

American Association of Community Theatre

Philosophical Foundation and Strategic Framework

- Approved by AACT Board of Directors, 06/20/2026

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Introduction

This framework establishes the strategic direction of the American Association of Community Theatre for the next decade.

Background

Founded in 1986, American Association of Community Theatre (AACT) emerged from a coalition of national theatre service organizations seeking to create a unified structure to support and connect community theatres across the United States. It was established to provide a centralized network through which local theatres could access shared resources, national programming, and broader visibility, while remaining rooted in their communities.

AACT operates as a membership organization composed of individuals, theatres, and affiliated organizations. It helps theatres thrive. Today, AACT represents a nationwide network of more than 1,500 member theatres and thousands of individual theatre-makers, making it one of the largest community theatre networks in the United States.

The organization connects local theatres to a broader national ecosystem through regional representation and partnerships with state and regional theatre associations.

The association's structure supports coordinated programming, information exchange, and sector-wide engagement, reinforcing AACT's role as a national convener and service organization for community theatre.

"Community Theatre"

Community theatre is central to this field's identity and impact, yet it is not always consistently defined across contexts. A shared understanding strengthens alignment across the network and clarifies its value to those outside it. AACT defines community theatre in the following ways:

- Community theatre is theatre created by and for a specific community, rooted in local participation and shared ownership.
- Community theatre brings people together to create and experience live theatre in their own communities — often providing the most accessible and locally rooted form of theatre available.
- An organization may be considered a community theatre if it:
 - Operates to serve a defined community rather than a commercial market,
 - Engages local volunteers in artistic and production roles,
 - Invites broad community access for participation or engagement.

As one perspective captures: "Professional theatre says, 'we produce shows.' Community theatre says, 'we gather to make theatre.'"

American Association of Community Theatre – Philosophy & Framework

Core Offerings

These offerings represent the primary ways AACT delivers value today and provide a baseline for future strategic decisions:

- Membership & Community Engagement
 - Access to resources, peer support, discounts on events and services, insurance advantages, and the quarterly *Spotlight* magazine that highlights trends, tips, and member stories
- Events & Professional Development
 - Webinars, roundtables, workshops, presentations, meetings, conferences, specialized sessions
- Resources & Knowledge Support
 - Practical tools and guidance, documents and references, toolkits and best practices
- Advocacy & Industry Support
 - Data analysis and reporting, news releases, publications, social media influences, policy analysis

Planning Process Overview

The association began its strategic planning process in Fall 2025. The process built from prior strategic planning efforts and outcomes and relied on extensive input from individuals involved with the association in various capacities.

In November 2025, the Board and Task Force engaged in conversations about the purpose, impact, and critical questions for assuring the association's impact in an ever-changing and increasingly complex world. The conversations about desired impact had particular meaning and reflected alignment for what was at the heart of the organization and the ways in which love and joy are central to the organization's values.



In January 2026, three virtual listening sessions were held for members to engage in the process. Over 40 members shared perspectives on the greatest value AACT offers for members, external forces requiring consideration when contemplating the association's future, and things they would like addressed through the planning process. These insights, ideas, and questions informed deliberations of the Board and the distillation process.

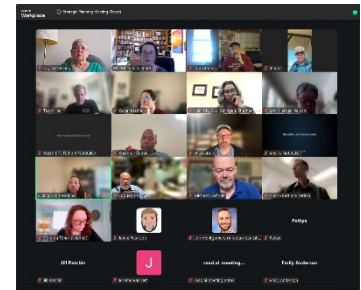
American Association of Community Theatre – Philosophy & Framework

Board and staff engaged in deeper exploration in February 2026. They discussed emerging concepts and language. There were challenging discussions about what might be critical for the association to continue, start, or stop doing to be able to achieve its desired outcomes within available resources.



Discussions with staff in mid-March added a practical lens to the activities, particularly related to timing and capacity for thoughtfully advancing the new ways and approaches. They lifted up the need to maintain the energy sparked through the process and to continue the honest and open dialogue as implementation begins. In supporting each other and in continuing to collaborate with the Board, they emphasized the importance of ensuring those involved continue to find energy and enjoyment in the work.

A preliminary framework was shared with a task force, including Board and staff members, in mid-April. A recommended draft was brought to the Board for discussion on April 23, 2026. It was then reviewed with members at an open-invitation virtual session on May 15, 2026. The framework was approved by the Board on June 20, 2026, by unanimous consent.



Document Purpose

This document distills the discussions and information gathered throughout the process into a strategic framework that guides those involved with the organization. It provides direction for the Executive Director to create implementation and work plans with staff that will inform performance goals that bring the strategic vision to life each year.

The strategic framework also serves as the basis for long-range discussions with the Board at least annually to focus on progress made as well as potential modifications based upon changing circumstances in the community. It is intended to remain dynamic.



Philosophical Foundation

Our Purpose – why the organization exists; what matters to it and those who are members

- The American Association of Community Theatre connects, strengthens, supports, and champions community theatre nationwide.
- It does so by offering educational resources, peer learning, national convenings, collaborative programs, advocacy, and representation.
- AACT welcomes all who are interested in celebrating and championing one of the most accessible and locally rooted forms of theatre available.

Our Commitments – what we believe as the basis for our work; what people can expect

- We share knowledge to support theatre makers in practical ways.
- We champion access, equity, safety, and belonging in theatre.
- We elevate community theatre as essential civic infrastructure.
- We evolve with purpose to assure resilience for theatre makers and relevance of our work.

Our Work – guiding principles for how the work gets done and the commitments upheld

- We are a Capacity Accelerator and a Movement Builder for community theatre.
 - We strengthen individual theatres through practical support while building a broader movement that elevates their collective impact.
- We meet community theatres where they are and help them be the best they want to be.
 - We balance inclusivity with disciplined focus, prioritizing work that delivers meaningful value at scale.
- We bring light to the value of community theatre and amplify voices that demonstrate it.

Our Promise – commitment to the community and to members; outcomes for which it is accountable

- As one of the nation's largest and most inclusive theatre networks, AACT welcomes people and organizations to share experiences, exchange ideas, and grow through learning.
- As a result of their engagement, local theatres can thrive on their own terms, serve their communities with greater confidence, and be recognized for their civic and artistic contributions.

Our Credo – the spirit that guides how we show up in the work

- We shall go forth boldly with love in our hearts, confidence in our steps, and members on our mind to focus our work and position the association to thrive in the years ahead.

2026-2035 Strategic Framework

Strategic Outcomes – what the organization seeks to accomplish to uphold its philosophical foundation

- Strengthen Local Theatres on Their Own Terms
 - Theatres of varying capacity levels access scalable, practical tools.
 - Participation expands among DIY and under-resourced groups.
 - Festivals celebrate and honor community-defined standards of excellence.
- Elevate Community Theatre as Essential Civic Infrastructure
 - Policymakers and funders recognize the economic and civic impact of community theatre.
 - AACT is the go-to resource for credible data and operational insight.
 - Community theatre is publicly positioned as a public good.
- Build a Networked Movement with Sustainable Capacity
 - Members actively serve as aligned ambassadors.
 - A revitalized regional/chapter structure increases meaningful local connection.
 - Participation grows through welcoming, accessible, and scalable entry points.
- Modernize Structure and Governance for Focus and Durability
 - Governance is streamlined with clear roles and decision rights.
 - Volunteer pipelines are sustainable.
 - Revenue is diversified to stabilize and expand access.

Strategic Priorities – where the organization will focus resources to fulfill its promise

- Transform the festivals into a curated experience that celebrates all things community theatre in ways that connect, inspire, and educate with multiple pathways for participation and recognition
- Redefine representation in governance and create new ways to assure diverse perspectives and divergent voices inform our work
- Begin building an infrastructure to advance advocacy efforts by the association and its members
- Institute decision filters to consistently evaluate all activities and evaluate new ideas for their return on investment in terms of time, talent, treasure, and mission advancement

APPENDIX

This supplemental information offers detail from the process to inform organizational dialogue and discussions about operating plans and annual resource allocations.

APPENDIX A

Considerations for Work Group Configurations

- **Executive Committee** – Acts on behalf of the Board between meetings to ensure continuity of governance, provide guidance to the Executive Director, and address time-sensitive matters within established authority.
- **Governance Committee** – Ensures the effectiveness of the Board by overseeing governance structures, policies, and practices, including board composition, performance, and alignment with the strategic framework.
- **Finance Committee** – Provides oversight of financial strategy, planning, and performance to ensure fiscal stability, sustainability, and alignment of resources with strategic priorities.
- **Development Committee** – Advances a comprehensive approach to revenue generation, including contributed and earned income strategies, to support long-term sustainability and expanded impact.
- **Membership and Outreach Work Group** – Explores and advances strategies to grow, engage, and retain members by strengthening value, accessibility, and connection across the network.
- **Portfolio Review Task Force** – Time-limited group to do a structured evaluation of programs and offerings to assess alignment with strategy, impact, and return on resources, and recommends continuation, modification, or sunset decisions.
- **Representation Task Force** – Time-limited group to develop and recommend approaches to reimagine the current regional representative model while ensuring governance and engagement structures reflect the diversity, geography, and perspectives of the community theatre field and the association members.
- **Festival Transition Team** – Time-limited group to lead the discovery, design, and transition of the festival model toward a reimagined experience aligned with strategic priorities, including structure, purpose, and participant value.
- **Advocacy Work Group (future)** – Builds the foundation for AACT's advocacy role by identifying priorities, developing messaging, and exploring strategies to elevate community theatre as essential civic infrastructure.

APPENDIX B

Considerations for Implementation

Following are some of the initiatives identified through the process that will benefit from intentional sequencing and assessment for resource requirements, timing, and prioritization:

Reimagine/Review – reconsider, redesign, or evolve

- National Festival (for shift in 2029, with some adjustments in prior cycle)
- National Directors’ Conference (Spring contracting informs event in following year)
- Community Theatre Management Conference (involves 6-9 months of advance planning)
- New Play Fest approach and name (for 2030 cycle planning starts fiscal year prior)
- Regional/state representation and partnerships
- Streamline Welcome Packets
- Audit publications and materials

Build/Develop – create, expand, or intentionally advance

- Strategic framework roll-out plan and ongoing communications campaigns
- Chapter model concept
- Expanded ambassador network
- Strategic partnerships to expand impact within limited staffing capacity
- Introduce nominal fees for *Spotlight*; expand reach and reputation (rival *American Theatre Magazine*)

Sunset – intentional, respectful wind-down

- Youth Fest (to be integrated back into AACTFEST)
- Industry Connections
- Design Competition

Pause – temporary halt with openness to resumption

- Spotlight Awards
- Board Expansion

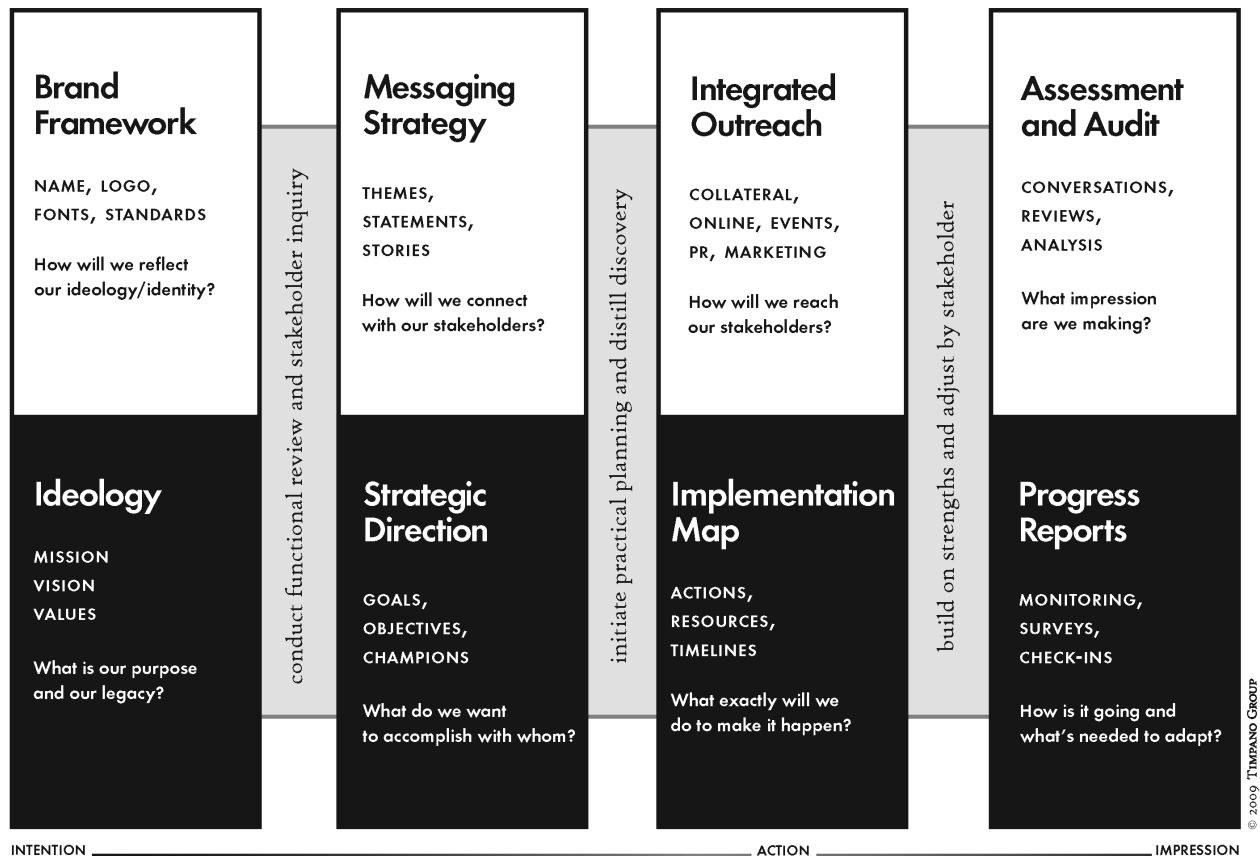
Stop – discontinue

- standalone offerings
- non-essential travel
- scarcity mindset
- assumptions about capacity
- minimizing strengths & identity
- get Board members out of operations

APPENDIX C

Considerations for Brand Development & Messaging

The Reflective StrategySM model connects strategic planning with strategic communication, helping organizations achieve more efficiently and effectively a clear basis for decision-making and platform for consistent communication:



A vital step will be developing value propositions by member type and segmented messaging by audience and intended impact. That language may benefit from being grounded in a theory of change:

- By equipping theatres with practical tools, strengthening peer networks, and elevating their collective voice, AACT enables local theatres to thrive, which in turn strengthens communities through accessible, locally rooted arts experiences.

APPENDIX D

Considerations for Prioritization Tools

Following are some tools to supplement a performance dashboard for helping to attend to operating strategically within available resources.

Decision Filters

- Informal Criteria – consider yes/maybe/no on a three-point scale (yes at 3, maybe at 2, no at 1)
 - Belonging yield: does it reliably create real connection?
 - Time-to-value: can a member get value in <30 days? If not, when
 - Local deployability: can a theatre use it to solve a real problem next week?
 - Scalability: does it scale without heroics from national staff?
 - Risk reduction: does it reduce harm (people/legal/reputation) while improving culture?
 - Advancement: how does it ladder and how does it advance the mission and strategic direction?

Offerings that score low on 1–3 are the ones most likely to feel “legacy” by 2030.

Idea review ‘rubric’

Consider reviewing all new ideas with strategic filters.

How does this idea:

- ☐ help strengthen local theatres on their own terms?
- ☐ elevate community theatre as essential civic infrastructure?
- ☐ help build a networked movement with sustainable capacity?
- ☐ advance modernizing our structure and governance for focus and durability?
- ☐ align with our philosophical foundation?
- ☐ make sense with our strategic direction?
- ☐ fit within our available capacity to do it well?

Activity prioritization tool

Consider assessing current and emerging opportunities based upon an impact/difficulty matrix.

- Evaluate each idea along a 10-point spectrum (small to large payback and easy versus hard to do).
- Then plot each of the ideas to reveal a path for prioritizing:

	Easy to Do	Hard to Do
Large Payback	PRIORITY Go for it!	CHALLENGE Plan for it!
Small Payback	ACTION Make it happen!	ELIMINATE Don't do it!

- Assess these results back against the philosophical foundation and the strategic framework to assure prioritization of resources (or possible determination of what is going to be put aside in favor of an emerging need/idea).

APPENDIX E

Considerations for Next Steps

With the framework approved, the organization shifts from direction-setting to disciplined execution. The following actions provide a practical path forward over the next 3–6 months:

1. Align on Leadership, Ownership, and Decision Rights

- Confirm the Executive Director’s authority to lead implementation within the framework.
- Clarify Board vs. staff roles (governance vs. execution) to avoid drift into operations.
- Identify a Board liaison or small implementation steering group to support—not manage—the work.

2. Activate and Sequence the Work

- Make Immediate Portfolio Decisions
 - Take action on identified *sunset, pause, and stop* items to free capacity and signal priorities.
 - Prioritize high-effort / low-impact activities for early decision-making.
- Translate Strategy into a Focused Implementation Plan
 - Direct the Executive Director to develop a 12–18 month phased roadmap tied to:
 - Strategic priorities
 - Available capacity (staff, volunteers, financial)
 - Timing dependencies (e.g., festivals, conferences)
 - Identify what will be advanced now vs. sequenced later.
- Sequence for Focus, Not Volume
 - Select 2–3 priority initiatives to begin immediately (e.g., festival transition, governance/representation, portfolio review).
 - Explicitly defer or queue other initiatives to avoid overextension.
 - Use decision filters to validate sequencing choices.
- Mobilize Work Through Defined Structures
 - Stand up initial work groups/task forces aligned to priority initiatives.
 - Appoint leaders and members.
 - Provide each group with:
 - Clear charge
 - Expected outputs (recommendations, plans, pilots)
 - Timeline and check-in points
 - Emphasize time-limited mandates where appropriate.
- Initiate a Portfolio Review Discipline
 - Conduct a structured review of existing programs and activities to determine:
 - What to continue, evolve, pause, or sunset
 - Align decisions with strategic direction and capacity realities.

3. Develop and Launch a Communication Plan

- Create a clear, consistent narrative of what was approved, what will happen next, and how members can engage
- Sequence communications for Board, staff, members, and key partners
- Reinforce momentum while setting realistic expectations about pace.

4. Align Resources to Priorities

- Review current budget and staffing against priority initiatives.
- Make intentional trade-offs, including:
 - Reducing or stopping lower-value activities
 - Reallocating time, funding, and volunteer energy
- Begin exploring revenue opportunities aligned with strategy (not legacy patterns).

5. Define Early Measures of Progress

- Identify a small set of near-term indicators (not a full dashboard yet), such as:
 - Work groups launched and active
 - Participation/engagement levels
 - Initial program or structural decisions made
- Focus on visible progress and learning, not perfection.

6. Establish a Cadence for Review and Adaptation

- Schedule regular check-ins (e.g., quarterly Board discussions) focused on:
 - Progress against priorities
 - Emerging challenges
 - Adjustments to sequencing or scope
- Reinforce that implementation is iterative, not fixed.

7. Signal Cultural Shifts

- Model and reinforce key shifts embedded in the framework:
 - From activity-driven → impact-driven
 - From scarcity mindset → intentional focus
 - From Board-in-operations → Board-in-governance
- Celebrate early examples that reflect these shifts.

AACT Next Steps: From Direction to Impact

A Disciplined Sequence for Focused, Sustainable Action (Next 3–6 Months)

