



CASE STUDY:

# REVIVING MAIN STREET THROUGH COMMUNITY-BASED DESIGN:

NORTHWEST NEW MEXICO COG  
AND COAL AVENUE COMMONS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Gallup's Creative Economy and Challenges for Local Artists **(Page 03)**
- A Shared Community Resource **(Page 04)**
- Cole Avenue Commons **(Page 05)**
- Key Takeaways **(Page 09)**

*Cover Image: gallupARTS*

*At Left: gallupARTS*

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From developing regional plans to securing federal grants, Economic Development Districts (EDDs) have a unique perspective on the built environment and how local residents live and interact within it. This perspective can be particularly useful for municipalities that wish to amplify their amenities for tourists while creating a safer and more vibrant community for the people who live there.

One powerful example is how the [Northwest New Mexico Council of Governments \(NWNMCOG\)](#) spearheaded a downtown revitalization project using community-based design by capitalizing on the creative economy in Gallup, New Mexico. The project, [Coal Avenue Commons](#), has secured Gallup's place on the map as a destination for residents and tourists alike. Coal Avenue Commons is a main street revitalization project centered around Coal Avenue, one of the primary streets for retail, hospitality, and tourism in downtown Gallup. This case study explores how NWNMCOG prioritized collaboration and partnership over the course of this transformative project.

### **Gallup's Creative Economy and Challenges for Local Artists**

Gallup, New Mexico (pop. 20,000) is no stranger to change. For decades, it has been an [epicenter for Indigenous arts](#) by attracting thousands of tourists, artisans, and art collectors from around the world to experience the region's hub of Indigenous crafts and jewelry. Yet at the same time, Gallup has remained mostly unchanged for decades. Walk along some of its main streets and you see a city frozen in time. Gallup's placement along the [historic Route 66](#) has made it a strategic stop not only for tourists and travelers passionate about Indigenous arts and culture, but also for visitors who yearn for historic architecture and breathtaking views of the mesas. However, heritage tourism-driven economic development can only go so far, and [many residents of Gallup never see the benefits impact their daily lives](#).

Vulnerable communities and marginalized populations feel this the hardest, particularly the Indigenous and Latino communities that make up most of Gallup's population. [Over half of Gallup identifies as Indigenous/Alaska Native alone](#). Due to historical marginalization, Indigenous artists are more than likely to participate in informal economies, denying them some benefits they would otherwise receive through traditional banking and retail enterprises. For example, 84% of Zuni artists earn most of their income from cash sources, and almost half of Gallup's artists sell work out of their homes. Further information on Gallup's cultural demographics can be found in [Gallup's cultural plan](#).

The creative sector makes up over 12% of all employment in Gallup, coming in third after retail and social services/education/healthcare, yet the creative economy isn't always enough to retain tourists beyond a short-term visit. Despite Gallup's reputation for creative industries, the city continues to face economic struggles, partially due to slow growth in new business, limited existing retail, and a limited professional workforce. In addition, Gallup's younger residents have tended to move where there are more opportunities for employment and other professional development. The city also grapples with negative perceptions related to drug use and crime, and competition with other emerging-market centers.

In response to these challenges, the city sought to leverage its cultural assets to improve overall quality of life and economic development. Working in collaboration with NWNMCOG, along with several other strategic partners, Gallup pursued a solution in "the commons" that has yielded many positive benefits and opportunities for the entire community.

### **A Shared Community Resource**

Throughout history, the concept of "the commons" has represented shared natural and cultural resources, wherein each stakeholder has an equal value. The commons has taken on many different forms over the years, including how it relates to environmental scarcity and sustainability, and more recently how people connect virtually through a digital commons. In Gallup, it represents many things: ideas, physical space, and activation.



Picture: **gallupARTS**

In its 2015 Arts & Cultural District (ACD) plan, the Gallup Main Street Arts & Cultural District defined the commons as one that is built for and by the community, benefitting residents first, and one that is welcoming to all. Feedback from the community reflected strong support for an "event street" to improve the city's economic outlook. This need placed second only after a new library on a list of community priorities. Coal Avenue was identified as a hub of arts and culture activity, given its central location in Gallup, one of the state's first MainStreet projects.

The ACD plan posits that Arts and Cultural Districts play an important role in economic development, providing opportunities to attract young families and the creative workforce, as



well as promoting the community as a tourism destination. As part of the community assessment, focus groups were facilitated that brought out certain elements that would later be referenced in the city's 2022 economic development plan.

## Coal Avenue Commons

### Partnerships

In 2017, Gallup was awarded an Our Town grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) to support this project that was matched by local government, institutions, and organizations, totaling \$300,000 in startup funding. The Our Town program is one of NEA's flagship granting programs that funds creative placemaking projects in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and U.S. jurisdictions. Our Town projects support municipalities and their creative community in five distinct ways: elevating community assets, boosting local vibrancy, problem-solving, facilitating connection, and honoring traditions.



Picture: GallupARTS

As per grant guidelines, applicants are required to partner with local nonprofit organizations and Northwest New Mexico Council of Governments took this opportunity to strengthen its relationship with its downtown neighbor, GallupARTS. GallupARTS is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to serve the artists and arts organizations of Gallup as well as the larger creative economy. Its flagship program, ArtsCrawl, draws thousands of people downtown every year to engage in cultural celebrations and support local businesses, giving both the small business community and the informal creative economy a chance to shine.

This collective movement started with a coalition and NWNMCOG ensured strategic partners at local and state level were at the table at every step. In addition to Gallup, GallupARTS, and NWNMCOG, partners on the project included the Arts & Cultural District, the Business Improvement District, McKinley County, and the State of New Mexico, and local residents. NWNMCOG Executive Director Evan Williams recalls that the community members would consistently bring people from their own networks who may not have otherwise gotten a chance to participate; certain families even brought three generations to multiple meetings.

NWNMCOG's participation in this project included supporting the planning, design, placemaking, and funding of this effort. The COG's involvement was a natural fit as these

strategic partnerships had been years in the making. NWNMCOG's office location in downtown Gallup has made the organization "not just a stakeholder" in municipal projects, "but a shareholder," says Williams. The agency had already been involved in arts and cultural program in the region, creating projects modeled after the national [Main Street program](#) for communities that weren't eligible for state-level funding. In addition, NWNMCOG had been on the ground floor of the re-envisioning of GallupARTS from regular backyard gatherings to fully-fledged nonprofit status.

### ***Community-Based, Collaborative Design Process***

The basic concept for this project was that by increasing connectivity downtown with more pedestrian-friendly spaces, the Commons would lead the way for a more accessible and welcoming environment. This concept "speaks to the essence of the entire [cultural] plan," said Rose Eason, Executive Director of GallupARTS. The first step of the community-based, collaborative design process was realized in four parts between May-August 2018:

- GallupARTS solicited word submissions from the community at the in-person kickoff event and on Facebook in May. Submissions were scored by volume and turned into a mural by local artist Bear Mescale at ArtsCrawl in May.
- ArtsCrawl attendees in June were assisted by local artists in designing their own visions for Coal Avenue using street chalk.
- During the July ArtsCrawl, two parklets were installed after a competitive selection. Parklets are an innovative way to create more places for people to interact or relax in a public space.
- Over the course of multiple public workshops, the final street design was both developed and decided on by the community. The community's ideas were then integrated with feedback from focus groups made up of property and business owners, artists, and downtown residents.

The project even had a physical space where the community could come in and ask questions, making the process even more accessible and human-scale; it provided an alternative to conventional town hall-style presentations. The community almost unanimously voted on a plaza-style design out of three final concepts. In September 2018, Gallup City Council voted to move forward with the plaza, which would feature new streetscape and connectivity improvements such as curbside sidewalks, patterned pavers, and a redesigned gateway.

In addition to proposed streetscape improvements, Gallup gained the state's first "scramble" intersection, where traffic stops entirely, and pedestrians may walk diagonally across the street. The total cost of the project came out to approximately \$8.3 million, funded through many sources.

Source	Funding	Amount
NMDOT	Transportation Project Fund	\$3,325,000
City of Gallup	General Funds	>\$2.35 million
NMDOT	Municipal Arterial Program	\$950,000
Gallup MainStreet Arts & Cultural District	New Mexico MainStreet Capital Outlay Grant	\$800,000
NMDOT	State Legislature*	\$677,000
NEA	Our Town Grant	\$150,000
McKinley County	Grant Match	\$50,000
NWNMCOG	McCune Foundation Grant March	\$25,000

\* = Legislative appropriations secured by former Senator John Pinto, Senator George Munoz, Representative Patty Lundstrom and Representative Wonda Johnson

### *Realizing the Vision*

Construction on the project began in July 2020 and Coal Avenue Commons officially opened in April 2023. It sits on a stretch of Coal Avenue between downtown's 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> streets, just a couple of blocks away from the Gallup Amtrak train station. The El Morro Theater is just one of several nationally registered historic structures, helping cement the area in Gallup's

cultural landscape. Progress in both the placemaking and logistic paths expedited the entire project from the typical 10 years down to five, thanks to momentum built by community trust. This trust came from local partners (small businesses, community members, etc.) bringing their friends and family to community meetings on a consistent basis. Still, Coal Avenue Commons “was probably the most difficult streetscape improvement project from a coordination and involvement standpoint to pull off,” said NWNMCOG’s Williams.

Since completion, the community has benefited from a decrease in vacancy, an increase in new business development, and investment from property owners. As of May 30, 2025, the City of Gallup has seen a total reinvestment of \$928,000 in building renovations for businesses of all types including retail, lifestyle, hospitality, and insurance, noted Williams. Ten new buildings including a steakhouse, leather store, and a bakery have either opened or moved to the district to open over the past couple of years – creating 28 new jobs, and three new or expanded businesses.

The creative economy has also flourished, particularly around cultural celebrations and parades, and the development of a Makerspace at the Children’s Library. ArtsCrawl attendance has grown from several hundred to several thousand, with double the amount of food trucks and visitors from Arizona and Colorado adding to in-state visitors. The El Morro Theatre has also seen a significant uptick for movie and private events tickets. In 2023, the Theatre sold 2,201 tickets; it has already surpassed that number in 2025 with over 5,000 tickets sold. “This project has helped fast-track our creative economy into light speed and made Coal Avenue the place to be,” notes Williams.

The built environment around us affects how we feel about a place, and Gallup is living proof. More people can fill the streets, sightlines are better, and storefronts are more accessible. One of many community-based design elements implemented was traditional Navajo chain design that is symbolic of bridging divides, said GallupARTS Executive Director Rose Eason. Another was stamped bricks, tying in Gallup’s industrial history. Curbless streets opened Coal Avenue, brought people together, and made citywide celebrations like ArtsCrawl event bigger and better. Eason and Williams are excited about the promising future the project has created for the city. “This project is a catalytic project in many respects,” says Williams, “including reinforcing the value of partnership and creative placemaking that the collective vision becomes a collective movement.”



**Picture: Gallup MainStreet Arts & Cultural District**



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

***There is power in numbers.*** Coal Avenue Commons involved the coordination and collaboration of multiple agencies across the public and private sectors. Not only did NWNMCOG facilitate connections between multiple agencies and the citizens of Gallup, but it was also instrumental in activating and investing in the creative community that was so essential to the success of this project. Coal Avenue's success reinforced the value of partnership in realizing a collective vision.

***Lean into creativity.*** This project's roots in community-based design and meaningful engagement with the public yielded a much more significant outcome than if the partners had simply gone with whatever agenda fit the budget and the timeline. Working with artists and arts organizations from day one meant that creative placemaking was at the core of bridging cultural divides. Capitalize on the talents of creative workers and involve them directly in the planning process (before, during, and after) to help garner wider public support.

***Our surroundings make a difference.*** The built environment affects our livelihoods in ways we don't necessarily think about daily. Pedestrian-friendly walkways, active storefronts and a vibrant arts scene don't happen by themselves; they are a result of the multifaceted effort between municipal agencies, small businesses, organizations, and our communities. We all benefit when we design spaces for people first.



Picture: gallup MainStreet Arts & Cultural District