

THE ROAD MAP

Arts, Culture, and Education

Formative Issues for Arts, Culture, and Education

Easton residents are very aware of the many diverse cultural assets to which they have access. Discussions at community forums, interviews with officials, and sessions with the Working Group revealed an uncommonly sophisticated and shared understanding of the diverse and often subtle cultural opportunities in everyday life. Historic sites and buildings, scenic landscapes, institutions of higher learning, public schools, the library, and museums create a cultural network across the community and across generations. As with many success stories in Easton, residents were ready to celebrate the amenities they have, but also quick to identify opportunities for improvement. The following text represents a list of key issues that helped to shape the discussions of arts, culture and education within the Envision Easton process.

1. **Easton has a unique history that can be discovered through many of the places, landscapes, and buildings in the community.**

From a cultural perspective, what first captures the attention of many visitors to Easton are the historic structures that help to establish the Town's identity. A collection of architectural treasures designed by H. H. Richardson, along with the peace memorial designed by Frederick Law Olmsted¹, serve as the core of the National Historic Landmark District. This district, in turn, is a smaller part of the locally designated North Easton Historic District (also on the National Register of Historic Places). The southern area of the community is also home to several historic districts, which are generally established to protect the more pastoral landscapes and vistas that were created many years ago. However, during community discussions stakeholders were careful to point out that historic districts and buildings were only a part of the community's cultural identity. Beyond the historic downtown and well into the southern area of the community, there are many tightly knit neighborhoods characterized by quiet, walkable streets, historic homes, and specimen trees. These neighborhoods are one of the primary drivers for the high quality of life in the community and serve as a cornerstone for Easton's local culture.



Easton's landscapes throughout the community provide a cultural and historic backdrop to everyday life.

In addition to residential neighborhoods, Easton's open spaces and park lands provide a scenic cultural

¹ The "peace memorial" is originally a Memorial Cairn, also known as the Rockery, a Civil War monument (1881-1884) designed by Frederick Law Olmsted.

landscape through many areas of the community. Tall stands of white pines, roadways surrounded by mature forest, and large open park spaces in many areas foster a local culture that values the Town's natural landscapes. Places like Wheaton Farm and Old Pond Conservation Area are just two examples of places that serve as cultural assets for the community as a whole. Residents who participated in Envision Easton understood the relationship between these different places and called for policies that reinforced this "culture of place" throughout the community.

2. The Easton Shovel Town Cultural District offers great opportunity for increased cultural activity, cooperation and awareness.

One of the most promising developments in recent years is the Cultural Council's creation of the Easton Shovel Town Cultural District in 2012. The role of the District is to connect the distinct, including numerous cultural institutions both within and outside the North Easton Historic District, in a way that makes the area a more vibrant activity center. Since its inception, the District has been active in coordinating and promoting the various cultural institutions, activities and events in the area, creating a tangible momentum in the community for Easton's current and future cultural opportunities. The District has already opened an artist co-op within the Ames Shovel Works complex, hosted numerous art exhibits, musical performances, and



Face painting is one of the many activities offered to Easton's youth at events like the Governor Ames Estate Grand Opening. (Photograph courtesy of Kristopher Ventresco)

holiday teas, produced a video showcase on Community Access television for local artists, and brought together dozens of art, cultural, business and educational organizations. The grand opening of the Governor Ames Estate in June 2014 was a tremendous success. Nearly 2,000 people of all ages visited the Ames estate and participated in the District's all-day art, music, food and fun festival and art exhibition. The District's activities provide the added benefits of economic opportunity in the form of increased foot traffic and business activity within North Easton Village and opportunities to attract to new, creative businesses. This is a unique and exciting development in the community and offers an avenue for even more cultural activity in the future.

While the District is successful locally, it continues to pursue official designation by the Massachusetts Cultural Council (MCC), the state's lead agency for the support of artistic and cultural development across the Commonwealth. The agency provides a diverse set of services including technical support and grants for individual arts organizations, individuals and municipalities. At the time this plan was drafted, 19 different

districts existed in Massachusetts. The purpose of Cultural Districts is best articulated by MCC:

"These cultural districts help local arts, humanities, and science organizations improve the quality and range of their public programs so that more local families can benefit from them. They enhance the

experience for visitors and thus attract more tourist dollars and tax revenue. And they attract artists, cultural organizations, and entrepreneurs of all kinds - enhancing property values and making communities more attractive.”

- Massachusetts Cultural Council

Achieving this designation would provide the Town and District access to technical assistance and grant funds from MCC. The Board of Selectmen and other Town Boards officially supported this designation. The Town should continue to improve close coordination with the Cultural District and offer support for this work where necessary and appropriate.

3. Residents would like to see even more cultural venues in Easton.

In discussions at public forums, through surveys, and as part of the Working Group discussions, it became evident there is a strong local demand for additional cultural and artistic venues in Easton. Residents were happy to live in a region where access to places like Boston and Providence is relatively easy, allowing them to experience all of the cultural outlets those cities have to offer. However, many felt Easton could serve as a host for new venues as well. During a brainstorming session at the first public forum, participants felt that live performance, galleries and many other “artistic spaces” would be successful in the community due to pent up demand.



Residents and visitors flocked to the grand opening of the Governor Ames Estate in June 2014. Participants expressed a desire to see even more cultural events and venues in town. (Photograph courtesy of Kristopher Ventresco)

It is difficult for a Town like Easton to facilitate the development of very specific uses, particularly cultural or arts-based uses that generally operate as non-profit entities. While there may be local demand for various artistic venues, it can be difficult for these types of entities to thrive without a significant regional draw. Easton can find success with expanding artistic and cultural venues by capitalizing on its emerging Cultural District and through additional partnerships.

signage and restrictions on temporary outdoor sales are all examples of local regulatory standards that can unintentionally restrict the establishment of new permanent or temporary artistic venues. Close coordination with the Cultural District, community organizations, and the Library will be critical.

Regardless of the approach, the Town will need to be sure that local regulations do not provide roadblocks to artistic venues and events. Licensing, parking requirements,

4. Cultural institutions in Easton would be strengthened through greater coordination.

Although residents clearly see a need for more cultural venues in Easton, there was also a lot of discussion centered on the venues and institutions already in place. The public library, for example, provides educational programming for people of all ages. Stonehill College provides

opportunities in the form of lectures, performances, and art exhibits throughout most of the calendar year. Easton's public schools have tremendous music and arts programming that have students performing at the schools as well as in regional events outside the community. The Children's Museum is widely regarded as a cultural and learning centerpiece in the community and enjoys widespread support. These venues represent just a few examples of the diversity of arts, culture, and education opportunities that are available to Easton residents.

At public forums and in community discussions, residents were quick to acknowledge the value in all of these opportunities. They also acknowledged that awareness of these opportunities could be fostered more effectively. As an example, the Shovel Town Cultural District has made great strides in coordinating activities and organizations both within and outside the boundaries of the North Easton Historic District. The district, independent institutions, and media outlets provide some awareness of arts, culture and educational opportunities throughout Easton but none provides this service in a comprehensive fashion. People who participated in Envision Easton recognized how challenging it will be to better coordinate all of these different organizations, but also recognized the enormous potential benefit to residents, business owners and visitors. While it has not been especially active recently, the Cultural Council, in partnership with the Cultural District, Library and Town administration, could potentially play a lead role in this effort.

5. Easton can better capitalize on the number of visitors who come to see Easton's cultural attractions.



Oakes Ames Memorial Hall (foreground) and the Ames Free Library (background) are two of many historic treasures in the Town of Easton.

On a regional scale and beyond, Easton is known for its historic buildings, historic districts, and open spaces. The historical architectural assets in the Ames Local Historic District attract architectural students and connoisseurs and artists to the Village area to view and experience the works of Richardson, Olmsted and others. Numerous wedding receptions and other celebratory events are held in picturesque venues such as Oakes Ames Memorial Hall each year. Most notable among Easton's recreational assets is Borderland State Park, which straddles the Sharon/Easton town line and serves as a regional amenity for hiking, more active recreation like frisbee golf, a location for weddings, and offers

rotating art exhibits. The Governor Ames Estate, which is now managed by the Trustees of Reservations, is another important attraction, with 2,000 people attending the grand opening in June, 2014.

Many stakeholders in the Envision Easton process were aware that thousands of people come to Easton every year, but many others were surprised to learn that their community does have a

noteworthy tourist economy. The discussions drew mixed reactions with some residents being excited about the visibility, while others were more interested in protecting the quiet “bedroom community” character from too many visitors. There was consensus on the idea that, if people are coming to Easton already, opportunity exists to better capture tourist dollars to support the local economy. The continued efforts to redevelop Main Street properties and create a more vibrant center around Ames Shovel Works dovetail with the desire to provide “spill over” opportunities for visitors. Where visitors once may have spent a limited amount of time to see a particular attraction, Easton is poised to offer more to tourists in the near future. Adding shopping, dining, or other cultural opportunities—creating more of a “destination” in some of Easton’s commercial areas—can broaden the experience for visitors and increase spending on the local economy. This economic piece is also a requirement for achieving official Cultural District designation from the Commonwealth.

6. Easton views its public schools as one of its most significant cultural assets.

Many communities struggle with integrating their public schools into a master plan process. The ways in which administrations at Town Hall and the School Department are structured often create a situation where local government and school functions are not highly integrated. Typically, in a master plan document, school “buildings and grounds” are included in the larger discussion of recreational needs, but more meaningful discussions about the significance of public schools to the community are lacking. From the outset of the Envision Easton process, the project Steering Committee felt strongly that this document should reflect the enormous value the community as a whole places on its public schools.

In their first meeting, members of the Arts, Culture and Education Working Group identified Easton’s public schools as “one of the Town’s most important cultural assets”. This assertion echoed many of the sentiments raised at the opening forum and with other stakeholders. Enrolling more than 3,800 students, there was strong consensus that Easton’s schools are an integral piece of the Town’s identity and serve as a significant draw for families to move into the community. Town support of public education is demonstrated through active parent teacher organizations and grass roots support from groups like the Foundation for Excellence in Education in Easton (FEEE), which has raised over one million dollars locally to purchase state-of-the-art technology for classrooms and match funds innovative teacher grants. This level of support plays a vital role in the performance of local schools, with very high numbers of students consistently showing proficiency in reading and math. While participants in Envision Easton were quick to point out the many successes the school system has every year, people agreed there is always a need to strive for improvement. Collaboration with town agencies and other cultural groups in the community could lead to greater engagement of the student body in community affairs and higher levels of enrichment beyond the core curriculum.

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Goals, Objectives and Actions for Arts, Culture, and Education

	Lead Agency	Time Horizon (1-2 years; 2-5 years; 5-10 years)
Goal ACE-1. Maintain and enhance existing cultural assets and opportunities.		
Objective 1.1 Coordinate cultural activities among educational institutions, recreational groups, and other culturally oriented groups in Easton.		
Action 1A: Develop an easily maintained, centralized community calendar that displays cultural events.	Cultural Council, Cultural District, and other related civic groups	2-5 years; then ongoing
Action 1B: Where appropriate, provide administrative powers to individuals or groups for the community calendar so they can add content as new events are scheduled.	Information Technology	2-5 years
Action 1C: Share and coordinate promotion of public events among the Town and private partners (e.g., Stonehill College and local community organizations like the Lion’s Club, Knights of Columbus and the Natural Resources Trust).	Town Administrator, Information Technology, School Department, Town Clerk	2-5 years
Action 2: Convene regular planning meetings between cultural institutions in Easton to discuss programming for the coming months, ways to combine resources, bolster participation, and develop complementary programming.	Cultural District, Cultural Council and other related civic groups	1-2 years
Action 3: Develop a high quality map (and poster) that shows all of the Easton cultural facilities in a way that can be used in conjunction with the Town calendar.	Cultural District, GIS Department, and other related civic groups	2-5 years
Objective 1.2 Continue to identify, maintain and restore historic structures, landscapes and assets.		
Action 1: Develop neighborhood preservation and streetscape improvement strategies for areas identified by the Historical Commission as high priorities.	Historical Commission, Planning and Community Development	5-10 years
Action 2: Identify funding for and upgrade the Town’s inventory of Historic town resources to include all structures 75 years or older.	Historical Commission	2-5 years

Action 3:	Develop new or modify existing land-use regulatory tools to preserve historic assets and landscapes.	Planning and Community Development, Historical Commission	2-5 years
Action 4:	Develop illustrated design guidelines for individual neighborhoods to help property owners interested in renovations or redevelopment.	Historical Commission	5-10 years
Action 5:	Revise Site Plan Review and landscape standards in the Zoning Bylaw to help guide sound development practices consistent with Easton's historic character.	Planning and Community Development, Planning/Zoning Board	2-5 years
Action 6:	Perform a town-wide archaeological survey.	Historical Commission	5-10 years
Action 7:	Continue to provide platforms for the Historical Commission and Historical Society to raise awareness of existing resources in the community through the Town website and other media as appropriate.	Historical Commission, Historical Society, Town Administrator, Town Clerk	Ongoing
Objective 1.3	Identify opportunities to program parks and public spaces with appropriately scaled events.		
Action 1:	Meet with individuals or groups that coordinate activities in each park area or public venue to develop a list of potential events on a semi-annual basis.	Recreation Department, other parks leadership groups	2-5 years
Action 2:	Explore the development of a walking tour smart phone app or similar mechanism that will allow users to hear historical accounts and important information related to specific monuments or sites.	Historical Commission	2-5 years
Action 3:	Actively engage with Easton public school administration and faculty to explore opportunities to more effectively showcase the numerous visual, musical, and performing arts shows that occur in Easton's public spaces.	School Department, Ames Free Library, Cultural Council.	1-2 years
Goal ACE-2.	Pursue new cultural opportunities to enhance Easton's quality of life.		
Objective 2.1	Include cultural activities in a variety of facilities		
Action 1:	Ensure there are no unnecessary regulatory barriers to providing cultural spaces, amenities or events.	Planning and Community Development, Planning/Zoning Board	1-2 years
Action 2:	Develop a master signage/wayfinding plan for the Town.	Public Safety, Recreation Commission, School Department, Conservation	5-10 years for town-wide installation

		Commission, Chamber of Commerce, DPW, Public Spaces Committee	
Action 3:	Educate property and business owners on ways to integrate art into sidewalk or interior spaces.	Cultural Council	2-5 years
Action 4:	As part of the community calendar, include information on art showings that are being exhibited at local businesses.	Cultural Council, Cultural District	1-2 years
Action 5:	Continue to provide outreach to businesses about coordinating hours of operation to take advantage of cultural activities.	Cultural District	1-2 years
Objective 2.2	Establish and support an officially designated Cultural District.		
Action 1:	Coordinate with the Easton Shovel Town Cultural District to identify how the Town can support the designation process.	Board of Selectmen	1-2 years
Action 2:	Work with the Cultural District volunteers to understand the administrative needs for the district and determine how the Town might assist.	Cultural District, Town Administrator, Town Accountant	2-5 years
Action 3:	Identify opportunities to connect Easton's school age population with events and opportunities within the Cultural District.	Cultural District; School Department	2-5 years
Action 4:	Identify physical connections between facilities, schools, parks and other areas in Easton.	Bicycle and Pedestrian Working Group	1-2 years, then ongoing
Objective 2.3	Create diverse opportunities to cultivate new artists in the community.		
Action 1:	Integrate art education into continuing education offerings.	School Department, Stonehill College, Ames Free Library	5-10 years
Action 2:	Solicit organizations to provide "field trips" for both youth and adults to see major exhibits and shows in neighboring communities, at Stonehill College or in the Boston/Providence areas.	Ames Free Library, Community Based Organizations (Lions, etc.)	5-10 years
Action 3:	Consider the continued use of municipal or private buildings as potential venues for rotating art displays.	Ames Free Library, Cultural District, Cultural Council	2-5 years
Action 4:	Sponsor writing, visual art, photo and video contests of all styles and display the products in public spaces.	School Department; Ames Free Library, Cultural	2-5 years

		Council, Cultural District, Easton Community Access Television, Historical Society.	
Goal ACE-3.	Create and maintain a culture of lifelong learning for all residents.		
Objective 3.1	Support pre-school learning opportunities.		
Action 1:	Develop a listing of pre-school appropriate activities and share with Easton pre-schools.	Ames Free Library, School Department	2-5 years
Objective 3.2:	Support the School Committee in implementing their Strategic Plan.		
Action 1:	Continue collaboration with public schools to integrate the exploration of historic resources into the curriculum.	School Department, Historical Commission, Historical Society	Ongoing
Action 2:	Institute regular meetings and/or updates between the School Committee and designated town agents outside of the financial planning process.	Town Administrator	2-5 years
Objective 3.3	Support the development of education programs for adults and seniors.		
Action 1:	Survey Easton residents regarding the types of adult education opportunities that would be popular.	Council on Aging, Ames Free Library	1-2 years
Action 2:	Collaborate with Southeastern Vocational Technical High School to publicize its adult education opportunities.	Council on Aging, Cultural Council, Cultural District	1-2 years
Action 3:	Work with Stonehill College to ensure that special programming and “one-time” educational offerings are well-publicized. Include in new community calendar.	Stonehill College, Town Administrator , Cultural Council	1-2 years