



Star Store Redevelopment: Community Engagement Summary

New Bedford, MA | August–September 2025

Between August and September 2025, the Arts & Business Council of Greater Boston (A&BC), in partnership with the New Bedford Creative team at the New Bedford Economic Development Council (NBEDC), conducted a series of community engagement sessions to guide the redevelopment of the historic Star Store. This process included six discipline-focused artist listening sessions, three public town halls, and interactive tools such as live polling, anonymous Q&A, and sticky note feedback.

Across more than 200 participants, a clear vision emerged:

The Star Store should be a welcoming, public-facing experimental arts hub—a place where creative practice and community connection coexist.

This summary identifies the strongest shared priorities, recurring themes, and guiding principles that emerged consistently across engagement formats and audiences. It does not represent a finalized program or design. Instead, it establishes a community-informed foundation that will continue to evolve through future planning, partnerships, and ongoing public engagement.

Core Finding: A Civic Hub for Everyone

From the earliest listening sessions, participants emphasized that the Star Store is more than a collection of studios. It is a space where artists and community members intersect, where youth, seniors, and casual visitors experience creativity, and where experimentation is encouraged.

“Even if you weren’t a student there, the lectures were open to the public...The Star Store can be a hub, cultural center...a place for everyone downtown.” —Town Hall B

“The building needs to belong to the city, not just the tenants.” — Listening Session 3

Sticky note feedback reinforced this idea, emphasizing welcoming and accessible programming for all ages, languages, and cultural backgrounds. Suggestions included after-school programs, adult education, multicultural events, and consistent outreach:

“Multi-cultural events, people, languages... drop-in innovation space... ask often how all members want to be welcomed.” — Sticky Notes

Participants consistently prioritized public-facing activity over private use, and repeatedly highlighted the importance of ground-floor activation and visible programming. Musicians suggested live jam sessions that could be seen from the street, while artists and live polling proposed gallery openings, lectures, film screenings, and pop-up demonstrations as ways to draw in a diverse audience.

“The ground floor has to feel open... You shouldn’t wonder if you’re allowed to walk in.”
— Listening Session 1

“Putting people in the windows is a great way to show what’s happening inside.”
— Listening Session 2

“I want to come here even if I’m not making anything—for a talk, a screening, or just to see what’s happening.” — Town Hall A

Affordability, Access, and Equity

Affordability was a central concern. Participants stressed the need for the Star Store to remain accessible to New Bedford-based artists, youth, and those with limited resources, and recommended multiple entry pathways: sliding-scale fees, pay-what-you-can programming, short-term residencies, and rotational access to shared spaces.

“Affordable space means more than low rent; it means fairness, access, and opportunities for newcomers.” — Listening Session 4

“Equity isn’t just about cost—it’s about who gets a chance to be here.” — Town Hall B

“There have to be ways in for people who don’t already have space or connections.”
— Listening Session 3

“There should be a consideration of teaching people how to move forward...but portfolios shouldn’t be used against people.” — Town Hall C

Sticky note feedback echoed these points, calling for free or low-cost public events, non-alcohol programming, and community-focused partnerships:

“For paid events, pay what you can...event variety, free/accessible events...partnering with local groups that represent all ethnic and age groups.” — Sticky Notes

Participants also emphasized intergenerational access, with programming for youth, adults, and seniors, alongside outreach to neighborhoods and communities historically excluded from arts infrastructure.

Flexible, Shared, and Multi-Use Spaces

Participants consistently favored shared and adaptable spaces over long-term static studios. Suggestions included small rehearsal rooms, multipurpose classrooms, darkrooms, maker labs, fabrication spaces, and black box theaters. Rotation and shared infrastructure were viewed as cultural and community values, not just logistical tools.

“Shared workshops with some personal storage would be ideal. Rotation keeps the building lively and accessible.” — Listening Session 1

“I don’t need a private studio, I need access to tools and a place to work when I need it.” — Listening Session 6

“The Star Store should have small practice spaces. You can’t play drums in your apartment, and having space for someone to experiment is critical.” — Town Hall B

“Flexible space means more people get to benefit.” — Town Hall C

Sticky notes highlighted the range of desired amenities: 3D printers, CNC machines, darkrooms, dye labs, communal fabrication equipment, libraries, cafés, and even rooftop spaces. Participants envisioned spaces that are multi-functional and engaging, supporting both practice and public participation:

“Lecture hall, gallery, art store... café, local/regional music, co-working, galleries...open studios, artist talks, movies.” — Sticky Notes

Welcoming, Inclusive, and Intergenerational

Participants defined a welcoming environment in actionable terms: outreach beyond the artist community, programming for youth and seniors, multilingual materials, ADA-compliant spaces, and ongoing feedback. Participants were clear that inclusion will require active effort, not passive openness.

“Inclusion isn’t just about access—it’s about programming that invites you in and gives you a role.” — Listening Session 3

“If kids can see artists working, that changes what feels possible.” — Listening Session 2

“I’m newly retired... I want to contribute and see this be successful.” — Town Hall C

“Being welcoming doesn’t just happen because the door is open.” — Town Hall A

“Not everyone wants a degree—people want skills, mentorship, and confidence.”
—Listening Session 6

Sticky notes reinforced this, suggesting flexible hours, evening and weekend programs, innovation hubs, and free community spaces to make the building inclusive and accessible to all demographics:

“After-hours programming for a variety of demographics, especially working people... classes for seniors, café, after school programs...very easy to book.” — Sticky Notes

“This could be a safe place for teens after school.” — Sticky Notes

“You have to keep asking who’s not here—and why.” — Sticky Notes

Governance, Oversight, and Trust

Questions about management and governance were frequent. A&BC described a nonprofit structure with formal boards, advisory groups, and feedback loops, designed to maintain accountability while allowing community input. Participants stressed the need for local representation, transparency, and clear evaluation processes.

“A governance system that includes local voices is crucial; otherwise, the building could drift from the community’s needs.” — Listening Session 6

“Transparency matters more than any single program.” — Town Hall B

“Trust comes from structure, not promises.” — Town Hall C

Sticky note feedback emphasized listening continuously to the community, testing concepts, and ensuring access and equity remain priorities:

“Keep asking the community (and test concepts)...be flexible and open to continuous feedback.” — Sticky Notes

Programming and Partnerships

Participants imagined the Star Store as a stacked, interconnected ecosystem rather than siloed departments. Participants advocated for layered, multi-use experiences, with overlapping and complementary uses that support both creation and public engagement.

“I want to grab a coffee, see a show, and stumble into something unexpected.”
—Sticky Notes

“Make it a place where things are always happening, even if you didn’t plan ahead.”
—Town Hall A

Participants envision the Star Store as a place where visitors can engage in multiple ways during a single visit—observing exhibitions, trying new making methods, attending a lecture, or simply connecting with others—creating a rich, layered, and evolving cultural experience.

Frequently named uses included:

Gallery & Exhibition Spaces: Rotating, experimental, and community-facing, these galleries will showcase work in all stages, from early experiments to polished presentations. Residents and visitors alike should feel invited to linger, explore, and interact, whether attending a traditional exhibition, a pop-up installation, or a collaborative art experience.

Performance & Screening Spaces: Spaces for music, dance, theater, and film screenings should be flexible and scalable, from intimate black box performances to lecture-style talks and multimedia presentations. The design encourages cross-disciplinary experimentation, so a performance might include visual projections, live fabrication, or audience interaction.

Shared Making Infrastructure: A diverse environment will support both time-honored techniques and cutting-edge technology, reflecting the full spectrum of artistic practice. Artists can work with traditional tools such as printmaking presses, clay, woodworking, darkrooms, and hand tools, while also exploring digital fabrication through CNC machines, 3D printers, laser cutters, and maker labs. This integration enables skill-sharing, experimentation across disciplines, and the blending of analog and digital practices.

Teaching & Learning Spaces: Non-degree, artist-led education is a core focus, with spaces designed for youth workshops, mentorship programs, and intergenerational learning. Programming encourages hands-on exploration, peer-to-peer instruction, and community skill-building, fostering creative confidence across all ages and backgrounds.

Social & Gathering Spaces: Cafés, lounges, and informal gathering areas are central to the Star Store's identity as a "third place." These spaces invite spontaneous connection, conversation, and collaboration, accommodating casual drop-ins, group meetings, or larger events.

Support Amenities: Shared resources such as art supply access, creative reuse center, tool libraries, and media labs allow artists to experiment without high upfront costs. Access to books, computers, and reference materials encourages both research and cross-disciplinary inspiration, helping the Star Store serve as a living laboratory for creativity.

"The best spaces let different disciplines overlap." — Listening Session 4

"Interactive art spaces, especially for youth... collaborative workshops/skill-shares... gallery space, ceramics studios, printmaking facility." — Sticky Notes

Participants also emphasized the importance of partnerships with schools, nonprofits, local arts organizations, and visiting artists to expand reach and impact:

"Public schools, youth programs, DATMA, AHA!, arts nonprofits... visiting artists... start-up collectives and teachers." — Sticky Notes

"Partnering with local groups that represent all ethnic and age groups... Program for community, not just artists." — Sticky Notes

Positioning in New Bedford's Cultural Ecosystem

Rather than competing with existing institutions, the Star Store is seen as complementary, supporting experimentation, process, and early-stage creative work and/or creative production. Participants described it as a connector between art, business, education, and community life, bridging gaps in New Bedford's cultural infrastructure:

"This should be a connector between art, commerce, and community life, not a competitor." — Listening Session 2

"It'd be great to have people see a show at the Zeiterion, see a demonstration at the Star Store, and grab coffee all on the same night...more is more." — Town Hall C

"It fills the gap between formal venues and informal spaces." — Town Hall B

"This is where experimentation can happen." — Listening Session 5

Participants repeatedly described the Star Store as more flexible, less formal, and a place for process, not just presentation. By bridging existing institutions, supporting early-stage and experimental work, and connecting arts, education, and commerce, participants envision the Star Store as a unique anchor of New Bedford's cultural ecosystem.

Guiding Principles Emerging from Community Feedback

Across sessions, seven principles emerged clearly:

1. **Public-facing first** – The Star Store is for the community, not just tenants.
"If the public can't feel it, it's not working." — Town Hall A
2. **Affordable and equitable by design** – Access must be financial, procedural, and cultural.
"Access has to be built in from day one." — Listening Session 2
3. **Shared, flexible, and adaptable** – Spaces and programs should rotate and encourage experimentation.
"Leave room to change—the city will." — Town Hall C
4. **Welcoming through action, not branding** – Inclusion is operational, ongoing, and responsive.
"The vibe matters as much as the floor plan." — Session 1
5. **Transparent and accountable governance** – Advisory groups, boards, and feedback loops build trust.
"People need to know how decisions get made." — Town Hall C
6. **Youth-centered and intergenerational** – Lifelong creative participation is core.
"This should serve people at every stage of life." — Sticky Notes
7. **Open to evolution over time** – Programming, spaces, and uses will adapt organically.
"Do it in a way that still feels like New Bedford, and not something dropped in from outside." — Session 5

Next Steps

This narrative reflects community priorities, values, and aspirations, not a finalized program. Broad support exists for:

- Phased development, leaving spaces intentionally flexible at opening
- Early public-facing activation, to maintain momentum and interest
- Continued engagement, including feedback loops as programming begins

The Star Store is widely seen as a cornerstone of New Bedford's cultural future, balancing creative experimentation, civic engagement, and community equity.

Photos of Star Store Engagement by Sasha Pedro (September 2025)

Photos of Lighting the Star Store exhibit and activation by Josh Souza (December 2025)

