

# BENSON CREATIVE DISTRICT

## 2022 - 2027 Strategic Plan

### Mission Statement

Our mission is to advance creativity and the economic vitality in the historic Benson community.

### Vision Statement

Our vision is to elevate artists, amplify Benson’s creative spirit, and serve as a hub for creative enterprise and expression in the Midwest.

### Values Statements

- **Creativity.** *Art is Everywhere* - We value the arts in all aspects of our lives; beyond visual, and immersed into schools, businesses, community spaces, outdoors, parks, streets, alleys, etc.
- **Equity.** *All Are Welcome* - We value diversity, inclusion, and differing ideas from all residents, stakeholders, and visitors.
- **Community.** *We’re Human* - We value helping each other, learning from each other and providing a safe and sustainable atmosphere for all.
- **Collaboration.** *We’re “Tight Knit”* - We value our supportive community and seek collaborative partnerships among all Benson residents and visitors.
- **Originality.** *We’re Original* - We value grassroot ideals and hold space for all creatives to innovate freely.



*Oceanside Mural 2018 by Maggie Weber, Maggie Heusinkvelt, Holly Tharnish, and Leo Rosas-Vickers located on west end of Benson*

## Community Information

### **HISTORY OF BENSON:**

On May 25, 1917, the city of Omaha, Nebraska annexed the town of Benson. At that time, it was 1.4 mi<sup>2</sup> and had 5,000 residents. In the years that followed annexation, Benson flourished, building a strong business district, as well as a robust residential market offering many affordable housing options, a mix of blue-collar workers and professionals, seven churches and four schools. The 1980s and 1990s brought challenges to Benson, but in the past decade, Benson has seen a large increase in development and independent business owners setting up shop. In 2005, the city of Omaha partnered with the Benson-Ames Alliance, the Benson Neighborhood Association, the Benson Business Association, and Omaha by Design to create the Maple Street Corridor Project, formed to revitalize Maple Street in downtown Benson from Northwest Radial Highway to 64th Street. Since then, music venues, craft breweries, trendy restaurants, and a strong artist presence (centered around BFF Omaha's First Friday art walks) now identify the Benson neighborhood as a place for community, family, progression, and the arts.

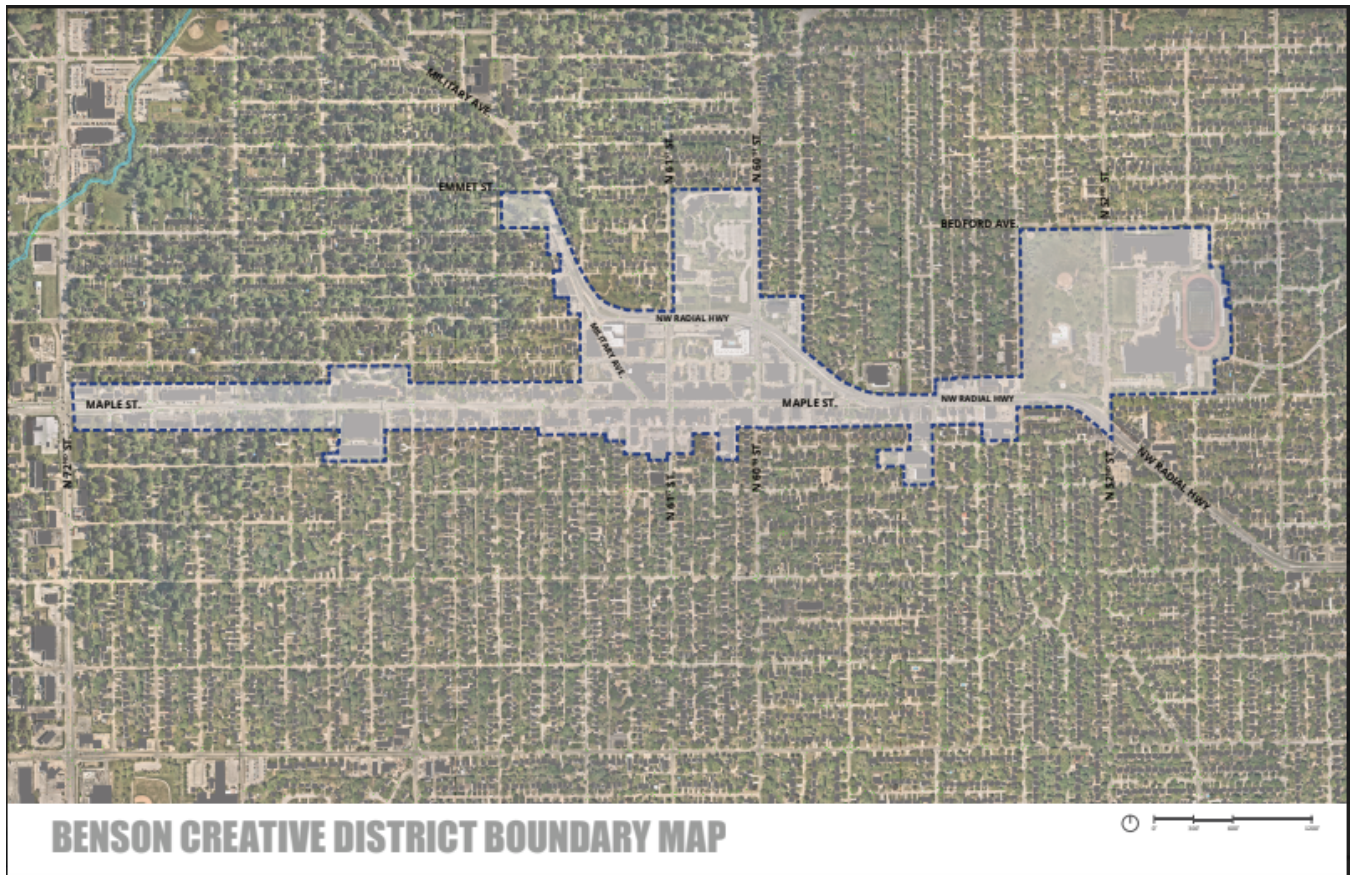
### **WHY IT IS UNIQUE:**

The current Benson community is home to immigrant families from Ethiopia, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, India, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, and many more. The number of U.S. citizens by naturalization in Benson is 1,148, while 4,266 residents are not U.S. citizens. This diverse culture contributes to the fabric of the Benson neighborhood; we live by the motto "All Are Welcome" as seen on the large mural facing westward on Maple Street, at the entrance of Benson. In addition to a diverse and welcoming community, there's a significant concentration of creatives and artists. Almost 30% of residents work in education, community service, arts, or media occupations.

Benson is a creative hub, boasting slogans such as "Keep Benson Bent" and "Keep Benson Good Weird," that comes alive as a night-life destination due to its concentration of restaurants, bars, a theatre, galleries, and music venues. Benson is also home to a variety of cultural assets; BFF Omaha's First Friday art walks, which bring a surge of tourists (1000+ per month average) to the neighborhood, year-round; Maple St. Construct's national artist residency program that bridges the discourse between artists from Los Angeles and the Midwest; education opportunities including (402) Arts Collective's multi-generational arts education programming and an internship program at the Benson Theater, in partnership with Metro Community College; Radial Arts Center's 4,3000 square foot gallery and multi-use space supporting artisan markets, classes, community meetings, workshops, after-school programs, and more. Over the last decade, an ever-increasing presence of public art and artist-designed posters and promotions can now be seen along Maple Street, alleyways, and on Benson buildings. During the day, creative retail and service shops, including three tattoo parlors, multiple salons, book stores, vintage shops, and other businesses slinging curios and antiques make the Benson Creative District unique and original. In addition to these creative happenings, it is the local schools, churches, library, community center, and local residents that keep the neighborhood welcoming and alive.

**BOUNDARIES:**

The Benson Creative District centers around Benson’s downtown business district along Maple Street. It extends west along Maple Street to 72nd Street, encompassing street-facing businesses and residential areas. It goes east along Maple, turning into NW Radial HWY, and extending until 52nd Street. On the north side, it is mainly bound by the alleyway just north of Maple, although extending briefly along Military Ave to include Grace Young Park, along 60th Street to include Heartland Family Services planned headquarters, and along 52nd Street to include Gallagher Park, Benson High School, and Monroe Middle School. The southern border follows the alleyway just south of Maple, although extending briefly along 61st Street to include StoneBridge Church, along 60th Ave to include Immanuel Lutheran Church, along 56th Street to include Citylight Church and Radial Arts Center, and along Country Club Ave to include St. Paul United Methodist Church.



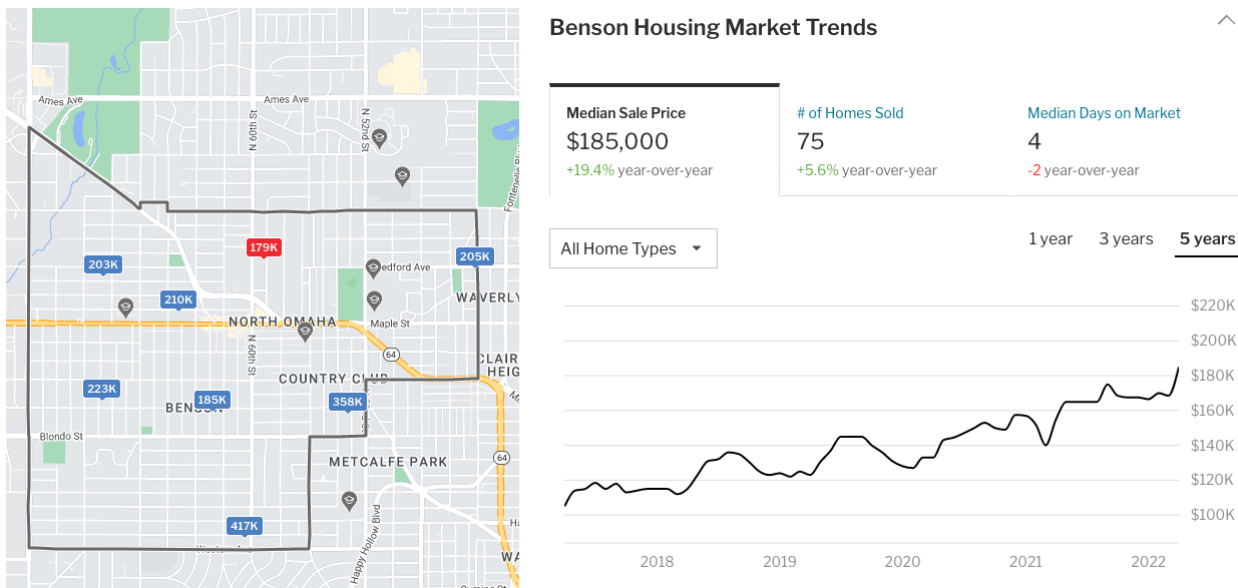
**BENSON CREATIVE DISTRICT BOUNDARY MAP**

**FUTURE OF BENSON:**

We envision Benson to continue embracing its creative culture for years to come. Benson is already bustling - in just over 2 square miles the population is around 8,700 people. This equates to a little more than 4,000 people per square mile. The city of Omaha averages 3,754 people per square mile, so Benson is a densely populated area.

Additional infrastructure improvements (green space, walkability, parking, transportation, etc), creative assets (public art, artist studios, shared creative working spaces, events, educational opportunities), and other improvements (Grocery store/markets, sculptures, skatepark, dog park) are expected. With the Creative District’s imminent success, we see creative businesses, new galleries, and more working artists being attracted to the area. In the Benson area, 37% of the population is under the age of 24, and First Friday surveys show that 85.8% of the audience is under the age of 45. Existing programming targets this audience, working in sometimes non-traditional manners. Increasing engagement opportunities for all ages is a priority for the future of Benson, including older adults.

Current residential and commercial constructions over the last three years have increased. This trajectory corroborates the Creative District’s future vision - increasing median sale price of homes, new residential and commercial construction, and new businesses opening.



Resource: <https://www.redfin.com/neighborhood/106763/NE/Omaha/Benson/housing-market>

## Overview of Our Process

### **PLANNING PROCESS:**

Benson has been at the helm of the state's creative district legislation, led by the neighborhood's state senator, Megan Hunt, from the inception in 2020. Local Benson leaders, Caitlin Little and Alex Jochim, spoke testimony on the importance of the arts in building community and supporting the economy, as witnessed in their own neighborhood of Benson. Soon after the Creative District designation process opened, Alex Jochim, Executive Director of BFF Omaha, sent an email out to over 200 community members, business owners, and artists who shared it with their contacts, inviting anyone interested to attend an initial brainstorming session. Those who attended, for the most part, decided to develop what is now known as the Benson Creative District Coordinating Committee (BCDCC) to further our goals and come together to submit an application.

The BCDCC is made up of the following key members: nonprofits BFF Omaha, Radial Arts Center, Maple St. Construct, Benson Theatre, St. Paul Benson Church, and Charles Drew Health Center; the city-sanctioned Benson Business Improvement District; and neighborhood residents Spencer Goracke, JoDee Goracke, Ross Miller, and Kayla Meyer. At the second committee meeting, the role of the District Administrator was discussed, voting in BFF Omaha as the designated administrators, and a draft of the Letter of Intent was reviewed. At the third meeting, a marketing plan to gather community feedback was developed and launched including physical posters, QR codes, emails, and face-to-face invitations. Committee meetings held between January and May were used to review community feedback and review small-committee assignments for drafting the Workbook. The BCDCC meets on a regular basis and will begin a quarterly meeting schedule starting in July 2022. Agendas are created ahead of time, and items are reviewed and approved by all committee members.

The following community feedback methods were used between September 2021 and June 2022 in order to establish the top five goals, outlined at the end of this Benson Creative District strategic plan: collection of online and in-person surveys, four in-person and two virtual community forums held in December and March, five BCDCC focus group meetings held between September and June, direct feedback from business owners, one-on-one interviews with community stakeholders, and several small committee meetings between BCDCC members and community experts to create the original Workbook.

The data and information gathered during the development of the Workbook was used to write the Strategic Plan. In particular, the SWOT Analysis, Asset Map, and top identified community improvements were used to create the district's goals for the next first five years. After the District Administration team drafted the Strategic Plan, expert Jessica Frankensen, Founder of Ace Consulting - specializing in systems management - reviewed and edited by adding important data and recommending ways to specify the goals. The BCDCC reviewed, provided edits, and held a meeting in early June to finalize and sign the Strategic Plan.

During the summer of 2022, the BCDCC will invest in further expertise to plan and develop timelines, budgets, marketing, and evaluation measures that must be identified for the Benson Creative District's goals over the next five years. The BCDCC will also work to establish further rules and regulations of the district administration role, and what each key partner will be responsible for.



*Benson Creative District Community Meeting facilitated by One Omaha, December 2021 at Radial Arts Center*

#### **DISTRICT ADMINISTRATION:**

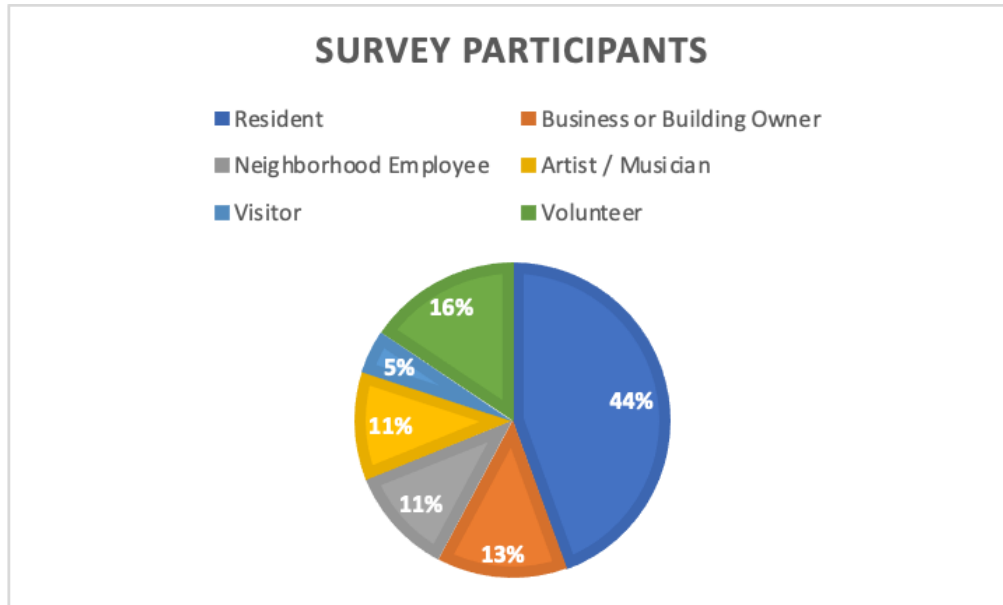
The administrative entity for the Benson Creative District is BFF Omaha (BFF). BFF is dedicated to building community through arts engagement, and advocating for the Arts through Education, Inclusion, Opportunity, and Unique Experiences (AEIOU). As District Administrators, BFF works closely with the Benson Creative District Coordinating Committee to plan and execute all district-wide projects and initiatives. BFF's key duties include fiscal responsibility, annual Creative District data reporting, submission and reporting of grant applications, and will provide quarterly budget reports to the BCDCC. BFF will also assist with marketing materials, coordinating meetings, and general district-wide communication. Currently, the District Administration role is filled by two key volunteers from BFF Omaha: Alex Jochim, BFF's Co-Founder and Executive Director, and Linda Hilliar, BFF's President of the Board. The Benson Creative District Coordinating Committee plans to designate and compensate for an official staff position to oversee district activities within the eighteen months of designation.

#### **ADDITIONAL PARTICIPANTS:**

Beyond key partners, supporting entities located within the physical boundaries of the Creative District include government officials, local business owners and employees, local artists and residents, and other organizations, as well as many supporters outside the physical boundaries. The BCDCC maintains an excel sheet of contacts for marketing and communication purposes.

#### **COMMUNITY INPUT:**

To ensure Benson's diverse community is represented in our activities, we have and will provide ongoing opportunities for input through online surveys and in-person community forums open to the public. We have reached out to all Benson businesses and organizations seeking their involvement in the process and encourage them to participate and spread the word. Our coordinating committee is an open door for stakeholders to get involved in any capacity whether it's sharing opinions, volunteering, or getting their hands dirty with planning an implementation. All future activities will be vetted through public input processes and implemented at the hands of interested residents, business owners, community members, and other stakeholders. No significant decisions will be made without input and polling from the community.



### SWOT Analysis Summary

After reviewing community forum discussions and our online survey results, we identified the district’s greatest strengths as being: a high-level of community support, walkability, arts-supportive infrastructure, and a laundry list of pre-existing assets including numerous creative places and spaces, creative activities and organizations, cultural and historical assets, creative businesses and industries, and artists and creatives within the community. Knowing these strengths allows confidence in achieving our goals.

Based on these findings, our goals center around community-desired infrastructure improvements and artist support and retention. Desired infrastructure improvements include more efficient and beneficial parking, improving the walkability and infrastructure for alternative modes of transportation, increased accessibility measures on all fronts, wider and more accessible sidewalks, alley-way development, redevelopment and repurposing of unused properties or empty buildings for community spaces and community gardens, and connecting green spaces with the district.

In the second Community Meeting, we discussed how to improve artist support. Among the top discussion points was the need for affordable live/work spaces for artists. This is a top priority for the Benson Creative District. Luckily, Benson is filled with buildings for lease, and the community is already communicating with building owners about using spaces for studios.

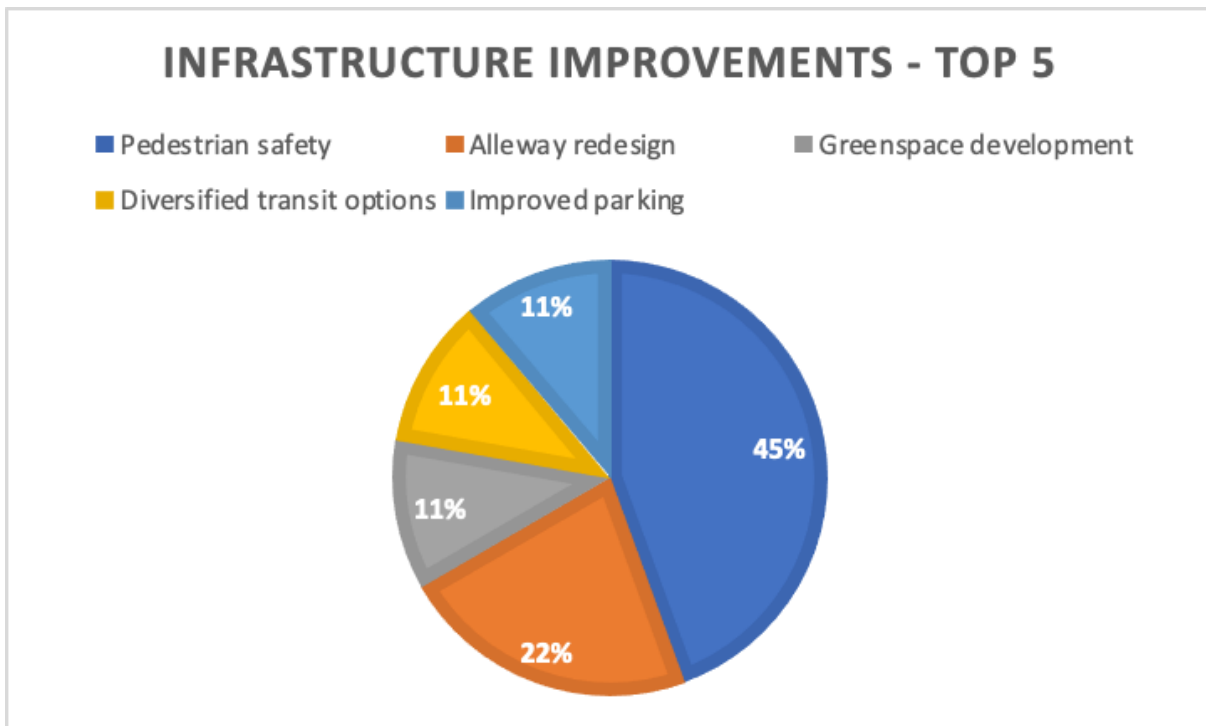
### Key Findings

The following findings are compiled from our community forum discussions and on-going community input surveys:

Top 5 ranking infrastructure improvements requested by the community:

*We discovered that traffic and parking in Benson are common points of concern, and the community is interested in addressing these issues through alleyway redevelopments, supporting diversified transit options, and improved parking options - all tied to the safety of pedestrians, cyclists, et al. Greenspace development also rose to the top of the community's desires, which we feel can be incorporated into the other four infrastructure improvements.*

1. Pedestrian safety
2. Alleyway redesign
3. Greenspace development
4. Diversified transit options
5. Improved parking

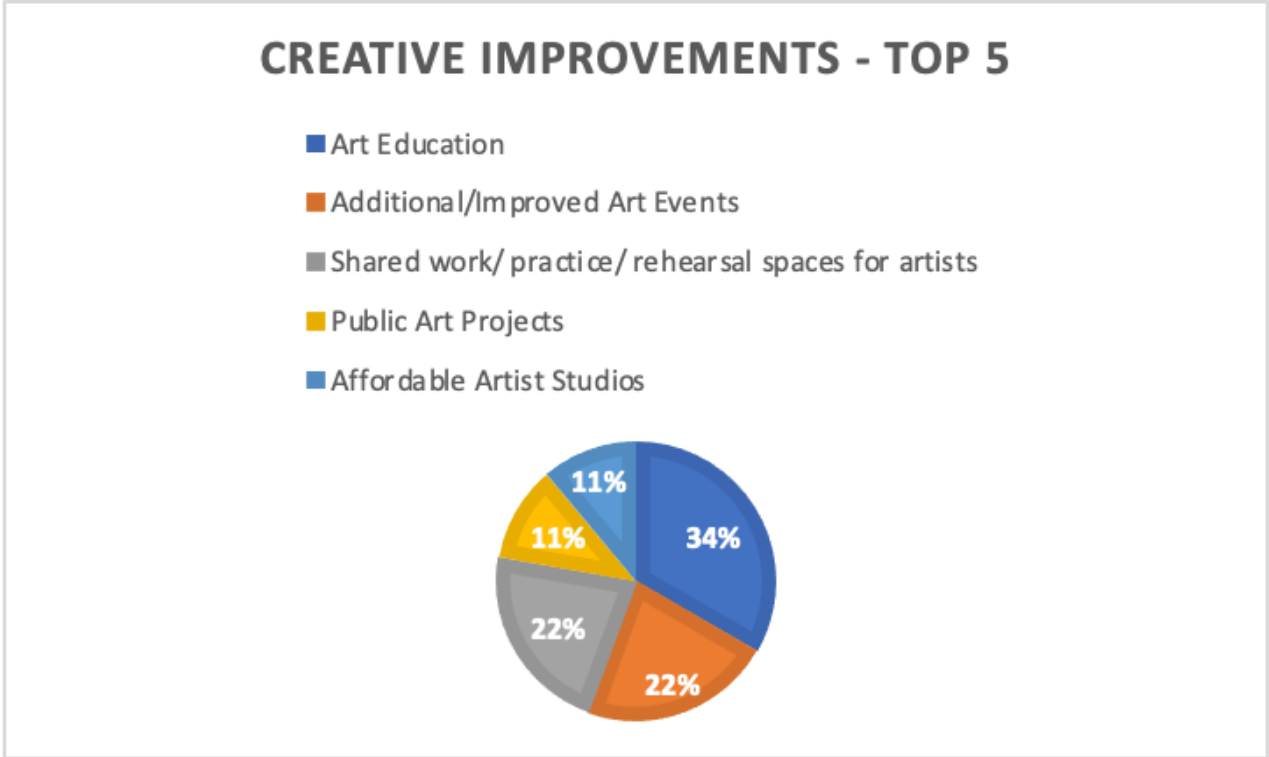




Top 5 ranking creative improvements requested by the community:

*The community expressed their concern for Benson’s youngest residents (37% under the age of 24) through increased education improvements. Beyond that, liveability and support for Benson’s artist community rose to the top, with shared work spaces, affordable studios, and supportive opportunities (through additional art events and public art projects) garnering the strongest interest from the community.*

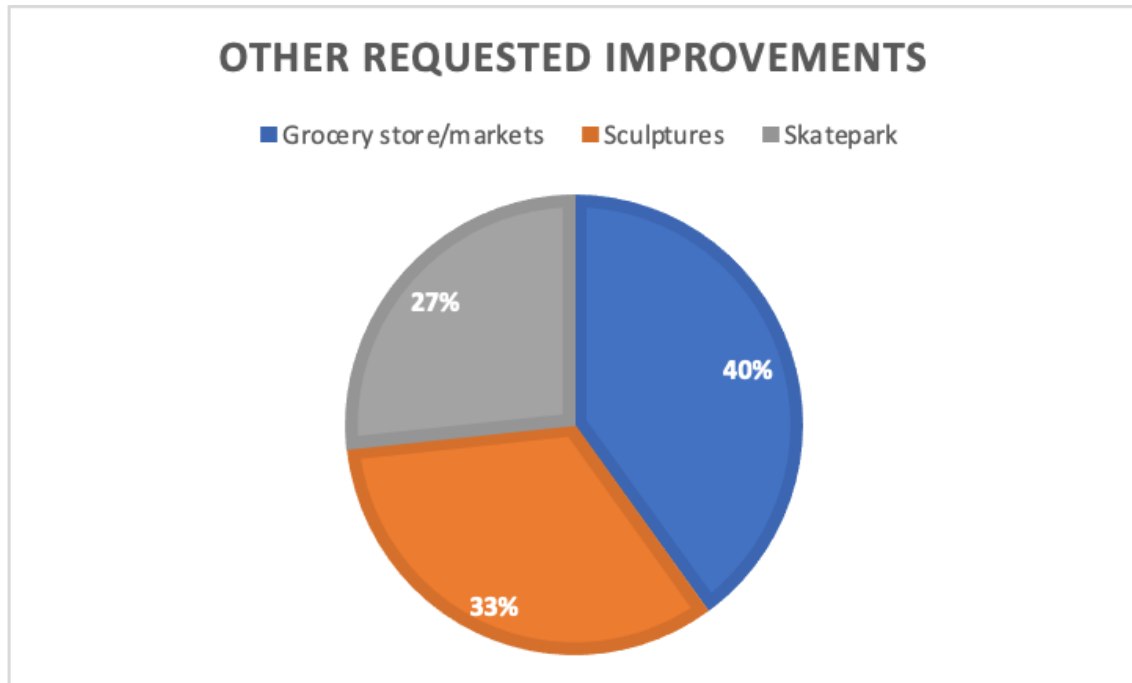
1. Art Education
2. Additional/Improved Art Events
3. Shared work/practice/rehearsal spaces for artists
4. Public Art Projects
5. Affordable Artist Studios



Top ranking other improvements requested by the community:

*Other needs of the community, including food accessibility, public sculptures, and a skatepark, were also expressed as top desires of the district’s stakeholders. The nearest grocery store to Benson is over a mile away, and would not be considered walkable by most residents.*

1. Grocery store/markets
2. Sculptures
3. Skatepark



Goals

**Goal #1: Define Marketing Strategy**

*Work within pre-existing creative assets and supporters to develop branding, website, and an initial marketing plan.*

**Time Frame: 2022-2023**

**Total Cost: \$1000-2000**

**Funding: NCD Certification Grant**

<b>Action Step</b>	<b>Anticipated Date</b>	<b>Party Responsible</b>
<p><i>Develop initial marketing strategy, aimed at an audience that reflects the demographics of the community (see original SWOT analysis).</i></p> <p><i>Marketing strategy should include efforts to guide visitors through physical attractions in the district. Reevaluate annually and whenever necessary.</i></p>	<p><i>Summer of 2022 and Each year as needed</i></p>	<p><i>District Administrator, Benson BID and BCDCC</i></p>
<p><i>Identify key audience segments, unique district elements, and any missing populations and voices.</i></p>	<p><i>Summer of 2022 (and ongoing)</i></p>	<p><i>District Administrator and BCDCC</i></p>
<p><i>Develop brand identity, utilizing current creative infrastructure and neighborhood identity elements.</i></p>	<p><i>Summer of 2022</i></p>	<p><i>District Administrator and BCDCC</i></p>
<p><i>Redevelop pre-existing website: "experiencebensons.com" to accommodate as the "home" for the Benson Creative District.</i></p>	<p><i>Fall of 2022</i></p>	<p><i>District Administrator, Benson BID and BCDCC</i></p>
<p><i>Design and distribute promotional materials: one-pagers and/or brochures identifying the district designation, mission, goals, and calls to action.</i></p> <p><i>Evaluate based on visible impact, ongoing surveys, one-on-one interviews, and numbers tracked online and social media.</i></p>	<p><i>Fall 2022</i></p>	<p><i>District Administrator, Benson BID and BCDCC</i></p>

**Goal #2: Launch 1st Strategic Public Marketing Initiative**

*Based on findings, identify a simple, yet impacting public-facing project (ie public art, greenspaces, alleyway improvements, etc). Project should be attention-grabbing, align with the mission, and solicit additional supporters (and possible funding) for the Creative District.*

**Time Frame: 2022-2023**

**Total Cost: \$5000-7000**

**Funding: NCD Certification Grant**

<b>Action Step</b>	<b>Anticipated Date</b>	<b>Party Responsible</b>
<i>Identify the most feasible public-facing project(s) correlating to marketing strategy to implement.</i>	<i>Summer of 2022</i>	<i>District Administrator and BCDCC</i>
<i>Implement project(s) - Form committee, select participating artists, invite community partners, identify volunteers, etc.</i>	<i>Fall of 2022 to Spring of 2023</i>	<i>District Administrator, BCDCC, and selected participating artists, community partners, and volunteers</i>
<i>Continuously evaluate project(s) through surveys, focus groups, and community discussions to help inform future projects.</i>  <i>Outcomes can be measured by the number of paid/participating artists, media attention, increased interaction with public art pieces, and actual numbers from online and social media content.</i>	<i>Spring 2023</i>	<i>District Administrator and BCDCC</i>

**Goal #3: Ongoing Community Feedback**

*Host additional community input forums and other input/involvement opportunities.*

**Time Frame: 2022-2023**

**Total Cost: \$1000-2000**

**Funding: NCD Certification Grant**

<b>Action Step</b>	<b>Anticipated Date</b>	<b>Party Responsible</b>
<i>Provide regular opportunities for community input through forums, surveys, discussions, etc.</i>	<i>Fall of 2022 and Ongoing</i>	<i>District Administrator and BCDCC</i>
<i>Identify facilitators, spaces, and any other specific needs.</i>	<i>Fall of 2022 and Ongoing</i>	<i>District Administrator and BCDCC</i>
<b><i>Develop a 5-year Road Map, based on BCDCC’s findings, recommendations, and community needs.</i></b>  <i>Evaluate based on the number of community participants (goal of 50% increase by end of the first year), number of community forums hosted (goal of 2/year), and participant surveys and one-on-one interviews.</i>	<i>Fall of 2022 and Ongoing</i>	<i>District Administrator and BCDCC</i>

**Goal #4: Grow + Develop Team**

*Hire a part time staff person to oversee the activities of the district.*

**Time Frame: 2023-2027**

**Total Cost: \$144,000 - \$36,000/year for 4 years**

**Funding: NCD Development Grant**

<b>Action Step</b>	<b>Anticipated Date</b>	<b>Party Responsible</b>
<i>Evaluate and fine tune all partner roles, participants, and district objectives and key results.</i>	<i>Summer - Fall of 2022</i>	<i>District Administrator and BCDCC</i>
<i>Based on findings from Goal #3, identify the staff person’s position description, task list, and goals within the District.</i>	<i>Fall of 2022</i>	<i>District Administrator and BCDCC</i>
<i>Apply for NCD Development Grant.</i>	<i>Fall of 2022</i>	<i>District Administrator and BCDCC</i>
<i>Host open interviews for candidates</i>	<i>Winter - Spring of 2023</i>	<i>District Administrator and BCDCC</i>
<i>Hire the best candidate, train, and integrate into the Creative District (if not already).</i>	<i>Spring - Summer of 2023</i>	<i>District Administrator and BCDCC</i>
<i>Monitor staff and other team member’s progress, successes, and areas for improvements. Expanding or reducing position work-load depending on outcomes.</i>  <i>Evaluation measures include the participation of key partners in lead roles, meeting measurable goals set by the BCD committee, fundraising, increased tourist traffic to the area, and successful communication/partnerships between staff and partners, artists, businesses, the city, and other stakeholders.</i>	<i>Continuously 2023-2027</i>	<i>District Administrator, Benson BID and BCDCC</i>

**Goal #5: 5-year Road Map Implementation**

*Identify and implement large-scale creative projects and infrastructure improvements outlined in the Key Findings section, above.*

**Time Frame: 2023-2027**

**Total Cost: \$500,000**

**Funding: NCD Development Grant, Peter Kiewit Foundation, Fundraisers, Donors, and other Revenue Streams**

<b>Action Step</b>	<b>Anticipated Date</b>	<b>Party Responsible</b>
<p><i>Based on findings from Goal #3, led by the staff hired from Goal #4, and through the guidance of the BCDCC, identify and implement large-scale creative project(s) and infrastructure improvement(s)</i></p> <p><i>(Examples included in Key Findings section)</i></p>	2023 - 2027	<p><i>District Staff, District Administrator, Benson BID and BCDCC</i></p>
<p><i>Review budget, begin artist/contractor selection process, select community partners, identify project managers, etc.</i></p>	2023-2027	<p><i>District Staff, District Administrator, Benson BID and BCDCC</i></p>
<p><i>Evaluate project(s) through surveys, focus groups, and community discussions.</i></p> <p><i>Evaluation measures will include tracked progress, achieved timelines, supplemental revenue sources, and community feedback.</i></p>	2023-2027	<p><i>District Staff, District Administrator, Benson BID and BCDCC</i></p>

**Evaluation**

The Benson Creative District Coordinator committee, led by the following individuals, will evaluate and approve the strategic plan quarterly, at pre-designated meeting times (July 2022, October 2022, January 2023, April 2023, July 2023, etc). Progress will be tracked using a project management tool (Asana), regularly-scheduled meetings, direct communication, and a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) document to track goals. Additional evaluation will be completed by individual committees on a more regular basis. For example, the Education committee may determine a strategic goal to focus on, and will meet more frequently to plan and execute individual goals. Budgets, progress tracking, and other important items will be reviewed weekly by District Administrator and future BCD staff.

**THANK YOU for your time and consideration!**

Sincerely,

**Benson Creative District Coordinating Committee Members:**

Alex Jochim, BFF Omaha  
Linda Hilliar, BFF Omaha  
Brittany Dabestani, Benson Business Improvement District  
Alison Ranniger, Radial Arts Center  
Ross Miller, Maple St. Construct  
Spencer Goracke, Resident  
JoDee Goracke, Resident



*Benson Creative District Coordinating Committee Meeting (From left to right: Maurtize Ivy, Charles Drew Health Center; Ross Miller, Maple St. Construct; Brittany Dabestani, Benson Improvement District; Linda Hilliar, BFF Omaha; JoDee Goracke, Benson Resident; Spencer Goracke, Benson Resident; Alex Jochim, BFF Omaha)*