

Background on the West Allis Arts Collective and the Wisconsin Arts Board-funded West Allis Arts Showcase

The West Allis Arts Collective is an emerging grassroots initiative dedicated to establishing West Allis as a thriving hub for creativity, culture, and artistic expression. Our mission is to cultivate a sustainable arts community by providing platforms for artists, makers, and performers to showcase their talents while fostering community connections through engaging artistic experiences and public engagement. Through initiatives such as makers markets, artist showcases, and public celebrations, we aim to inspire creativity and strengthen a sense of belonging in our community.

Until November 2024, West Allis lacked an organized structure for local artists to network, collaborate, or contribute to city-wide artistic initiatives. The Collective was born out of the City of West Allis' Community Conversation series, an inclusive civic participation dialogue among residents and business owners. The first "Creative Arts and Entertainment" discussion in November 2024 brought together 40 attendees to explore challenges and opportunities for the local arts scene, network, share resources and exchange ideas. Three additional public dialogue sessions followed, drawing even more participants. As a result, a dedicated group of artists, performers, and cultural advocates came together to form the West Allis Arts Collective. To date, more than 60 creatives have actively engaged in shaping and enriching the city's cultural landscape.

This grassroots effort is now evolving into a formal nonprofit organization committed to deepening community engagement through the arts. With funding from the Wisconsin Arts Board, and support from the City of West Allis as a fiscal agent, the Arts Showcase and Capacity Building activities mark a significant milestone for the West Allis Arts Collective. This initiative will develop leadership skills, strengthen community bonds, raise awareness of the creative arts community, and build bridges to engage in and celebrate artistic expression.

The key project goals include:

- Strengthen community bonds through artistic engagement and creative expression.
- Gather community input to shape the future of the West Allis Arts Collective.
- Provide leadership and capacity-building opportunities for Collective members to ensure sustainability and growth.
- Promote local artists and increase public awareness of the West Allis Arts Collective.
- Establish a strong foundation for a vibrant and sustainable arts community in West Allis.

Showcase Day One (September 5, 2025, 5-8 PM): An expansion of the successful Art on the Plaza event, now in its eighth year, sponsored by the City of West Allis and Inspiration Studios, held at Centennial Park outside West Allis City Hall. In the past, this event has not always included artists from our own community.

This enhanced event will feature:

- 10 additional artist booths dedicated to local West Allis creatives.

- Interactive live art experiences for community participation.
- New elements beyond the established live music performances and creator booths, including:
 - A community participatory art installation
 - Live art demonstrations
 - A chalk artist facilitating public involvement and creation
 - A face painter to engage young attendees in artistic experiences.

Showcase Day Two (September 6, 2025, 11 AM-3 PM)

A newly developed Arts Showcase celebration at Inspiration Studios, a creative hub serving West Allis and surrounding communities which is less than a 5-minute walk from the Art on the Plaza grounds. This event will explore a fresh approach to arts engagement in a space dedicated solely to artistic expression. Led by the West Allis Arts Collective, this showcase will incorporate intentional learning and public dialogue to guide the Collective's future direction through feedback forums, written surveys, and one-on-one conversations. The event is designed to engage the community, collect input on the Collective's future, and highlight local artists across various disciplines.

Features include:

- Two free hands-on workshops to immerse participants in a creative artistic experience.
- A makers market showcasing up to 10 local artisans during the day's activities.
- Up to seven live music and theater performances by West Allis musicians and theater groups affiliated with Inspiration Studios productions throughout the course of the event.
- A visual arts display.
- Live art demonstrations and "meet the artist" opportunities.
- Interactive art experiences for youth and adults, such as creating musical instruments with recycled materials and a community-created collaborative piece of art.
- Information booths connecting attendees with arts organizations and gathering input on the future of the West Allis Arts Scene.

Organizational Capacity Building: This project will enable the newly formed Board of Directors and membership of the West Allis Arts Collective to strengthen their organizational skills, develop leadership capacity, and raise awareness of the arts network in West Allis. Board volunteers include directors of arts organizations such as Patricia Eby of the Suburban Singers, and owners of businesses with a focus on the arts, such as Colleen Volland of Cream City Clay and Michael Grassman of Sound Check Entertainment.

They will build the organization by participating in:

- Brand awareness through the creation of branding materials, including a reusable event banner.

- Website development, including administrative training for Collective leaders to maintain the site.
- Promotional materials, including printed outreach and video documentation of events for future marketing.
- Community feedback collection through surveys, focus groups, roving interviews, and volunteer observations to guide the Collective's next steps.

Leadership and Support: Project planning and administration will be overseen by a committee co-chaired by Erico Ortiz (Owner/Director of Inspiration Studios), Suzanne Singh (Community Services Coordinator for the City of West Allis), and the Board of Directors of the West Allis Arts Collective. ENGAGE West Allis, a new community leadership development group, will support promotion and volunteer coordination. Erico and Suzanne will co-chair the initiative, overseeing planning, financial management, logistics, marketing, evaluation, and reporting. New partnerships with local businesses will help expand community support for the arts.

Community Participation: Both events will be free and open to the public, offering inclusive experiences for all age groups. Art on the Plaza has successfully engaged families for seven years, featuring high-quality regional artists and diverse art forms, including sea glass creations, paper collages, acrylic paintings, textile arts, as well as kids' activities that promote art appreciation. The expanded format will offer additional hands-on opportunities for creative engagement such as makers workshops and participatory community art.

While the City of West Allis takes a lead role in Art on the Plaza, the new Arts Showcase provides a platform for the emerging Arts Collective to shine and hone their leadership and organizational skills. Artist selection for the new local arts wing of Art on the Plaza, as well as the makers and performers featured at the Arts Showcase, will be managed by the Arts Collective. A public call for artists will be issued for the Arts Showcase, with preference given to those with strong community ties to West Allis. This project represents a transformational step in solidifying West Allis as a dynamic center for the arts, creating opportunities for local artists, engaging the public, and fostering a lasting creative community.