
Lynn, Gloucester, Rockport seek 'Cultural District' status

By Steven A. Rosenberg

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Lynn, Gloucester, and Rockport will not be receiving any cash grants as part of their newly designated Cultural District status, but the added cachet could help bring more dollars from tourists and investors into their arts neighborhoods.

The three communities - along with sections of Boston and Pittsfield - are the first five centers for arts designated by the Massachusetts Cultural Council. Lynn's district is the Central Square downtown area, where arts have thrived in recent years; in Gloucester, Rocky Neck - one of the country's first art colonies - was chosen; in Rockport, the district is downtown, and includes the iconic fishing shack Motif #1 and the Shalin Liu Performance Center.

The Cultural District initiative evolved from an economic stimulus bill passed by the state in 2010. While no funds will be awarded to the communities, the state will erect signs on highways and within the communities to point visitors toward the districts. The state also plans to add online profiles of the districts to the Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism and the Massachusetts Cultural Council's websites.

"We're hoping over the next number of years we can convince the Legislature to provide other kinds of incentives for these districts - maybe historic tax credits or other tax breaks," said Massachusetts Cultural Council spokesman Gregory Liakos.

He said the Cultural District status will help attract tourists, artists, and investors; bolster a creative economy in the communities; and preserve historic buildings while also boosting property values.

"It really helps promote the assets we have, and hopefully it will help us expand and create new destination spots," said Jim Cowdell, executive director of Lynn's Economic Development and Industrial Corporation. "This puts on the map."

Cowdell said the Cultural District designation fits in with the city's plan to rejuvenate its downtown. Over the last decade, more than 250 people have moved into downtown condos and lofts, and the area - just minutes from a commuter rail to Boston - has become a popular draw for artists. Recently, Lynn's EDIC purchased a building in Central Square and is converting it into eight artists' residential and work lofts.

In Gloucester, artists and city officials were focusing on the future and the prospects of promoting Rocky Neck, where artists including Winslow Homer and Edward Hopper set up their canvases.

"The arts attract residents and serves as a destination for entrepreneurs wanting to start their own businesses and tourists who will also support the area businesses such as restaurants, lodging, retail, and entertainment," said Jim Duggan, the city's chief administrative officer.

"The presence of the arts and cultural opportunities enhances property values and profitability of surrounding businesses, expands the tax base, and provides employment opportunities," he said.

Karen Ristuben, president of the nonprofit Rocky Neck Art Colony, believes the designation will help bring the arts community together.

"It's a multilevel partnership that puts arts and culture at the core, so it's a really new opportunity on all levels," she said.

She said the neck's artists and business owners plan to establish a website and will also print brochures and maps of the famed colony. Also, there is talk of holding events, such as a Rocky Neck Cultural District Festival.