

2021

West Central Mountains Regional Creative District 2021

Gabe Osterhout
Boise State University

Emily Pape
Boise State University



**WEST CENTRAL
MOUNTAINS
REGIONAL CREATIVE
DISTRICT**
2021



BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY
IDAHO POLICY INSTITUTE

WEST CENTRAL MOUNTAINS REGIONAL CREATIVE DISTRICT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Idaho Commission on the Arts (ICA) commissioned Idaho Policy Institute (IPI) to gain a better understanding of the role and impact of the creative community in Idaho's West Central Mountains (WCM)—covering Valley County, Cascade, Donnelly, McCall, and the Meadows Valley—and provide context for the establishment of a creative district pilot in the region.

IPI hosted two focus groups with local stakeholders and conducted a survey of individuals affiliated with the creative community. This feedback provided qualitative insight into the experience of creatives such as artists, makers, and retailers, as well as the perceptions of arts supporters, educators, and administrators.

Findings indicate:

- The local creative community is largely perceived as strong or at least moderately strong, while few believe it is weak.
- There is overwhelming optimism regarding creatives' opportunity for economic growth and prosperity.
- Artists, makers, and retailers want to be more connected with other WCM creatives.
- Respondents are divided on knowing where to find information about creatives.

Based on focus group and survey data, the WCM creative community's strengths include its community, value and impact, and optimism; weaknesses are lack of awareness and access; opportunities involve creating an online tool, expanding resources, and strengthening connections; and the creative community is threatened by growth and erosion of local character.

The implementation of creative districts in other states, particularly in Colorado and California, offer roadmaps for the establishment of a WCM district, including potential best practices, benefits, local partnerships, resources, and state-level assistance.

INTRODUCTION

This report addresses the role and impact of the creative community in Idaho's West Central Mountains (WCM) and provides context for the establishment of a creative district pilot in the region. The first section presents background on best practices in other states, with a particular focus on community implementation in Colorado and California. The following section overviews the study's process for collecting local data through stakeholder engagement, focus group interviews, and a survey of residents affiliated with the creative community. Third, a SWOT analysis uses this qualitative data to understand the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats facing the WCM creative community. Finally, the report overviews potential next steps including a regular forum and potential local partnerships.

BACKGROUND

In recent years, many organizations and researchers have examined best practices in creative placemaking through creative districts, cultural investment, and other designations related to the arts. Generally, the reports that emerged from these examinations found that a holistic approach gave the districts the best chance at success; it is best for both policymakers and other financial backers to gain a well-rounded understanding of a region's cultural ecology as opposed to focusing on one component alone.¹ The research also underscores the importance of tapping into existing artistic communities and efforts, where formal districts are most successful when they collaborate with existing informal districts and networks.² More specifically, an Americans for the Arts report found that the "inclusion of local artists, historical or symbolic resources, local skill sets, and even local business entrepreneurs and suppliers have a marked and positive impact on the success of cultural districts."³ Additionally, development of local ownership of districts fosters community cohesion as well as more equitable economic growth.⁴

Based on recent research, best practices for creative planning endeavors involve a clearly stated mission and relevant goals, both for the purposes of guiding the project but also allowing for useful evaluation farther down the line.⁵ Cross-sector participation also plays an important role in the success of a district.⁶ Creative districts do not necessarily have to rely on extensive financial support or intense policy changes; researchers found that even the act of naming an "arts district" can increase investment in both development and new creative undertakings in the named area, even though the designation may not bring any policy benefits or additional resources.⁷ Throughout the literature, reports emphasize the importance of collaboration between government authorities and creatives, especially to ensure that creative district designations do not sideline creatives in favor of economic development.⁸

As Idaho explores establishing a creative district, other states such as Colorado and California offer potential roadmaps. Colorado, with its culture of outdoor recreation and largely rural areas, provides several enlightening case studies. The state has a Creative District Certification process which has so far recognized 26 creative districts.⁹ Across these creative districts, most are based around events and a creative directory, and host resources for creatives and an emphasis on the existing community as well as serving tourists.

Greeley, CO, a college town with a diverse population of refugees and immigrants and roots in agriculture, established a creative district in 2012 as a 501c3 nonprofit. Their mission revolves around highlighting the existing creative community and encouraging economic development. The accompanying website has a variety of components, including interactive maps, resources for creatives (including “cacophony of creatives” meetings for networking and skill building, a grants page, and a “calls for artist” page), and information for tourists.

Paonia, CO, a rural agricultural community in the process of transitioning away from an energy economy, established a creative district as a 501c3 nonprofit in 2012 as well. The district’s mission is to foster community development and the community’s diverse creative economy and its website is home to an interactive map, a directory of creatives, a calendar of events, and a news page.

Corazón de Trinidad, CO, also in the process of transitioning from an energy-based economy, established a creative district in 2013. The district’s mission involves attracting creatives to the area in a revitalization effort as well as strengthening the existing community’s identity and sense of place. The creative district website hosts a page for events and page with resources including blog posts and other information.

California also has existing creative-focused districts in place. The California Cultural Districts program seeks to leverage cultural, creative, and diverse assets across the state and certifies cultural districts throughout California.¹⁰ The resources the program provides to local communities seeking recognition of a district include information on the creation of an asset inventory and potential benefits and challenges of establishing a district.¹¹ The California Cultural Districts program identifies benefits such as enhancement of placemaking, cultural and historic preservation, increased artist support, and encouragement of economic development.¹² The challenges listed include gentrification and displacement, inequitable development, and issues of equity and access.¹³

METHODOLOGY

Idaho Policy Institute (IPI) facilitated two focus group discussions with local stakeholders. These stakeholders included artists, arts administrators and educators, city and county economic development representatives, retailers, and community members. The first session, held in November 2020 with nine participants, sought to understand the value and impact of WCM creatives, their opportunity for economic growth and prosperity, and gauged demand for an online tool to inventory creative assets. This discussion informed the development of the survey instrument.

The second focus group session, held in February 2021 with eight stakeholders, followed the survey’s completion and attempted to gain a deeper understanding of the survey data. It featured a discussion about stakeholders’ reactions to the results, including responses that met expectations or were surprising. Participants also provided insight into broader community sentiments. For instance, the group offered reasons why survey respondents were exceedingly optimistic about creative economic growth and prosperity.

The survey instrument was distributed on February 5 and closed on February 22. IPI's project contacts forwarded the survey link to local organizations including Valley County, city governments, chambers of commerce, nonprofits, galleries, libraries, co-ops, and the creative district steering committee, who then distributed it through their email and social media channels. The West Central Mountains Economic Development Council also featured the survey link on its website and The Star-News published a story that increased survey participation and generated interest in the larger effort.

The cleaned survey data contained 127 total responses. Most respondents accessed the survey through email and social media (see Figure 1). Over half of the respondents live in McCall, approximately one quarter in Cascade, and the rest in Donnelly, Meadows Valley, and Lake Fork (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 1 - SURVEY METHOD

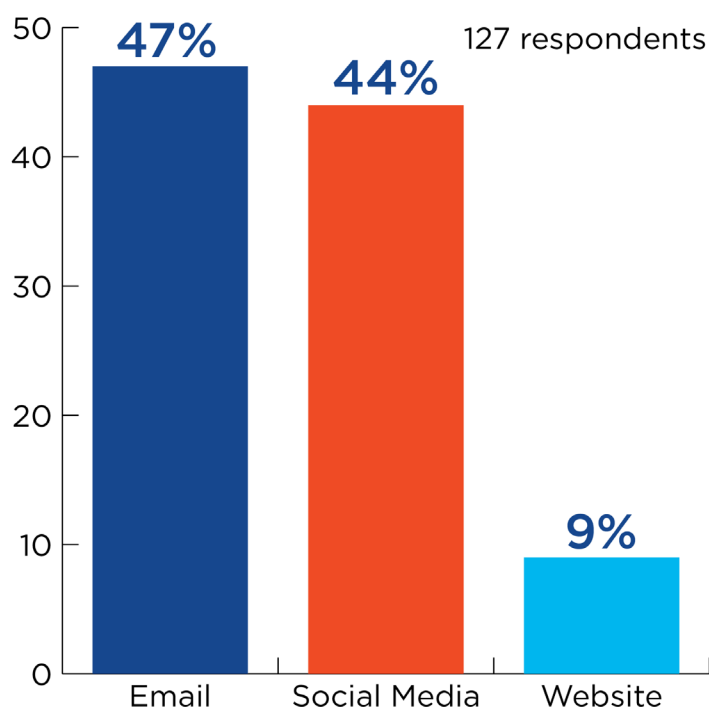
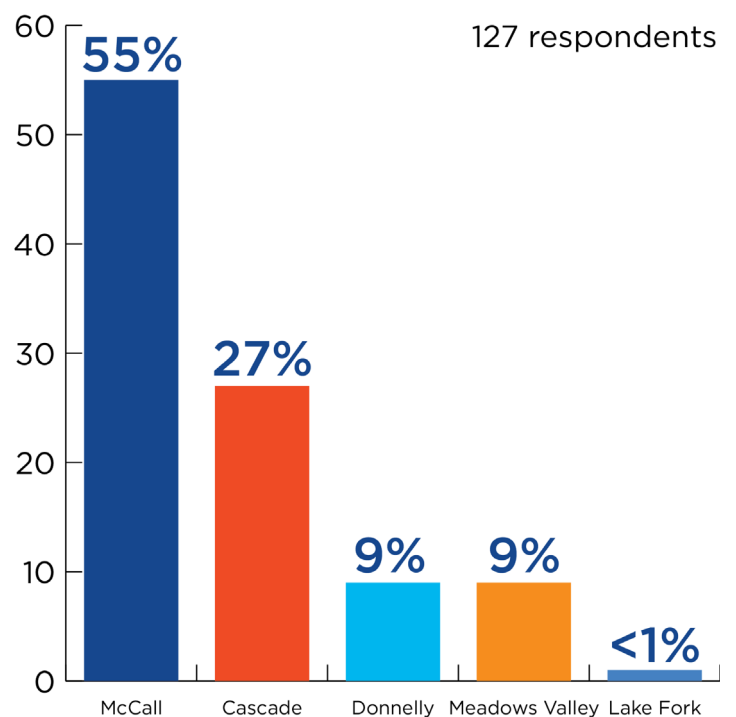
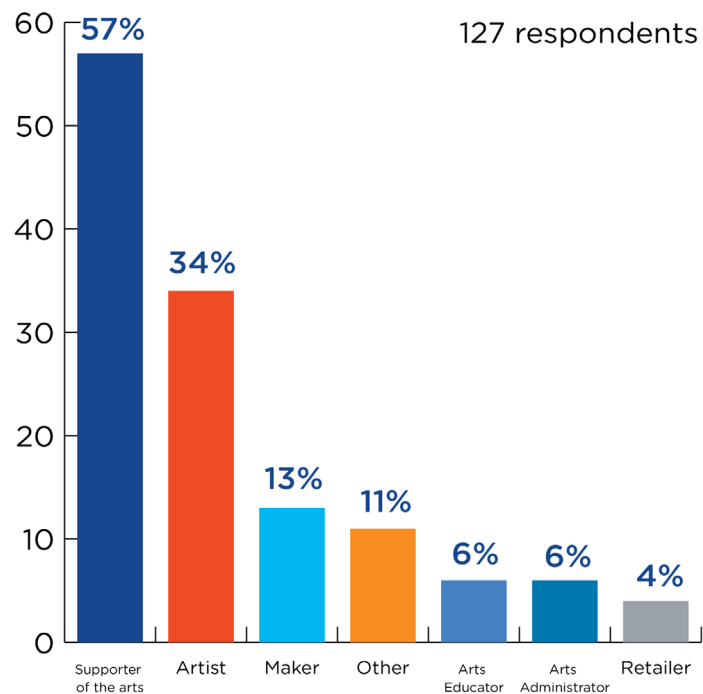


FIGURE 2 - RESPONDENT LOCATION



Respondents were asked to identify two primary roles in their relationship to the creative community. The most popular identifier was supporter of the arts and the least common was retailer (see Figure 3). About 60 respondents identified as an artist (e.g., painter, potter, sculptor, performer, musician), maker (e.g., coffee roaster, crafter, small local manufacturer, chef, brewer, etc.) and/or retailer.

FIGURE 3 - RELATIONSHIP TO CREATIVE COMMUNITY



Over two-thirds of artists, makers, and retailers reported that their creative or artistic sales constituted less than 5% of their total income (see Table 1). Only eight respondents reported that such sales account for a majority of their income. The most selected method for selling and displaying creative work is online, followed by seasonal festivals and fairs (see Table 2).

TABLE 1 - PERCENT INCOME FROM CREATIVE/ARTISTIC SALES (ARTISTS, MAKERS, & RETAILERS)

Percent	Responses
76-100%	7
51-75%	1
26-50%	2
6-25%	8
<5%	38

TABLE 2 - HOW SELL/DISPLAY CREATIVE WORK (ARTISTS, MAKERS, & RETAILERS)

Method	Responses	Percent
Online	33	58%
Seasonal festivals/fairs	14	25%
Other	14	25%
Someone else's in-person storefront	9	16%
Own in-person storefront	5	9%

There are several limitations related to the survey’s findings. First, it is difficult to determine what share of the WCM creative community are represented in the survey. Since the population size of creatives is unknown, it is difficult to calculate the confidence level and margin of error for collected responses. The sample size of survey respondents may or may not be representative of the region’s creative community, so results should be interpreted cautiously. Second, because of the type of respondents that were targeted (i.e., affiliation with the creative community), there are likely biased responses based on this experience. For instance, respondents would presumably be more likely to feel that creatives positively impact the regional community. Finally, the respondent sample is skewed toward general supporters of the arts, though several creative-specific questions were asked only to artists, makers, and retailers, such as how they can more effectively reach consumers or what resources they would like to have access to.

SWOT ANALYSIS

Analyzing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) of the creative community in the West Central Mountains offers insight into the advantages and disadvantages facing the community internally (strengths and weaknesses) and externally (opportunities and threats). This analysis was informed by qualitative data obtained through stakeholder engagement, focus group interviews, and a survey of local residents affiliated with the creative community.

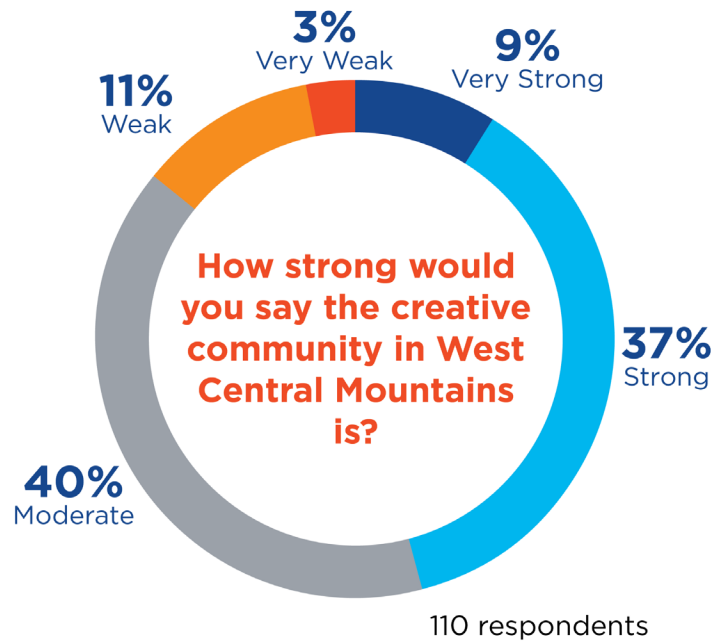
Internally, the West Central Mountains creative community’s strengths include its community, value and impact, and optimism. Its weaknesses involve awareness and access. Externally, opportunities include creating an online tool, expanding resources, and strengthening connections. The community’s threats relate to growth and erosion of local character.



COMMUNITY

Nearly half of survey respondents rated WCM’s creative community as strong or very strong, while only 14% considered it weak or very weak (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4 - STRENGTH OF WCM CREATIVE COMMUNITY



The focus group offered several reasons for the strength of the WCM creative community. For instance, creatives are all over the area and numerous spaces have makers’ art in different places. Artists in the community also support other creatives by promoting each other’s work. The public is supporting the creative community, even more so during the pandemic, by increasing their demand for small and local businesses. Many creatives claim that the past year has been the busiest year they have ever had.

One focus group member pointed out that members of the creative sector are willing to share their wisdom with others. As a result, someone who wants to create does not have to fear going it alone or reinventing the wheel. There is a culture of people being able to lean on others. Another participant noted that the combination of the region’s people, expertise, creativity, and depth and wealth of knowledge and experience, along with the ability to leverage organizations like the McCall Arts and Humanities Council and Ponderosa Center, means that the community’s potential is limitless.

VALUE & IMPACT

Survey respondents largely perceived creatives as positively impacting cultural, economic, educational, and tourism aspects of the region, with cultural value represented most (see Table 3). In addition, some respondents added that creatives contribute to the local aesthetic, placemaking, mental health, connectivity, vibrancy, and enjoyability.

TABLE 3 - POSITIVE VALUE AND IMPACT OF WCM CREATIVES

Type	Responses	Percent
Cultural	93	84%
Economic	74	67%
Educational	74	67%
Tourism	72	65%
Other	11	10%

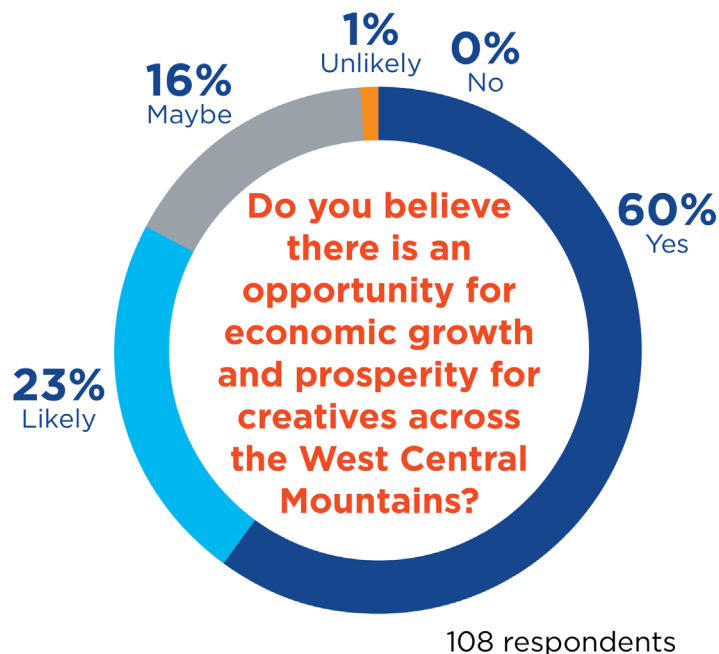
Focus group participants expanded on the specific impact creatives have across these different categories. Culturally, creatives cultivate opportunities to connect community members, help articulate the unique qualities of the region, and add to the richness of the community's character. Economically, artists and makers add to the region's supply chain and economic output, create entrepreneurial inspiration, and attract labor. Educational benefits include engaging in controversial subjects in an approachable way, showing youth the value of creativity and sustainability, and drawing attention to conservation movements. Finally, creatives attract visitors and contribute to the region's tourist demand.

OPTIMISM

An overwhelming majority of respondents reacted positively regarding the opportunity for economic growth and prosperity among creatives. Over 80% responded yes or likely, while only 1% responded unlikely, and not a single respondent selected no (see Figure 5).

Although members of the community are likely thinking beyond present circumstances, such optimism is particularly notable during a pandemic that has disproportionately impacted the artistic community across Idaho, eliminating an estimated 30% of jobs in the arts statewide.¹⁴

FIGURE 5 - ECONOMIC GROWTH & PROSPERITY



Respondents who believed there is opportunity for creative economic growth and prosperity (answered yes) provided various reasons for their optimism. These explanations involve the region’s room for growth, supportive culture, tourist and local consumer base, untapped potential (e.g., opportunities for investment, exposure, education, rebranding), authentic value, existing artistic space, and the general power of art.

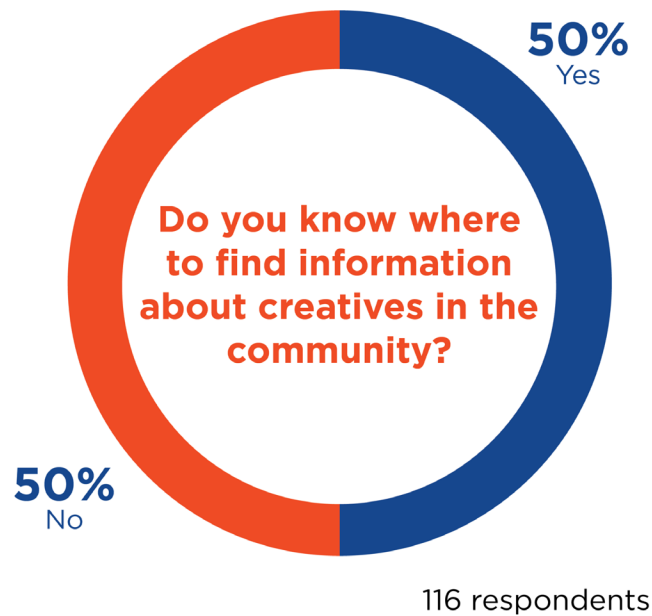
Respondents who selected likely, although optimistic for similar reasons, offered cautionary advice about the area’s high cost of living, lack of knowledge and advertisement about current opportunities, need for business guidance, and difficulty selling in the off-season. Unsure respondents (selected maybe) also added fears that tourists are not arts-focused, the small community is not welcoming to newcomers, the region needs to prioritize residents over visitors, lack of retail opportunities, and a need for a stronger support system.

Weaknesses

AWARENESS

Respondents were evenly divided on knowing where to find information about creatives in the community (see Figure 6). This is a surprising outcome given that nearly all of the survey participants are affiliated with the local creative sector, suggesting that members of the public are even less likely to know where to find information about creatives. One focus group member, however, was not as surprised about the awareness gap since there is not a master list of creatives, limiting possibilities for communicating about their work.

FIGURE 6 - FINDING CREATIVE INFORMATION



Among respondents who know where to find information, the most popular sources are mainly informal: word of mouth, social media, and newsletter and email lists (see Table 4). More formal information sources, such as online and print directories, were the least commonly selected. Other entries mention the McCall Arts and Humanities Council, art galleries, small businesses, and local newspapers.

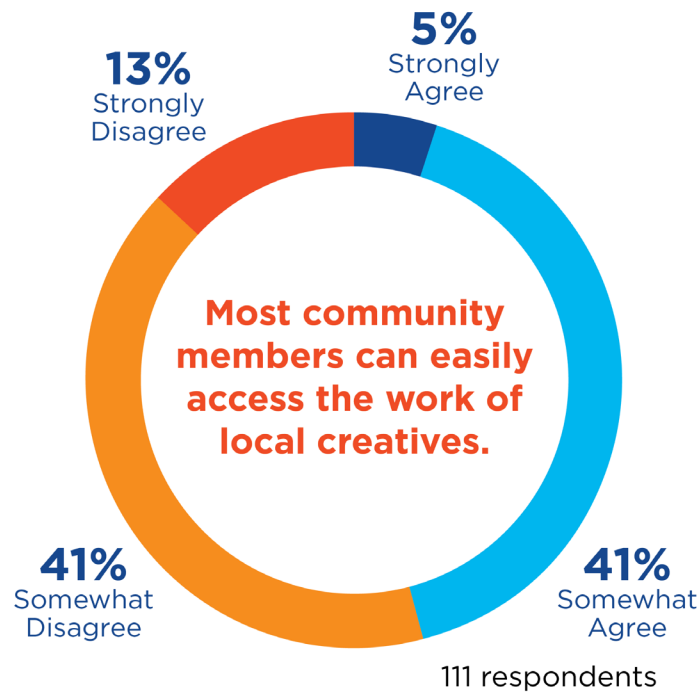
TABLE 4 - RESPONDENT INDICATED SOURCES FOR CREATIVE INFORMATION

Source	Responses	Percent
Word of mouth	47	81%
Social media	38	66%
Newsletter/email lists	32	55%
Google/other search engine	22	38%
Other	12	21%
Online directory	7	12%
Print directory	3	5%

ACCESS

Related to the awareness gap is a perception that the public cannot easily access the work of local creatives. Over half of respondents felt that this is the case for most community members (see Figure 7). A focus group participant noted that, given the lack of a central hub for creative work, a survey distributed to a broader audience would likely agree that finding information about creatives in the community is difficult.

FIGURE 7 - COMMUNITY MEMBERS ACCESSING CREATIVE WORK



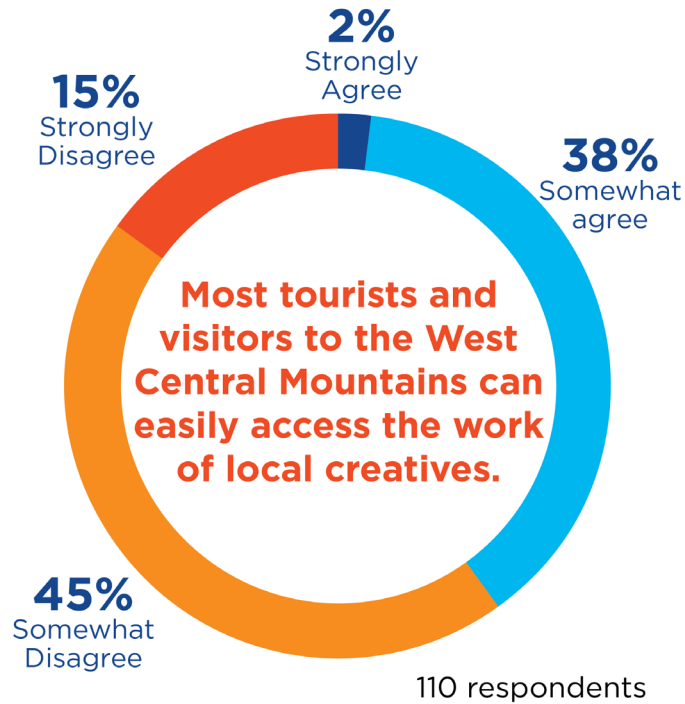
Among those who strongly or somewhat agreed that local creative work is easily accessible, respondents provided open-ended responses on where they believe most community members find information (see Table 5). The most common responses involve online sources such as social media and email newsletters.

TABLE 5 - RESPONDENT PERCEIVED PUBLIC ACCESS TO CREATIVE INFORMATION

Source	Responses	Percent
Online	22	49%
Personal interaction	9	20%
Art organizations	8	18%
Local media	6	13%
Non-creative community organizations	3	7%
Art galleries	3	7%
Local businesses	2	4%
Events	2	4%
Public postings	2	4%

Similarly, this perceived lack of access extends to the experience of tourists and visitors, as 60% of respondents believed that non-residents cannot easily access the work of local creatives (see Figure 8).

FIGURE 8 - TOURISTS & VISITORS ACCESSING CREATIVE WORK

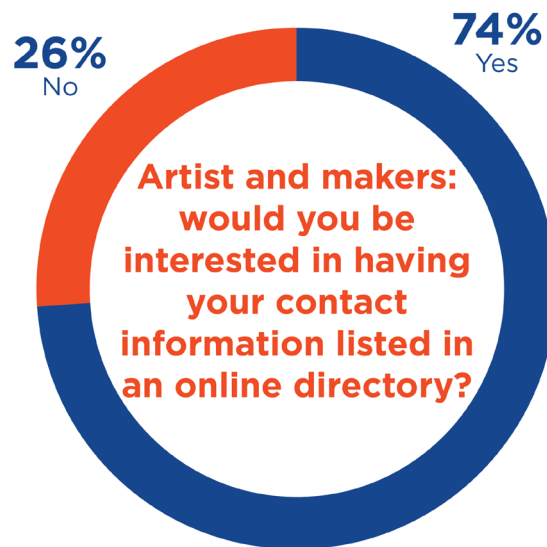


CREATING ONLINE TOOL

The first focus group identified the need for an online tool to inventory WCM creative assets. Such a tool would build on the community's strengths while addressing the public's awareness and access gaps related to creative work. An asset inventory could identify local creatives' descriptions, contact information, created work, and details for consumer access. It could also enable creative users to reach out to arts administrators and other creatives for help reaching consumers and markets. Finally, the focus group identified the possibility of featuring other resources that are provided as part of a new creative district, such as events, partnerships, and other tools.

Gauging interest in the survey, nearly three-quarters of artists and makers expressed interest in having their contact information listed in an online directory (see Figure 9).

FIGURE 9 - INTEREST IN ONLINE DIRECTORY (ARTISTS & MAKERS)



47 respondents

A creative directory is only one feature of a potential online tool. Although it is the most desired feature, artists, makers, and retailers also indicated support for a calendar of events, map of creative assets, and business management tools (see Table 6).

TABLE 6 - DESIRED ONLINE TOOL FEATURES (ARTISTS, MAKERS, & RETAILERS)

Feature	Responses	Percent
Directory of creatives	41	79%
Calendar of events	40	77%
Map of creative areas/studios/businesses	32	62%
Business management tools	19	37%
Other	4	8%

EXPANDING RESOURCES

To more effectively reach consumers and markets, artists, makers, and retailers mainly indicated a need for in-person events, an online platform, and partnerships with local businesses and other creatives, among other possible resources (see Table 7).

TABLE 7 - RESOURCES NEEDED TO MORE EFFECTIVELY REACH CONSUMERS (ARTISTS, MAKERS, & RETAILERS)

Resource	Responses	Percent
In-person events	31	60%
Online platform	26	50%
Partnerships with local businesses	25	48%
Partnerships with other creatives	25	48%
Business development advising and/or tools	19	37%
Partnerships with local nonprofits/ government	8	15%
Other	4	8%

Artists, makers, and retailers ranked trainings as the top resource they would most like to see, with entrepreneurship tools, grants/other financial assistance programs, business management resources, and mentorship ranking behind it (see Table 8).

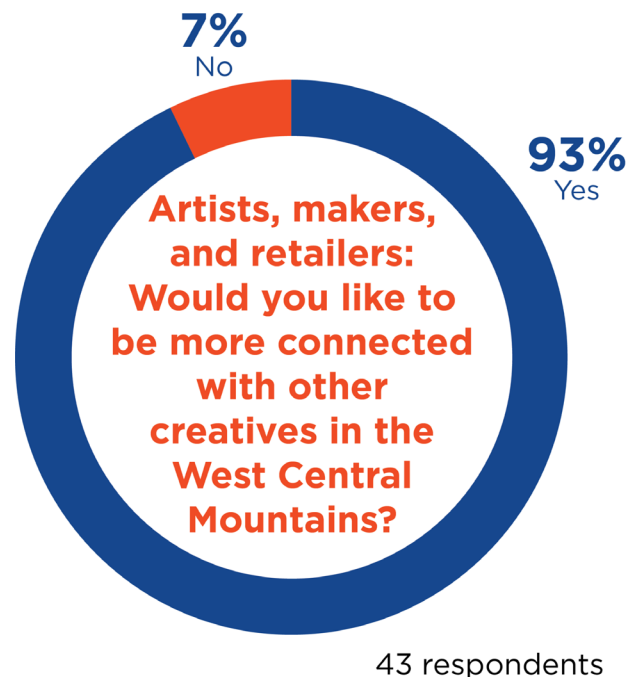
TABLE 8 - MOST DESIRED RESOURCES (ARTISTS, MAKERS, & RETAILERS)

Resource	Average Rank (1-6, 1 Most Important)
Trainings	2.95
Entrepreneurship tools	3.13
Grants/other financial assistance programs	3.2
Business management resources	3.3
Mentorship	3.4
Other	5.03

STRENGTHENING CONNECTIONS

More than 90% of artists, makers, and retailers indicated an interest in being more connected with other creatives in the region (see Figure 10).

FIGURE 10 - CONNECTION INTEREST (ARTISTS, MAKERS, & RETAILERS)



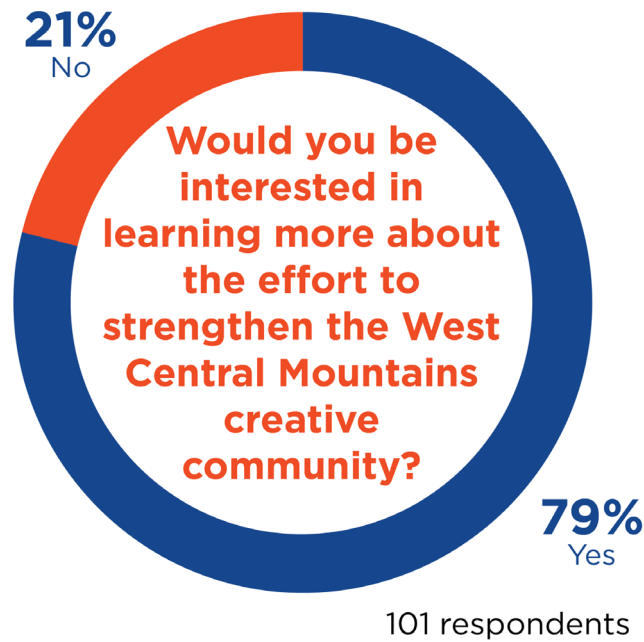
Creatives interested in being more connected offered suggestions related to structured engagement, new organizations, online engagement, community engagement, and community events.

Structured engagements and new organizations were the most common themes. The former includes organized conferences, festival meet and greets, small group teaching sessions, creative-based events, personal communication, business seminars, social networking, round tables, meetups, and creative classes. The latter includes suggestions such as a central directory of creatives, regional council, makerspace, artist database, arts council, art school, centralized clearing house showcasing local work, and local creatives committee.

Similarly, online engagement suggestions include an e-commerce platform advertising and selling creative handmade goods, centralized website, newsletter, social media, and local news media. Community engagement involves more cooperation and collaboration between local artists and galleries, more support from the City of McCall and Chamber of Commerce, volunteer opportunities, and community involvement. Finally, community events would offer local artists more chances to engage in festivals, fairs, galleries, and cultural events.

WCM creatives and others affiliated with the artistic sector expressed enthusiasm about the ongoing effort to strengthen the local creative community (see Figure 11). Over 70 respondents also provided their contact information to learn more about the process and become more involved in it.

FIGURE 11 - COMMUNITY INTEREST IN EFFORT



T Threats

GROWTH

Between 2015 and 2019 alone, Valley County’s population increased by 13.4%.¹⁵ This figure does not account for expanding tourist activity in the region, which is also driven by growth in neighboring areas. To highlight growth’s threats on affordability and sustainability, the City of McCall recently banned the construction of houses larger than 10,000 square feet.¹⁶

Although growth has benefited the creative community, it can also threaten the region’s artists and makers. For instance, while growth can lead to an increase in artistic demand and sales, it can also overwhelm individual creatives who are not prepared to meet such challenges. One focus group member noted that some artists in their city go into seclusion if they feel overwhelmed.

As an external force, growth will likely happen regardless of the actions of local and state stakeholders. It was noted in the focus group, however, that growth can be enabling or empowering for the creative community if managed correctly. Some actions, such as the local limitation on franchise businesses and other policies to protect local character, can shield artists and makers and help offset the negative effects of growth. The establishment of a WCM creative district could further empower creatives to navigate such challenges by expanding the resources at their disposal and strengthening both the connections among creatives and the connections between creatives and the larger community.

LOCAL CHARACTER EROSION

A potential consequence of growth and another threat to the WCM creative community is the erosion of local character. With the growing population in nearby cities, particularly the Boise area, regional artists and makers are at risk of being replaced in the local market. The focus group discussion recognized that some locals are already unable to sell locally because people from outside the region are pricing them out. Even parts of the WCM's public art scene, which has long been a staple of the region's character, are now created by non-local artists based out of other Idaho cities and even other states.

The focus group also raised concerns about losing the community's uniqueness, which creatives have played a significant role in cultivating. As expressed by one participant and seconded by others, this fear of gentrification creates an "urgency for fostering creatives because they reflect something unique about the communities and our region that we are losing."

NEXT STEPS

One possible early creative district utility, as suggested by multiple focus group participants, could involve hosting a monthly or quarterly forum where artists and makers connect with business owners and nonprofit leaders, among other stakeholders, to explore partnership opportunities. These meetups could also feature training sessions where creatives learn best practices and receive business development advice.

Local partners have the potential to play a significant role in a creative district's success. Colorado creative districts have forged local partnerships with development authorities, library districts, city halls, and private foundations. In California, partnerships include the tourism bureau; department of transportation; offices of historic preservation, economic development, and housing and community development; and universities. More broadly, a National Assembly of State Arts Agencies brief recommends state arts agencies, historic preservation offices, departments of economic development and tourism, Main Street programs, and universities as potential partners.¹⁷

In the West Central Mountains, working local partnerships initiated by the Idaho Commission on the Arts, including the West Central Mountains Economic Development Council, City of McCall, McCall Arts and Humanities Council, Ponderosa Center, and Cascade Cultural Arts Center, will continue to play an integral role in the establishment of a creative district. However, there is also potential for new partnerships as well. Such organizations include local chambers of commerce, University of Idaho Valley County Extension, Boise State University's Community Impact Programs, public libraries, city halls, and foundations and nonprofits such as farmer's markets. Finally, there is potential for state-level partnerships with organizations such as the Main Street program, Idaho Transportation Department, Visit Idaho, Idaho State Historical Society, Idaho Department of Commerce, Idaho Commission for Libraries, Idaho Humanities Council, and Idaho Heritage Trust.

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REPORT AUTHORS

Gabe Osterhout, Research Associate
Emily Pape, Research Assistant



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