



Grant propels arts center toward massive expansion
Real Art Ways gets \$9.1M from state for 'transformative project'



Will K. Wilkins, executive director of Real Art Ways, shows where two 49-seat movie theaters will be built as part of a \$23-million expansion set to break ground as soon as spring. Aaron Flaum/Hartford Courant

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[NEXT IMAGE](#)

By Kenneth R. Gosselin Hartford Courant

HARTFORD — Hartford's Real Art Ways — the contemporary arts center that has been a fixture in the Parkville neighborhood for three decades — will break ground on an ambitious expansion as soon as this spring that is part of a larger, \$23 million plan for its Arbor Street building.

The expansion, which includes a major addition that will increase the size of the arts venue by more than 50%, recently won approval for a \$9.1 million grant from the state's Community Investment Fund program, critical to the project's financing. The fund seeks to foster economic development in traditionally underserved communities.

"It's just really exciting and encouraging to get this boost, and it's coming right at the right time," Will K. Wilkins, RAW's executive director, said. "And it's going to make this project a reality. This is going to happen."

Wilkins said private fundraising for the expansion has topped about \$5 million, and he now expects a public campaign to launch early next year. The goal is to raise a total of at least \$7 million through fundraising.

Long known for its independent film screenings, cutting-edge art exhibits, performances and social events bringing together different communities from within the city and surrounding suburbs, RAW's vision for expansion seeks to build on those strengths.

"It's a big project, but it's a transformative project," Wilkins said. "I think it's going to be transformative for Real Art Ways as an organization. But I also think it has the potential to be just a wonderful, unique addition to the state of Connecticut." City approvals for the project have been secured in the past two weeks, and construction would take about a year, Wilkins said.

The expansion, first announced in late 2021, includes the addition of three movie screens, bringing the arts organization's total to four. The project — in the planning stages for more than four years and during a long slog through the pandemic — also will add a dedicated area for the performing arts, a new café with a kitchen and more space for educational programs.

The prospect of a groundbreaking comes after four years of planning and a long slog through the pandemic that saw audiences drop but RAW is seeing them return.

RAW's project also comes as the surrounding Parkville neighborhood is experiencing a new wave of revitalization. The successful Parkville Market food hall is expanding, and there are plans for a new Business Improvement District, modeled after downtown's and the second in the city.

The revitalization has meant some growing pains, however, particularly a parking crunch for the market and other businesses. But plans are unfolding for a 400-space parking garage that would be part of a \$29 million redevelopment of a surface parking lot at the corner of Park Street and Bartholomew Avenue. The redevelopment includes a new apartment building.

And farther south on Bartholomew, a street considered the spine of the Parkville Arts & Innovation District, the \$92 million redevelopment of a former factory into apartments and business incubator space is underway.

Hartford's strategic plan of development includes the arts and innovation district as one of the 10 projects that could transform the city by the time the city turns 400 in 2035.

RAW's expansion would help anchor those efforts, but for decades, it has been a cornerstone of the arts community that has long existed in the neighborhood.

'A good niche'

The \$23 million plan also includes RAW's \$4.25 million purchase of 56 Arbor St. in 2021 — a former typewriter factory built in 1917 — where the nonprofit arts organization had leased space for more than 30 years.

The idea behind buying the 4-story, brick building was grounded in diversifying the sources of the nonprofit organization's revenue to include rental income from tenants, many of whom have a focus of arts and creativity that dovetail with RAW. The overall budget also includes a new roof and elevator for the former factory

Wilkins said the project's funding also is expected to include a little over \$2 million in state and federal historic tax credits.

The project costs rose from an initial estimate of \$15 million in 2021. Wilkins said the increase is partly attributable to rising construction costs and the addition of the roof and elevator that were not included originally, Wilkins said.

RAW is now about \$2.5 million shy of what it will need to finance the expansion.

The state's investment in the project has been considerable: \$1 million for the purchase; another \$3 million in 2022 for the expansion; and now \$9.1 million from the investment fund for a total of \$13 million. The fund's grant is all but assured to be approved by the State Bond Commission, which meets Oct. 6.

The legislature's Speaker of the House, Matt Ritter, a Hartford Democrat, said RAW's application for assistance through the Community Investment Fund program turned significantly on the strength of RAW's fundraising campaign.

"So part of that vetting, especially in the nonprofit space is: 'Do you have the philanthropic community support?' " Ritter, who co-chairs the investment fund's board, said. "Because that is another example of staying power. And they had to dig really deep. So I would say they probably almost tripled what they thought they originally had to raise."

One criteria for an investment fund grant is staying power, Ritter said, and what the recipient will be able to do for a community or region, years or even decades into the future.

Ritter said he has watched RAW evolve over the years, having met Wilkins soon after Ritter was first elected to the Hartford City Council in 2007. Ritter said he also has seen the importance of arts and culture as a contributor to vibrancy and economic growth only increase over time. That is especially true in the aftermath of the pandemic when fewer workers are commuting into the city.

Expanding the arts community also dovetails with a growing population of city residents, particularly in and around downtown, and efforts to both bring visitors back to the city after Covid and increase their number from pre-pandemic levels, Ritter said.

"Will has found a good niche," Ritter said. "It's not just the place to go see a movie, right? Or see a performance," Ritter said. "Will loves the notion that it's a community space. So you could be there for a presentation, a lecture, a happy hour — and these are things that we have to keep investing in."

Different mission

Wilkins said he has been asked why the expansion includes three additional movie screening rooms — two of which will be in a space once used for dance — when theaters across the country have been struggling.

Downtown Hartford's Apple Cinemas closed in June, and New Haven's Bow Tie Criterion Cinemas — that city's last movie theater — will close next week, according to multiple published reports.

Wilkins said he doesn't necessarily see RAW filling the void left by those theaters because they have a different focus, mostly commercial, first-run features.

"We have a different mission with what we're doing," Wilkins said. "Those are all commercial theaters. They are trying to make the most money that they can. And with us, it's about supporting artists, building community and it's about being sustainable. And that's a different thing from being about making profit as your primary goal."

The three new theaters each will have less than 50 seats allowing for broad diversity in film selection, Wilkins said.

"I'm excited about having the four cinemas," Wilkins said, "because we're going to be able to show movies that will attract a mainstream audience but we're also going to be able to do smaller films by independent filmmakers. Some of them will be particular to individual communities. Maybe a Peruvian film. Or a Puerto Rican film. Or a Jamaican film that wouldn't necessarily be in a multiplex will be here."

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