

PAS QUICKNOTES

Music Policy and Planning

Cities around the United States and the world are increasingly recognizing the importance of music in their communities. These “music cities” seek to define the role that music plays in planning and develop policies that proactively manage how music—in all its forms and functions—affects the wider community. Music can have myriad benefits for economic vitality and resilience, equity and social justice, and placemaking and quality of life. But to understand and leverage these impacts, planners must better understand the role of music in planning, economic development, placemaking, and community engagement.

BACKGROUND

Music is one of the most powerful community engagement tools we have. It is accessible, diverse and involves all community members. We are all born with a musical instrument—our voice—and through it we share a universal language.

But music is much more than that. It can be the foundation of substantial economies. It can improve health and well-being and promote healthy aging. It can be used to attract and retain talent, promote economic growth, and attract tourists. And it can be a tool to celebrate, unify, and gather safely and responsibly.

Achieving these outcomes requires an intentional, proactive plan that understands music’s role in a community: where it is, how it functions, who it engages, and—most importantly—how it connects with wider policies and practices. To build this data and evidence base, cities are commissioning music audits and creating policies that take music seriously so it can be a stronger force for economic, social, and cultural development.

DEVELOPING A MUSIC AUDIT

A music audit is a comprehensive data-gathering exercise that maps and assesses music’s role in a community. The overarching concept is to better define the role that music plays in planning and develop policies that proactively manage how music of all kinds and its related elements interact with the wider community. It includes the following key steps:

Map music and wider cultural assets. These can be spaces and places, businesses, tourism assets, educational and community assets, or numbers of artists. This map is best completed in the same format as any other city mapping framework, so it can be overlaid onto other data sets.

Engage stakeholders and community members. Music means many things to different people, and one person’s music may be another’s noise. As with any other planning process, engaging the community through interviews, roundtable discussions, and surveys can help identify gaps in access; geographic, racial, or other disparities; and other challenges that music can be a part of addressing, such as a lack of cultural spaces or places in disadvantaged communities.

Understand the economic impact of music. The total economic impact that music has in most communities is widely misunderstood because it is not calculated. Flagship musical events or festivals are only part of the story, as many music economies exist behind closed doors. Understanding the breadth of a local music economy—music making and dissemination, live music events, music education, and the impact of music on the wider nighttime economy—requires a comprehensive economic analysis that looks at the direct and indirect value of music, where the money is generated and by whom, and where the gaps lie. This data can prompt action, as it often demonstrates that all cities have music economies larger than is estimated.

This PAS QuickNotes was prepared by Shain Shapiro, PhD, founder and executive chairman of Sound Diplomacy and executive director of the nonprofit Center for Music Ecosystems.



“Music cities” develop policies that proactively manage how music—in all its forms and functions—affects the wider community. Credit: recep-bg/Getty Images



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Creating Great Communities for All

Assess regulations and implement reforms. Though music is part of all our communities, there are few intentional policies dedicated to it. Music is often linked to noise, which is considered an environmental health concern. A lack of economic data can lead to a lack of business support and little access to finance. It also reduces accountability for bad actors. Taking an intentional approach requires establishing datasets and regulations specific to music and ensuring they connect with wider city policies.

Write music policy for music purposes. Housing policies, zoning ordinances and bylaws, and other regulations that affect music are not often written with music in mind. Workforce development strategies often focus on goods manufacturing and intellectual property is not typically considered in economic growth policy. Because noise ordinances often do not differentiate music from other forms of noise, they can unintentionally restrict business operations and growth. The data produced in a music audit allows for decision-making that incorporates music from the beginning, so music is built into policy rather than tacked on and inequities can be addressed through evidence rather than emotion.

REAPING THE BENEFITS OF MUSIC

In 2018, the City of Huntsville, Alabama, invested in [a music audit](#) that has led to economic growth. To implement the audit's recommendations, the city has hired a full-time [music officer](#) who sits in the economic development department and works alongside the director of long-range planning. Several music and place-based investments have followed, including the opening of the \$48m city-funded [Orion Amphitheater](#) in the new MidCity mixed-use district and the redevelopment of the downtown performing arts Von Braun Center. New investments are bolstering educational programs in the diverse North Huntsville district, while amended zoning is better managing new residential developments around music and cultural venues. In Tulsa, Oklahoma, a [music audit](#) led to the creation of [Play Tulsa Music](#), which used ARPA funds to help local music venues book local artists as an economic development initiative as the city was recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The City of Madison, Wisconsin, incorporated music into the city's equity and racial justice reforms through the development of a [music and equity task force](#). This led to the development of the advocacy group [Greater Madison Music City](#) and a commitment from the city's planning department to enact recommendations from a music audit commissioned by the group. This ongoing work has opened a much broader conversation on how to [combat systemic racism](#) that impacts the city's musicians and artists. In Des Moines, Iowa, [development of a local music strategy](#) revealed gender- and race-related gaps in access for local artists at local festivals. The community nonprofit implementing the audit, [Des Moines Music Coalition](#), has since become more involved in community event programming and has committed to both gender and racial equity in all local events and festivals, including First Fridays and farmers markets, by 2024.

This year, [New Orleans and Company](#), with partners, launched [NOLA Music Month](#), a celebration of music, culture, and technology that will include a music industry conference. A similar initiative was launched in [New York](#) in 2016 and now features over 50 community events across the five boroughs. Music has been used to strengthen community identity in Fort Worth, Texas, through the development of [Hear Fort Worth](#), a local music office that sits within the city's tourism board. The office leads monthly music meetups for the community and a yearly conference, both of which have increased in attendance since the pandemic, when the city commissioned [its music audit](#). The office also stages a festival for local musicians and acts as the city's promotional agency to support local music.

CONCLUSION

Music is something that we may not need to live, but very much cannot live without. But music has rarely been treated intentionally across planning and wider civic strategies. As this has changed, cities are reaping the rewards music can bring and better managing its impacts—both positive and negative—on budgets, community cohesion, and long-term planning. The more that music's value is understood in a community, the better it can be leveraged to foster economic, social, and cultural development. But this starts by planning a music strategy with a holistic approach. A music audit is the tool to do so.

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FURTHER READING

Published by the American Planning Association

American Planning Association. 2011. [Arts & Culture Briefing Papers](#). APA Planning and Community Health Research Center and RMC Corporation.

Ro, Christine. 2019. "[Planning for Music Can Help Transform American Cities](#)." *Planning*, February.

Other Resources

Sound Diplomacy. 2019. [The Music Cities Manual: Your Comprehensive Guide to Building Music Cities](#).

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