

Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District

**STRATEGIC PLAN
JULY 2021 – JUNE 2026**



Executive Summary

The Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District, also referred to as the A&E District, has created this five-year Strategic Plan, covering the period of July 2021 through June 2026. This Strategic Plan is meant to enable the Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District to build on its history and current context in order to establish its priorities for this five-year period, and guide its engagement with the A&E District's Key Stakeholders in undertaking its work.

These Key Stakeholders - the businesses, organizations, and individuals who live, work, create in, and visit the Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District - are the primary drivers and audience of this Strategic Plan. Their input has been vital in developing the understanding of the impact, reach, and focus of the Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District, and they will be the direct beneficiaries of the outcomes of this Strategic Plan.

This document lays out the Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District's Vision and Mission, and its Strategies, Goals, and Objectives for the next five years. These elements of the plan focus on:

- Creating and supporting more arts and entertainment programming within the A&E District, including public art installations
- Improving communication and collaboration with Key Stakeholders to further build their understanding and development of, and engagement in, A&E District offerings
- Making the Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District a vibrant and unique community for residents, visitors, businesses and creators

This Strategic Plan will guide the A&E District in developing its annual activity plans in cooperation with Key Stakeholders. It will also guide the A&E District in monitoring progress against these plans in order to measure success and identify areas which require additional focus.

Overview

An Arts and Entertainment District is a state designation created to empower rural, suburban and urban localities with tax-related incentives to encourage artists, arts organizations and other creative enterprises to locate in targeted areas in order to promote community involvement, tourism and neighborhood revitalization.

The Town of Bel Air was designated as an Arts and Entertainment District by the State of Maryland in 2011 with an aim to develop, promote and support diverse artistic and cultural activities for the community; to preserve a sense of place; and to provide unique local experiences to support economic vitality.

The Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District applied for redesignation in April 2021, a process required every ten years by the Maryland State Arts Council. As part of this process, the Bel Air A&E District has chosen to undertake a strategic planning process in order to reflect on its history and growth, develop a better understanding of its current context, more effectively determine the future direction of its work, establish Goals and Objectives for the next five years, and more clearly communicate its priorities with residents and businesses within, and visitors to, the A&E District.

This Strategic Plan has been developed in conversation and consultation with the Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District's Key Stakeholders including Town of Bel Air staff, the newly-established Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District Advisory Board, the Bel Air Cultural Arts Commission, Harford Artists' Association, the Bel Air Armory, the Bel Air Downtown Alliance, and other vital partners within the A&E District and within Harford County. This plan is a reflection of these consultations, and is designed to be an intentional, sustainable, and thoughtful response to the values, needs, and goals of the greater Bel Air community, including its residents, businesses, organizations, artists, and visitors.

The development of this Strategic Plan has been informed by:

- Key Stakeholder consultations - in person and via email survey
- Review of past and current Bel Air A&E District partnerships, work, communications, and offerings
- Evaluation of Bel Air A&E District staffing, finances, systems, and structures
- Establishment of, and consultation with, the Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District Advisory Board
- A SWOT Analysis exercise with Key Stakeholders
- Engagement of a Strategic Planning consultant's services, and
- Review and evaluation of key materials including Strategic Planning documents from similar Districts and organizations, existing Bel Air A&E District publications, and materials from the Maryland State Arts Council

This Strategic Plan will serve as a guiding document for the Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District from July 2021 through June 2026. It is intended to be a living document, referred to regularly by A&E District staff, the Advisory Board, and other Key Stakeholders, to provide guidance for annual planning, and monitoring and evaluation of progress against the Goals, Objectives, and other benchmarks established in this document. This Strategic Plan should be reviewed annually by A&E District Staff and the Advisory Board to determine if any amendments are required.

Background

The Maryland State Arts Council (MSAC) manages the State of Maryland's Arts and Entertainment District (A&E District) program. The purpose of the program is to "help develop and promote community involvement, tourism, and revitalization through tax-related incentives that attract artists, arts organizations, and other creative enterprises to towns and cities across the State."

Each A&E District has unique economic development goals and priorities, which can include producing or facilitating events, attracting new businesses, attracting developers, encouraging artists to locate and/or sell artworks in the district's boundaries, or a combination of these strategies.

The Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District encompasses 98 acres of the historic downtown corridor throughout which events are planned and held by a variety of organizations throughout the year. The A&E District promotes events for partner organizations, serves as a central reporting source for all arts related events information, and offers tax incentives to artists and arts-related businesses.

The A&E District is home to a wide variety of events, locations, and programs which bring together artists, businesses, government, cultural organizations, area residents and visitors to celebrate the arts and entertainment, support the stability and growth of local businesses, ensure the economic vitality of the Town of Bel Air and the surrounding community, and make the arts accessible to all.

Bel Air's Department of Economic Development oversees the A&E District. Our partners include, but are not limited to, the Bel Air Cultural Arts Commission, the Bel Air Downtown Alliance, Harford Artists' Association, the Bel Air Armory, Visit Harford, the Harford County Cultural Arts Board, and the Maryland Center for the Arts.

Mission and Vision

The Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District is a state-designated geographic location that is designed to promote and enhance arts and entertainment offerings and opportunities which drive economic activity, vitality and growth.

The Mission of the Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District is to promote and enhance arts and entertainment offerings and opportunities to create a unique and vibrant community where people and businesses want to live, work and play.

The Vision of the Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District is a community where arts and entertainment offerings are available and accessible to community members, visitors, businesses and organizations, and are central to the economic vitality of the District.

Context

The Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District is one of 28 such districts in the State of Maryland. The A&E District is home to a wide array of events and cultural offerings year-round. With a vibrant downtown, a growing number of permanent and temporary public art pieces, a variety of businesses, indoor and outdoor performance spaces, and a calendar packed with programs for all ages, the Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District offers something for everyone.

Offerings within the district include performing arts, visual arts, literary arts, traditional arts, media arts, and other events, programs, and installations, including public art. From gallery exhibits to concerts, theater and dance performances to holiday and cultural events, the Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District is home to diverse artistic and cultural activities, many of which are free. The tax incentives offered to businesses and creators encourage the growth of arts and cultural offerings within the A&E District. And strong partnerships with arts and culture-focused organizations, businesses, and artists have led to the expansion of programs throughout the A&E District.

Over the past ten years, the Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District has:

- Supported the opening of the Harford Artists' Association expanded Gallery at Armory Marketplace

- Expanded and promoted temporary and permanent Public Art installations
- Supported and promoted events within the A&E District including the Town of Bel Air Film Festival, Take a Chance on Art through Harford Artists' Association, art exhibits, performances and events at the Bel Air Armory, First Fridays, the Maryland Center for the Arts Plein Air Festival, the Bel Air Festival of the Arts, the Summer Concert Series, Historical Society of Harford County events, Authors and Artists, and a variety of seasonal concerts, events, festivals, and workshops
- Provided educational workshops and trainings for artists
- Supported holiday offerings such as "The Magic of Christmas in Bel Air" and "Winter Wonderland"
- Encouraged and supported the opening of new businesses within the A&E District
- Promoted and marketed events happening throughout the A&E District through its website, social media, and paid advertising

As with other locations throughout the country, the Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District has been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Extended shut-downs of businesses, including restaurants, retail shops, event and entertainment venues, gallery spaces, and other locations within the A&E District have led to the loss of much-needed revenue. In addition, the curtailing of in-person gatherings has led to the cancellation or postponement of many arts and entertainment-related events and offerings. While some organizations and businesses have continued to offer entertainment in more creative ways (virtual gatherings, outdoor events, etc.), many have decided to simply wait out the pandemic before returning to arts and entertainment programming.

However, certain aspects of the Arts and Entertainment District have been less impacted, or have even thrived during this time. These include the public art installations, which have seen an increase in public engagement, and the popularity of outdoor programs, such as drive-in movies and Winter Wonderland in December 2020.

While it is difficult to know the extent of the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on the Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District, the eventual recovery of the local economy, and the overwhelming appetite of community members and visitors for in-person entertainment, will likely mean that engagement in the offerings within the A&E District will return to pre-COVID levels or higher once it is safe for people to do so.

Consultation with key partners within the Arts and Entertainment District has revealed a strong desire for new and expanded arts and entertainment programs and events within the A&E District. All Key Stakeholders see the value of growing the number and type of offerings, and all expressed an interest in the Arts and Entertainment District playing a stronger convening and supporting role in enabling coordination among businesses, artists, organizations, and local government within the A&E District, as well as in sharing information about events and programs in the A&E District with one another and with the general public.

In addition to a desire for new and expanded arts and entertainment offerings, and more coordination of, and communication about, events and programs, it is also apparent that there needs to be clearer and more targeted communication with the public and businesses, artists, and organizations in the area about the existence of the Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District and the benefits it offers, such as tax incentives and sponsorship of public art pieces and non-profit rentals of the Armory. While many of the Key Stakeholders know of the existence and benefits of the A&E District, the public generally does not. Increased publicity and communication about the A&E District and its services will lead to a greater level of artist, business, and public participation and engagement.

The Goals and Objectives detailed below build on the past achievements of the Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District while addressing the need for more arts and entertainment programming, better coordination of and engagement with Key Stakeholders, and clearer, more robust communications about the offerings within and benefits of the A&E District.

Strategies, Goals and Objectives

The Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District has established the following five-year Strategies, Goals and Objectives to work toward achieving its Mission and Vision, based on the above context.

An annual plan will be developed each year in coordination with the Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District Advisory Board which will evaluate progress toward these Strategies, Goals and Objectives, and will detail the planned activities for that year.

Strategies 2021 - 2026

1. Deepen relationships with current Key Stakeholders, and identify and engage with new Key Stakeholders in order to increase collaboration in developing and implementing events, exhibits, and programs
2. Improve and expand communications, promotions, and marketing efforts in order to reach a wider, more diverse audience, and improve understanding of the existence, purpose, and benefits of the Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District
3. Create more opportunities for collaboration between different stakeholders in order to enable the creation and expansion of arts and entertainment events and programs
4. Provide support for and publicity of existing and new arts and entertainment offerings, including events, programs, and public art installations in order to draw a wider, more diverse audience to the A&E District

Goal 1: Residents of, businesses within, and visitors to the Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District have greater awareness of events, exhibits, programs, and incentives within the A&E District, and know where to look to get this information

Objectives:

1.1 Improve communication with and among community members, businesses, partner organizations, artists, and visitors about A&E District offerings, events, programs, and incentives

1.2 Increase audience size through improved and widened communications efforts

1.3 Create more frequent, higher quality, and more accessible content promoting offerings and incentives within the A&E District

1.4 Identify and engage in new and more effective communication channels

Potential activities:

- Direct Communications: Develop and engage in new and improved communication tools including a regular newsletter (via email) providing information and updates on offerings within the A&E District to businesses, organizations, artists, and other Key Stakeholders
- Website: Continue to provide information on events and programs on the A&E District's website, improve website, and increase frequency of postings
- Marketing: Continue to engage in free and paid marketing; Expand marketing to new channels and outlets
- Media: Work with local media to highlight the existence of the A&E District and happenings within it
- Social Media: Create Instagram account; Increase frequency of postings on social media; Work with partners to cross-promote events; Utilize paid social media promotions
- Outreach: Work with Advisory Board and other Key Stakeholders to share updates on happenings within the A&E District and explore additional opportunities for promotion; Undertake survey of community members to better understand their knowledge about the A&E District, their understanding of events and programs, and their preferences for additional events, programs, and offerings; Provide content at local events including the Bel Air Farmers' Market, Downtown Alliance events, annual events, fairs, and other community gatherings
- Content Creation: Hire photographers to create promotional photos for website, social media, and publications; Feature artists on website and social media; Redesign or add brochures promoting the A&E District and its programs - share with businesses and other key locations in the County

- Networking: Develop a team of “ambassadors” and marketing partners who can help promote the A&E District; Work with partners and businesses on developing co-promotion plans

Goal 2: A greater number of arts and entertainment events, programs, performances, and exhibits are provided within the A&E District which appeal to and draw increased engagement from community members, visitors, creators, organizations, and businesses in the A&E District

Objectives:

2.1 Facilitate partnerships/networking opportunities between businesses/organizations and creators to increase offerings in the A&E District

2.2 Build understanding of community preferences for events, programs, performances and exhibits

2.3 More widely share information about funding, incentives, and other opportunities for development/offering of cultural and arts events and programs with creators, businesses, and organizational partners

Potential Activities:

- Build understanding: Undertake survey of community preferences; Gather information from similar A&E Districts and other locations on successful programs
- Generate new ideas: Facilitate conversations between and among businesses, organizations, creators, and other Key Stakeholders to identify potential new and expanded programs
- Provide incentives and support for implementation of new initiatives: Provide financial sponsorship of events or programs; Support promotion of new ideas; Work with Key Stakeholders to identify how they might share costs or work involved in new initiatives
- Expand pool of organizations/people involved in developing new initiatives: Direct outreach to new businesses and creators in the area; Share opportunities to connect through newsletter and social media; Create brainstorming events
- Share information about funding for new program development through newsletter, social media, and other communication channels
- Work with Key Stakeholders in the A&E District to better track engagement in arts and entertainment programming

Goal 3: Additional public art installations are provided within the Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District, and the community has more opportunity and incentive to engage in public art

Objectives:

3.1 Work with and support partners to expand temporary public art installations within the A&E District

3.2 Work with and support partners to expand permanent public art installations within the A&E District

3.3 Better raise awareness of existing and new public art installations

Potential Activities:

- Identify locations/events for public art installations: Speak with business and property owners; Work with Key Stakeholders to identify opportunities for new public art installations
- Support the creation of new public art offerings: Create plans for vacant building windows; Coordinate with the Cultural Arts Commission on art installation for parking garage or installations at other locations
- Promote the benefits of public art: Work with media to feature public art in articles; Post on social media about public art benefits
- Create opportunities for engagement with public art: Explore creating social media campaign/ business/ promotional campaigns around public art engagement
- Work with existing and new Key Stakeholders to develop co-promotion plans for public art

Measures of Success

At the end of five years, the Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District will have reached the above-detailed Goals and Objectives by creating annual action plans based on the potential activities mentioned under each Goal.

The annual action plans will detail annual benchmarks against which will be measured the success of the implemented activities, both as compared to plans and as compared to previous years' performance. These should include, but not be limited to:

- The number of events implemented and/or supported each year
- The number of Key Stakeholders engaged in planning and implementation of A&E District offerings
- The number of businesses and creators taking advantage of incentives
- The number of community members engaging in A&E District programs and events

- The number of public art installations added to the A&E District (permanent and temporary)
 - The number of artists living and/or working in the A&E District
 - The addition of arts-focused businesses, events, and programs
 - Results of marketing and promotional efforts (number of articles featuring A&E District events; number of social media posts and followers; number of brochures created and distributed; etc.)
 - Survey results
 - Number of people/organizations on email/newsletter distribution list
 - Number of businesses and organizations taking part in performing art and public art sponsorships through the Cultural Arts Commission
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Conclusion

This Strategic Plan will be used by the A&E District as a tool for guiding the creation of annual plans. Annual plans will be designed to build on the information in this document, and will help to determine priorities from year to year. This document will also guide the establishment of annual benchmarks against which progress will be evaluated at the end of each year. These benchmarks will be developed with an aim to build on each previous years' achievements while progressing toward the overarching Goals and Objectives.

At the end of the five-year Strategic Plan period, a detailed evaluation will be undertaken which measures the success of the A&E District's work in reaching the agreed Goals and Objectives, identifies gaps and challenges encountered, and creates recommendations for next steps.

As stated above, the A&E District's Key Stakeholders are the primary audience and beneficiaries of this Strategic Plan. As such, they will be involved in all aspects of its implementation and evaluation. Key Stakeholders will be asked to provide feedback and input at various points along the five-year timeline, will be involved in designing and implementing activities, and will receive direct communications about progress against the A&E District's Goals and Objectives.

It is our aim to ensure that the agreed-upon Goals, Objectives, and Activities are achieved as a result of collaboration, cooperation, and clear communication between the Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District and its Key Stakeholders.

For additional information about the Bel Air Arts and Entertainment District or this document, please contact economicdevelopment@belairmd.org or call 410-838-0584.