

The average household income is \$75,000. About 54% of the adult populace have a postsecondary education. In the Plan, Ajax is described as already “a community that is family-oriented and neighbourhood-based. We respect our differences and celebrate our diversity.”

Local arts, culture and heritage have a great effect on everyday social well-being, and are important for community enrichment. Council formally acknowledged this in 2003 by adopting into the Town’s corporate strategic plan a goal “to promote arts and culture in our community” as part of a push to celebrate the legacy and enhance the future of community arts and heritage.

The Integrated Community Arts and Cultural Plan was approved by Ajax Town Council on July 10, 2006 – “a comprehensive strategy based on the recognition of the diversity of our cultural sector, from small to large, amateur to budding professional, and represents every conceivable discipline, from visual arts, to heritage, the performing arts and cultural industries.” The recommendations contained aim to “support a vibrant, flourishing arts sector that will contribute personal, social and economic benefits to our community.”

Local empowerment, engagement and partnership are critical to the success of any community plan. To ensure that the community’s collective desire and needs are accurately reflected, the planning process included resource mapping (of intangible, as well as tangible, resources), considerable research, and extensive consultation with many residents, community organizations and artists.

Nine guiding principles were established at the outset of planning:

1. Maximizing opportunities for communication and expression
2. Celebrating the legacy and future of community arts and heritage in Ajax
3. Promoting accessibility and embracing cultural diversity
4. Committing to success through strong leadership
5. Building community vitality and a sense of identity
6. Unifying through collaboration and consultation
7. Achieving fiscal accountability through sustainability
8. Cultivating social connections and utilizing community resources
9. Making the case through an agreed-upon plan of action

Although Council has ultimate responsibility for the plan, Recreation Services is to oversee its implementation, to ensure that:

- The plan moves forward in a timely fashion.
- Applicable strategic elements of the Arts and Cultural Plan are incorporated into the annual work plans of municipal departments.
- Communication and collaboration takes place to and among the many corporate departments and community stakeholders that have been identified as potential participants.

To ensure efficacy, the Arts and Cultural Plan incorporates public education initiatives to raise awareness of the value of arts endeavours; 3- and 10-year timelines on essential strategic directions for potential participants; and fiscal accountability through sustainability. It should lead to program-specific policy development and actions, strengthened partnerships and alliances, increased tourism, improved communication and marketing, and better utilization of places and spaces in the town, all of which support a thriving artistic community.

The planning process was transparent, open and inclusive. In addition to meetings with a variety of stakeholders, the process included general and stakeholder surveys (available at all Town facilities, in local newspapers, and on the Town website); public forums (prior to and following drafted statements of definition, vision, goals, key strategic directions, and recommendations); three focus groups (81 participants, in total); and public appeals for input and feedback. Existing Advisory Committees, composed of some 57 residents who were already committed and engaged, were consulted on the specialty areas of accessibility, heritage, diversity, recreation, cultural arts, transportation and traffic, environmental considerations, and library services. The Committees were updated monthly.

In addition, 18 Ontario municipalities that have been leaders in cultural development were consulted (four in depth), along with the neighbouring communities of Ajax. Such research repeatedly found two keys to success: ongoing plan development with continual review, and a collaborative, partnership-oriented approach. The ultimate owner of such a document is, after all, the community.

The overall **vision** of the plan was summarized thus:

As a welcoming and dynamic community enriched in cultural expression and diversity, Ajax provides opportunities that enhance the quality of life and reflects a sense of well being. The Town of Ajax is committed to engaging and supporting a local creative culture while preserving and nurturing our unique heritage and environment.

The **goal statements** of the Integrated Community Arts and Cultural Plan are:

1. To increase and enhance the variety and diversity of creative cultural experiences and programs.
2. To provide and develop places and spaces for cultural and artistic activities throughout the community.
3. To improve communication and information resources to better market arts, culture and heritage in Ajax.
4. To strengthen alliances and partnerships for effective growth and development in order to facilitate greater community capacity building.
5. To support a climate where the arts, cultural and heritage community can flourish through economic investment and cultural renewal.
6. To create an environment that encourages a thriving artistic and cultural community . . . a collective effort.