



THE
CABARET.

Next Level

The Cabaret Strategic Plan
2026-2030

PREPARED WITH CAPE FLETCHER ASSOCIATES

Executive Summary

The Cabaret enters its Next-Level era with a new five-year strategic plan for 2026–2030.

This plan affirms our purpose of delivering artistic and educational excellence through extraordinary up close and personal experiences in our award-winning intimate venue, while positioning the organization for strategic growth, deeper community impact, and long-term sustainability.

It elevates what makes The Cabaret unique — world-class artistry, experiential education programming, radical hospitality, and a signature patron and artist experience — while focusing on five next-level themes:

1. Artistic Excellence & Experience
2. Operational Excellence
3. Educational & Community Impact
4. Sustainability
5. Storytelling



TONY WINNER MATT DOYLE, 2022 • PHOTO BY DAVE PLUIMER

What's New in This Plan

A clear, inspirational narrative that centers excellence, radical hospitality, belonging, care, and gratitude in every interaction.

Clear goals for each focus area to drive execution and accountability.

An expanded commitment to artist, patron, and staff care.

Upgrades to internal systems, staffing capacity, and data-informed decision-making.

Significant expansion to signature education and artist development collaborations, plus stronger civic partnerships.

A sustainability path that explores venue ownership and thoughtful expansion, grows major gifts and endowment, and plans for leadership succession.

A compelling storytelling platform that elevates our visibility, celebrates our artists, and strengthens audience engagement and development pathways.

Five-Year Outcomes We're Aiming For

Audiences and artists who reflect the full diversity of our community and industry consistently describe their Cabaret experiences as exceptional, with year-over-year growth in attendance and engagement.

Integrated systems and right-sized staffing enable enhanced/sustained best-in-class hospitality.

Expanded education and artist development programs produce measurable talent pipelines and impact with a focus on enhanced training and opportunities for historically underserved students and artists.

A successful capital campaign and strengthened major gifts program secure long-term control of our venue and sustainable mission impact.

Elevated storytelling and increased visibility institute The Cabaret as a cultural anchor locally and a celebrated leader in the industry, driving expanded artist and audience engagement.

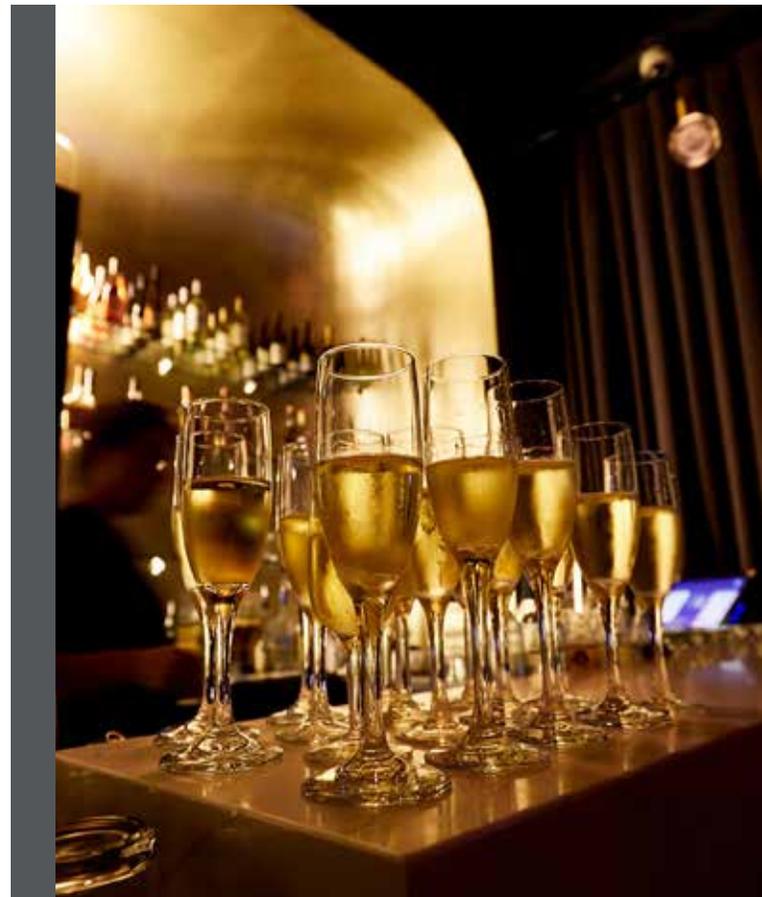
Intentional succession planning sustains artistic excellence and educational impact, preserves the signature Cabaret experience, and ensures long-term success.



EXTERIOR SHOT, 2019 • PHOTO BY DAVE PLUIMER

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Overview

The 2026–2030 Strategic Plan propels The Cabaret forward with clarity and confidence — honoring the core experience our audiences love while boldly elevating our artistic excellence, community impact, and organizational strength.

The Board of Directors extended the 2020–2024 Strategic Plan through 2025 to account for pandemic-related considerations, and all priorities in that plan were successfully executed. This strong performance provides the foundation on which we are now building.

Supported by a generous grant from Lilly Endowment, The Cabaret undertook this process in 2025 — our first comprehensive planning cycle since returning to full production and staffing levels post-pandemic. This timing also reflects seven years and seasons of lived experience in our new venue, which opened in 2018.

The Cabaret engaged Cape Fletcher Associates to lead this planning process. What began as a straightforward refresh quickly revealed something bigger: an opportunity for a full-scale glow-up. Through a deep dive into our current strategic framework — which remains strong and continues to guide our mission — we uncovered the potential for transformative evolution. This enhanced plan reflects a more expansive vision, addressing our operating and financial model, long-term sustainability, and bold considerations such as venue enhancements, possible building acquisition, deeper education and neighborhood impact, and other strategies designed to position The Cabaret to realize its full potential. It's more than a refresh; it's our next-level upgrade as we build to our 20th Anniversary Season in 2029.

Given the current landscape, this plan also addresses several emerging challenges:

- Ongoing volatility in government arts funding support.
- Rising artist fees in the post-pandemic environment (+20–40%) and the impact on ticket accessibility.
- The need to grow sustainable operating support to maintain full staffing levels.
- Evaluation of education and outreach programming to ensure excellence, inclusion, access, and financial sustainability.
- Exploration of opportunities to present high-profile Marquee Artists to meet audience demand while preserving The Cabaret's signature intimate experience.
- Assessment of short- and long-term capital improvements to advance strategic priorities.
- Leadership team succession planning.

The Board Executive Committee oversaw the planning process working in partnership with staff and our partners at Cape Fletcher Associates.

Consistent with the participatory nature of the cabaret artform, the plan draws on intentional inclusive research and analysis conducted August–September 2025, including:

- Five listening sessions with staff, board, donors, students, community partners, and vendors.
- 41 one-on-one or small group interviews.
- A community-wide online survey with significant engagement by 354 participants representing attendees (92%), donors (34%), Alley concert attendees (21%), and students (7%).
- SWOT analyses led by staff and Cape Fletcher Associates.

These inputs revealed clear, consistent themes about what makes The Cabaret extraordinary—and how we can strategically grow our mission impact and sustainability while preserving the intimacy at the heart of our experience.



What We Heard

Top 5 Key Themes

Overall Directive: Keep Doing What We're Doing - Taking it to the Next Level

1. Preserve the up-close and personal intimacy and warmth of the current venue and experience.

Patrons, artists, and supporters love the current venue and desire next level enhancements to their experience in the theatre as well as production and public spaces. They are open to modest capacity expansion but don't want to impact the fundamental feel and experience of the current room.

2. Sustain the caliber of artists and mix of programming presented.

The Cabaret has refined a magic mix of big names and emerging talent that has earned audience trust and confidence in the artists Artistic Director Shannon Forsell brings to our stage. This includes the mix of professional and student artists, the range of genres, and intentionally inclusive representation—elements that our audiences recognize, value, and appreciate.

3. Preserve and enhance The Cabaret's culture of radical hospitality.

This includes the personal touches and culture of genuine warmth, welcome, and belonging conveyed at every step of The Cabaret experience.

4. Grow staff capacity required to support/sustain The Cabaret experience and community impact.

There is clear recognition of the strain placed on our small team to deliver the current level of excellence, and strong support for the staffing enhancements needed to expand our artistic and educational impact, as well as to ensure succession planning for long-term sustainability. The Cabaret has wisely taken a conservative approach to restoring pre-pandemic staffing levels. Rebuilding and strategically expanding that capacity is essential to implementing this plan.

5. Expanding awareness and visibility - moving beyond our hidden gem status.

There is a strong desire for The Cabaret to be recognized as a distinctive cultural anchor in Indianapolis and as a premier national home for intimate, world-class performance. This is not about visibility for its own sake. It is mission-driven. Greater awareness elevates the relevance of our artists and helps attract top-tier talent, strengthens audience development by reaching new patrons who will value our work, and supports sustainability by expanding our community of supporters, partners, and advocates.



TONY NOMINEE LAURA BELL BUNDY AND EMMY WINNER ERIC MCCORMACK (*WILL AND GRACE*), 2024 • PHOTO BY DAVE PLUIMER

Facility Ownership Consideration

Early assessment through this planning process suggests that securing long-term control of our venue may offer a powerful opportunity to advance our Next Level goals. While our current model has served us well, exploring ownership allows us to evaluate how greater stability, flexibility, and investment potential could support artistic excellence, audience experience, organizational growth, community impact, and sustainability.

Our analysis to date has been thoughtful, data-informed, and collaborative—including productive conversations with key partners—and has given us confidence to continue exploring this path.

Accordingly, The Cabaret will prioritize a structured next phase of due diligence in year one of this plan to determine whether facility ownership should be incorporated into the long-term vision.



BROADWAY & TV STAR (UNBREAKABLE KIMMY SCHMIDT) TITUSS BURGESS, 2024 • PHOTO BY DAVE PLUMER

Why Cabaret & Why Now?

We believe cabaret is a vibrant, essential force for artistic expression and human connection.

Cabaret is an intimate and immersive art form that dissolves the traditional fourth wall and invites a uniquely personal exchange between artist and audience. Rooted in small-scale settings, cabaret thrives on direct connection, emotional honesty, and storytelling without the artifice of elaborate staging or scripted personas.

At its best, cabaret is a three-way dialogue between singer, song, and audience, where intimacy and interpretive nuance create an unforgettable exchange. Whether through humor, pathos, or provocation, cabaret is a space where artistry and authenticity converge, delivering profound emotional resonance.

The origins of cabaret can be seen throughout European and American history as a safe space for creativity, connection, and social/political critique. As an artform, cabaret welcomes all, reveling in dualities: high and low brow, glamour and grit, refuge and rebellion, sophistication and irreverence.

This rich legacy has shaped The Cabaret's mission since 2009 and deeply informs our curatorial approach - which has been resoundingly affirmed through this planning process.

As we consider our role in a rapidly evolving social, political, and economic landscape, the purpose of cabaret feels more essential than ever. We are called to provide a space where artists and audiences can both escape and engage — finding joy, reflection, meaning, and belonging. In a world weighed with urgent needs, we offer a haven to soften the loneliness, division, and isolation of modern life — gathering people in community, inviting care, and reminding us of our shared humanity.

More than entertainment, cabaret is an art of presence.

It lingers long after the last note, offering audiences genuine connection and the feeling of being truly seen — not merely as spectators, but as participants and contributors to the experience.



Mission, Vision, & Values

Our Mission

To be the premier home for intimate cabaret where artists are uplifted, audiences belong, the next generation thrives, and our community is strengthened through world-class artistry and radical hospitality.

Our Vision

To expand our reach and influence as the premier national home for intimate cabaret, elevating the artform and setting the celebrated standard for excellence, relevance, and radical hospitality.

Our Values

1. WE DELIVER THE WOW

Excellence is our love language. What happens on stage matters — but how people feel in the room, from arrival through the final note — is what defines us. We create exceptional experiences through thoughtful details, bold artistry, and genuine care. Our work inspires joy and awe because it's rooted in generosity toward artists, audiences, and each other. We're grateful to do this work, and we're always learning, refining, and raising the bar.

2. WE PRACTICE RADICAL HOSPITALITY

Radical Hospitality is both our moral compass and our competitive advantage. Success is measured not only by applause, but also by how people are treated backstage and beyond. We anticipate needs, exceed expectations, and warmly welcome all — artists, audiences, students, partners, and each other. We take pride in making every interaction feel personal, celebratory, human, and special.

3. WE WELCOME EVERYONE

Radical Hospitality calls us to openness. We're at our best when every person feels seen, safe, valued, and part of the story. We honor differences, expand access and opportunity, and work to remove barriers so everyone can fully belong. Our commitment shows up in the spaces we create and the choices we make — from programs and partnerships to policies and leadership that reflect and serve our community. We believe belonging is a two-way exchange, and we are open to being changed by those we serve.

4. WE LIFT EACH OTHER UP

Radical Hospitality starts at home. We treat each other with care, honesty, and respect. We communicate directly, support one another's growth, and celebrate wins together. Collaboration fuels us; trust sustains us. Service at The Cabaret is a responsibility we take personally. There are no small roles. We step outside our comfort zones, support one another, and do what the moment requires to create extraordinary experiences.

5. WE DO THE RIGHT THING

Radical Hospitality guides our decisions and accountability. We show up with excellence and integrity—every time. We honor commitments, steward resources wisely, and make decisions that strengthen long-term mission impact. We are transparent, responsible, and courageous enough to do what's right, even when it's hard. We balance bold vision with thoughtful risk to ensure sustainability while staying adaptable, brave, and mission driven.

THIS MEANS:

- We unapologetically strive for perfection.
- We create moments that surprise, delight, move, and inspire.
- We honor the craft of cabaret and obsess over details.
- We continually evolve and elevate our work and impact.

THIS MEANS:

- We choose kindness and generosity, always.
- We anticipate expressed and unexpressed needs with thoughtfulness and emotional intelligence.
- We take ownership of concerns and resolve them with urgency and care.
- We lead with optimism — always friendly, personable, and responsive.
- We leave ego outside and keep the drama onstage.

THIS MEANS:

- Our spaces, programs, and people are inclusive, accessible, and representative.
- We listen, learn, and act to advance belonging and equity.
- We collaborate with partners to widen the circle.
- We learn, grow, and improve together.

THIS MEANS:

- We hire and empower the best of the best.
- We value emotional intelligence — empathy, optimism, curiosity, integrity, and work ethic — alongside technical skill and expertise.
- We address issues openly and kindly — no gossip, no triangulation, no ego, no jerks.
- We encourage creativity, individuality, and new ideas.
- We foster honest dialogue and respectful sharing of views without fear.
- We support balance, well-being, and a culture where everyone can thrive.

THIS MEANS:

- We take responsibility for our actions and our outcomes.
- We use resources with care and intention — delivering elegance and economy.
- We communicate honestly and act ethically.
- We value clear, accurate, and timely internal and external communication.
- We adopt systems and protocols that support collective impact and success.

Themes & Goals • Next Level

1. Artistic Excellence & Experience

Elevate every performance and interaction to deliver extraordinary, meaningful, transformative experiences infused with The Cabaret's signature Radical Hospitality.



POSTMODERN JUKEBOX STAR GUNHILD CARLING, 2018 • PHOTO BY DAVE PLUIMER

Goals

- Strengthen and sustain artistic excellence.
- Elevate patron experience.
- Elevate artist experience.

OBJECTIVE 1: Explore venue improvements to enhance/elevate the audience and artist experience and increase community impact.

- Conduct a comprehensive building assessment and visioning process.
- Analyze operational, financial, and technical needs to inform improvement priorities.
- Test feasibility and long-term impact.

OBJECTIVE 2: Deepen and invest in the artistic engine to ensure consistently exceptional, innovative performances that reflect The Cabaret's distinct artistic identity.

- Pilot the Marquee artist model and explore other genres like comedy and a refined approach to Jazz.
- Advance internal capacity and capabilities that uphold and sustain artistic excellence and expand our visibility in the industry.
- Share curatorial expertise and mentor the next generation to champion the cabaret artform.

OBJECTIVE 3: Deliver a consistently extraordinary audience experience.

- Train staff and volunteers in Radical Hospitality standards and service rituals (e.g., Disney, Ritz-Carlton).
- Maintain meticulous standards for lighting, sound, sightlines, scent, and overall ambiance.
- Refine arrival, parking, lobby, reception, and restroom experiences to match onstage polish.

OBJECTIVE 4: Improve food & beverage quality and capacity.

- Explore expanded kitchen infrastructure to support capacity and culinary quality/breadth.
- Expand menus and explore pre-order options for enhanced service.
- Strengthen our F/B partnership to present a more cohesive, seamless, and elevated experience.

OBJECTIVE 5: Strengthen artist care and support.

- Explore addition of at least two dressing rooms, enhanced amenities for all dressing rooms, and the creation of a backstage green room for larger bands, student groups, and artist meet-and-greets.
- Evaluate and secure partnerships and sustainable resources to upgrade artist lodging.
- Continue to strengthen the advancing process to ensure clear communication and expectations.

Timing

2026-2027: Advance venue planning and feasibility studies; expand staff capacity; update service standards and training; pursue quick-win experience improvements across arrivals, lobby/restrooms, menu rotation, and artist lodging partnerships.

2028-2030: Implement venue improvements based on feasibility outcomes and continue refining the experience through ongoing audience, artist, and partner feedback.

Themes & Goals • Next Level

2. Operational Excellence

Strengthen internal systems, staffing, workflows, and culture to consistently reflect precision, readiness, and the heart of Radical Hospitality.



Goals

- Strengthen staff capacity and culture.
- Build and adopt systems that consistently drive excellence, efficiency, and accountability.
- Integrate and operationalize values and radical hospitality principles across all roles and functions.

OBJECTIVE 1: Strategically expand staff capacity to support growth, deliver on plan priorities, and sustain a healthy, high-performing culture.

- Align staffing structure with the next phase of long-term organizational needs.
- Restore pre-pandemic positions and add strategic roles that support artistic excellence, Radical Hospitality, revenue growth, and organizational sustainability, including succession planning.
- Invest in staff development, leadership coaching, and cross-training that nurtures internal talent and reinforces a strong values-driven culture.

OBJECTIVE 2: Improve operational systems and data to strengthen results, streamline workflows, and support informed decision-making.

- Evaluate and implement an integrated CRM platform that seamlessly interfaces with ticketing and donor data to improve accuracy and audience insight.
- Standardize organizational project/workflow management to improve accuracy and efficiency.
- Establish consistent performance and fundraising management rhythms.

OBJECTIVE 3: Embed Radical Hospitality into daily operations, environments, and interactions to create consistently warm, welcoming, and values-driven surprise and delight experiences.

- Audit artist, audience, donor, volunteer, and partner touchpoints to identify opportunities to elevate Radical Hospitality across the full experience journey.
- Establish Radical Hospitality as a core performance standard by training staff/volunteers/partners and including expectations in annual goals, evaluation processes, and leadership coaching.
- Integrate Radical Hospitality improvements into short and long-term venue planning and CRM/systems to support overall experience and personalized touches such as special occasions, donor benefits, and F&B preferences to build audience profiles that support consistent, relationship-based engagement.

Timing

2026–2027: Audit the full experience journey and implement short-term venue and hospitality enhancements; evaluate, select, and adopt a new CRM system; incorporate Radical Hospitality performance standards into training, annual goals, and accountability practices.

2028–2030: Integrate major environmental recommendations into venue renovations and continue ongoing optimization, refresh cycles, and continuous training as part of organizational performance management.

Themes & Goals • Next Level

3. Educational & Community Impact

Strengthen The Cabaret's role as a cultural anchor by expanding community engagement, deepening education and artist development, and harnessing Radical Hospitality as a community-building force.

Goals

- Deepen The Cabaret's neighborhood, regional, and national role and relevance as a cultural anchor.
- Develop signature education and artist-development programs and partnerships that advance The Cabaret's mission and the cabaret artform for the next generation.
- Strengthen and expand our existing young-audience program to realize its full potential.



OBJECTIVE 1: Strengthen community visibility and engagement to cultivate a thriving cultural ecosystem in and around the venue.

- Position The Cabaret as a key contributor to downtown's next chapter by collaborating with city leaders, developers, and civic/cultural organizations on district planning, arts advocacy, and revitalization initiatives. Collaborate with developers and civic partners to attract synergistic neighboring tenants that enhance the creative corridor.
- Help convene a Neighborhood Cultural Coalition to coordinate cross-promotions, shared events, and resource-sharing within the district. Implement wayfinding, public art, or shared branding initiatives that visually reinforce the area as an official Indy Cultural District and/or cultural destination.
- Increase visibility through community-facing programs such as The Alley Sessions and participation in other neighborhood events.
- Create a Cabaret Community Ambassadors Program to engage local leaders, creatives, donors, and partners in advocacy and outreach.

OBJECTIVE 2: Elevate education as a core pillar through collaborative programming that expands access, deepens training, and creates clear education-to-career pathways for the next generation.

- Expand equitable access by increasing free and reduced-cost tickets and training opportunities, prioritizing economically disadvantaged and underrepresented students.
- Strengthen education pipelines by deepening partnerships with Central Indiana high schools, universities, and youth arts organizations to identify, mentor, and prepare emerging talent for audition readiness, talent scouting, scholarship pathways, and collegiate/career success.
- Launch The Cabaret Conservatory as a central hub for training and artist development, offering tiered curriculum, masterclasses, workshops, coaching, and performance opportunities unique to cabaret.
- Expand our partnership with Ball State University's Department of Theatre and Dance to increase access to BSU audition days, and provide dedicated mentorship, showcases, masterclasses, performance opportunities, internships, and professional development for BSU student cohorts.
- Grow digital learning and global reach by leveraging The Cabaret's access to acclaimed artists to expand online masterclasses, short-form instructional content, and archival programming through its YouTube channel, which reaches nearly 2 million viewers annually.

OBJECTIVE 3: Reimagine and expand The Cabaret's young-audience program into a signature, year-round pipeline that builds early engagement and cultivates the next generation of Cabaret patrons.

- Rebrand and elevate the program with dedicated leadership and a cohesive identity that resonates with teens and young adults.
- Expand year-round engagement and connection opportunities including a structured calendar of touchpoints and unique experiences, including an annual signature event tied to a performance.
- Establish a youth advisory council to co-design experiences and strengthen relevance and ownership, including board representation.

Timing

2026-2027: Expand staff capacity to support program expansion; develop and pilot enhanced education programming and launch expanded BSU partnership; rebrand young audience program; connect with partners to initiate cultural district conversations; explore creation of an ambassador program.

2027-2030: Expand student access efforts; scale audience development program; pilot and expand digital learning initiatives; launch The Cabaret Conservatory; scale neighborhood district initiatives.

Themes & Goals • Next Level

4. Sustainability

Ensure The Cabaret's mission, culture, and venue endure for generations.



BALL STATE UNIVERSITY STUDENT SHOWCASE, 2026 • PHOTO BY DAVE PLUIMER

Goals

- Explore facility ownership and long-term infrastructure capacity.
- Strengthen our philanthropic pipeline and endowment.
- Strengthen board capacity, governance excellence, and leadership succession planning.

OBJECTIVE 1: Evaluate and prepare for a capital campaign.

- Use facility assessments and long-term plans from the Next Level Artistic & Experience work to determine feasible expansion opportunities and associated 10-year operating impacts.
- Conduct a philanthropic feasibility study and based on findings, activate a capital campaign plan.

OBJECTIVE 2: Build a robust major gifts program.

- Strengthen major gift practices and pursue multi-year commitments.

OBJECTIVE 3: Grow endowment to by 2030.

- Expand The Cabaret's planned giving society through intentional cultivation, stewardship, and impact reporting.
- Establish and track annual goals for planned giving solicitations and commitments.

OBJECTIVE 4: Strengthen board capacity and staff leadership succession.

- Develop a next-level board recruitment and engagement plan that builds a strong, diverse leadership pipeline.
- Initiate comprehensive Artistic Director and senior leadership succession planning (emergency, short-term, and long-term scenarios) with outside counsel.
- Study peer success cases and incorporate relevant learnings and best practices.

OBJECTIVE 5: Expand earned revenue through venue rentals while preserving mission.

- Equip staff with the tools and structures needed to proactively secure rental clients, including multi-year agreements.
- Define pricing, packages, and service standards that reflect Radical Hospitality and protect The Cabaret's nonprofit mission.

Timing

2026: Facility and campaign feasibility; major gifts infrastructure development; initial succession planning framework; early rental strategy alignment.

2027-2030: Capital campaign execution; endowment growth and planned giving expansion; sustained rental revenue strategy; continued board capacity building.

Themes & Goals • Next Level

5. Storytelling

Move beyond hidden gem without losing our magic.

Goals

- Enhance brand visibility through a refreshed identity and a stronger digital and physical presence.
- Invest in modern marketing and communications infrastructure and strategic brand partnerships to support sustained growth.
- Amplify the voices of artists, students, and audiences to highlight impact through compelling, continuous storytelling.



OBJECTIVE 1: Significantly increase exterior visibility and wayfinding.

- Enhance signage and street-facing presence, including a more visible and accessible box office.
- Evaluate marquee opportunities and art installations on the building facade and frontage.
- Integrate wayfinding enhancements (digital and physical) in partnership with city/district partners.

OBJECTIVE 2: Explore a Cabaret museum/gallery concept that preserves legacy, further distinguishes The Cabaret as a destination venue, and deepens community connection.

- As part of our venue visioning process, conduct site visits and benchmarking with peer institutions and performance-focused museums or installations.
- As part of the Building Committee, create a board-staff task force to examine vision, purpose, and integration of a possible cabaret museum/gallery with existing programs.
- Evaluate costs, funding pathways, partnerships, and curatorial options, including local artists, national archives, and Cabaret alumni.
- Pilot a temporary pop-up or exhibit to test interest and refine the concept.

OBJECTIVE 3: Build a modern, flexible institutional storytelling system.

- Update and modernize the website — enhancing design, functionality, search engine optimization (SEO), and analytics — to improve discoverability, user experience, and mission-aligned engagement.
- Create a refreshed and unified suite of brand templates and toolkits for marketing, development, education, and events.
- Produce annual storytelling assets — impact videos, slide decks, reports, and artist features — that can be utilized across channels and campaigns.
- Improve internal digital asset library (photos, video, testimonials, historical materials) to streamline staff workflows and increase content output.
- Capture and archive high-quality B-roll, testimonials, and performance excerpts for ongoing content needs.

OBJECTIVE 4: Spotlight artists, students, and community impact through continuous storytelling.

- Build and invest in a comprehensive annual marketing, PR, and digital content strategy including a multi-channel content calendar aligned with programming, fundraising milestones, education initiatives, and national visibility moments.
- Expand digital reach through platform-specific strategies (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, email, podcasting, LinkedIn), artist-generated content, and hashtag campaigns.
- Integrate paid digital campaigns targeted to key audience segments.
- Produce high-quality multimedia storytelling that elevates artists and audiences including video, photography, and editorial features that showcase artist journeys, alumni successes, creative processes, and transformational artist, audience, and student experiences.
- Expand behind-the-scenes and experiential storytelling, including exploration of signature formats to build recognition and repeat engagement.
- Engage influencers and ambassadors who help amplify the brand and expand engagement.
- Leverage brand, media, and community partnerships to increase visibility.

Timing

2026: Facility and campaign feasibility; major gifts infrastructure development; initial succession planning framework; early rental strategy alignment.

2027–2030: Capital campaign execution; endowment growth and planned giving expansion; sustained rental revenue strategy; continued board capacity building.

Implementation & Governance

This plan is a living framework. We will revisit and report on progress regularly to sustain momentum, celebrate wins, and address gaps early.

Cadence & Accountability

- Quarterly staff reviews of Focus Area milestones and KPIs.
- Biannual dashboard to the board; annual plan refresh and budget alignment.
- Committee reports aligned to Goals/Objectives to increase clarity and accountability.

Illustrative KPIs

- Excellence/Experience: audience/artist satisfaction, repeat attendance, donor retention, F&B per-capita.
- Operations: system adoption rates, project on-time delivery, hiring/retention metrics.
- Education & Community Impact: program participation, partner activations, student access numbers, long-term career impact tracking, cultural district/destination development and relevance.
- Financial: strengthened major gift pipeline, endowment growth, earned revenue from rentals.
- Storytelling: media mentions, awards/recognition, increased digital engagement, new audience development and conversion.





Appendices

Appendix A

SWOT ANALYSIS SUMMARY

The following summary of multiple SWOT analyses (next two pages) was produced to reflect the feedback provided by members of The Cabaret's family.

SWOTs were conducted by two primary constituencies of the organization: its staff and by Cape Fletcher Associates (strategic planning counsel). Information gleaned from those sessions has been organized into this rubric for clarity of understanding.

Strengths

EXCEPTIONAL ARTISTIC & AUDIENCE EXPERIENCE

The Cabaret consistently delivers a powerful, engaging, and personal artistic experience that feels both intimate and high caliber. Audiences and artists alike feel a strong sense of belonging.

DISTINCTIVE BRAND & REPUTATION

The Cabaret's brand is recognized for radical hospitality, excellence, and its signature "Cabaret experience." For those familiar with it, the brand is synonymous with mastery, polish, and warmth.

LEADERSHIP & PEOPLE

The organization benefits from strong, trusted leadership in Shannon Forsell, and a high-performing, collaborative team culture. Staff members are deeply aligned with the mission and trusted as experts in their areas. The board is strong, supportive, and non-intrusive.

FINANCIAL & PHYSICAL ASSETS

A healthy endowment, strong donor/sponsor base, and a beautiful dedicated venue distinguish The Cabaret from peers. The space itself — both intimate and luxurious — is among Indiana's most desirable settings for live performance.

LOYAL CONSTITUENCY

Audiences, donors, and partners are loyal, engaged, and return frequently. Many key supporters are on-site multiple times per year, deepening connection to the organization.

Weaknesses

STAFF CAPACITY

The relatively small team limits the organization's ability to scale or take on new initiatives without risking burnout or compromising the signature experience.

OVERRELIANCE ON KEY RELATIONSHIPS

Many critical relationships — especially donor and artist relationships — are closely held by the Founder/CEO. This centralization creates risk without a clear succession or relationship-transfer plan.

LIMITED AUDIENCE GROWTH & CAPACITY CONSTRAINTS

The small venue size restricts ticket availability, and expanding audience reach (particularly among younger demographics) has been challenging. The niche artform can limit appeal to new audiences and funders.

OPERATIONAL CONSTRAINTS

Food & beverage and back-of-house logistics present challenges to optimizing revenue and service. Systems and infrastructure may not yet match the sophistication of the organization's artistic and audience-facing experiences.

Opportunities

BUILDING OWNERSHIP & CAPITAL CAMPAIGN

Acquiring and enhancing The Cabaret's building could secure long-term stability, create new capacity for earned and contributed revenue, and elevate the organization's visibility and permanence.

AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT & MARKET REACH

Broaden engagement beyond current audiences—regionally (Chicago, Cincinnati, Columbus) and demographically (younger audiences, new communities). Continue deepening radical hospitality for both audiences and artists.

PHILANTHROPY & ENDOWMENT GROWTH

Expand donor and partner networks beyond current circles. Establish an endowment that could fund 30% of annual operations, enhancing resilience in economic downturns.

BOARD & LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Strategically recruit next-generation board members with strong networks and fundraising capacity. Plan proactively for leadership succession to maintain trust and continuity.

ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS & STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Strengthen internal systems, digital presence, and professional development to match the excellence of the onstage experience. Continue building internal culture as a model of radical hospitality.

EDUCATION & CULTURAL LEADERSHIP

Expand educational initiatives to position The Cabaret as the premier cabaret training hub in the U.S., reinforcing its role as a cultural anchor in Indianapolis.

Threats

LEADERSHIP TRANSITION RISKS

The Cabaret's deep reliance on Shannon Forsell's relationships, artistic identity, and trust network poses a significant continuity challenge during future transitions.

ECONOMIC & PHILANTHROPIC VOLATILITY

Heavy dependence on philanthropy (approx. two-thirds of revenue) makes the organization vulnerable to economic downturns or shifts in donor priorities.

VENUE & INFRASTRUCTURE RISKS

Uncertainty about long-term control of the building or parking could disrupt operations. Climate change also presents potential physical risks to outdoor spaces like The Alley.

MARKET CONSTRAINTS

The intimate venue and luxury positioning, while core to The Cabaret's identity, limit potential for audience and revenue growth. Balancing exclusivity with access remains a strategic tension.

STAFF BURNOUT & CULTURAL EROSION

Maintaining the current high-trust, high-performance culture will be critical as growth accelerates. Staff transition or overextension could erode the organization's "signature touch."

Appendix B

LISTENING SESSIONS BRIEFING

Top Line Summary

During August and September 2025, five listening sessions were conducted with internal stakeholders, community members, and one-on-one interviews. In total, 41 persons participated in either small-group or one-on-one interviews, and over 230 individual responses were gathered across guided questions. The participants included board and staff members; individual donors, corporate sponsors, and foundation grantmakers; subscribers and individual ticket buyers; education and community partners, and vendors.

Key themes emerged consistently across all groups, with participants offering both affirmations of The Cabaret's strengths and aspirations for its future growth.

Key Findings

1. INTIMACY & EXPERIENCE

- Participants repeatedly emphasized the intimate scale of the venue and the uniqueness of the live experience.
- The “up-close and personal” environment was viewed as essential to The Cabaret's identity and appeal.
- Several respondents noted that while modest growth in seating could be feasible, maintaining intimacy should remain a priority.

Supporting Quotes

- “The intimacy of the experience is tremendous! The interaction with the artists is part of what makes The Cabaret unique.”
- “The special sauce of The Cabaret is that combination of the artistic caliber and the intimacy of the venue.”

2. QUALITY & TALENT OF PERFORMERS (Mentioned ~82 times)

- The **caliber of artists** — both big names and emerging talent — was universally praised.
- The Cabaret is seen as providing **world-class performances in Indianapolis**, creating “pinch me moments.”
- Participants valued the balance between established stars and new voices.

Supporting Quotes

- “I love seeing big name artists come to The Cabaret, but I also love learning about the artists whose names I don't know much about. It's a good mixture today.”
- “I just trust the decisions that the team makes, because they always bring great, top-tier performers to an intimate space.”

3. HOSPITALITY & WELCOMING CULTURE (Mentioned ~7 times, but strongly emphasized qualitatively)

- Words like “radical hospitality” and “welcoming” were frequently associated with The Cabaret's culture.
- The staff and leadership were praised for **personal touches** (knowing names, creating belonging).
- This reputation for hospitality was cited as a differentiator from other arts venues.

Supporting Quotes

- “It will be essential to have the high quality of staff continue forward, because the staff is key to the success of The Cabaret.”
- “As I look to the future, I would be so proud of The Cabaret because they bring top-talent, because the atmosphere is so beautiful, and because they bend over backward to make every person feel welcome and create a magical experience.”

4. DIVERSITY & VARIETY OF PROGRAMMING (Mentioned ~20 times)

- Attendees valued the **mix of genres, identities, and backgrounds** among performers. Shannon's expertise in programming a varied season instills trust and confidence in those surveyed that they will always enjoy Cabaret performances.
- There were calls for continued emphasis on **inclusive representation**, including LGBTQ+ voices and local talent, acknowledging The Cabaret already is doing this very thoughtfully.
- Balance between Broadway, jazz, cabaret, and crossover acts was seen as a strength as is currently presented.

5. GROWTH & EXPANSION (Mentioned ~42 times)

- Many participants raised the possibility of modestly expanding seating capacity to the degree that the audience experience is not diminished or different than it feels presently. There is an assumption that a designer and/or architect can determine both how and how many seats can be added to increase revenue but without noticeable changes to the audience experience.
- Growth in staffing was identified as necessary to sustain The Cabaret's trajectory. Because radical hospitality and personal relationships are key to The Cabaret experience, ensuring staff are not pulled in too many directions was voiced as important and strategic.

6. COMMUNITY AWARENESS & VISIBILITY (Mentioned ~30 times)

- Several respondents expressed a desire for The Cabaret to be better known across Indianapolis and beyond. And yet, at the same time, those interviewed understand that the intimate experience sets apart the organization from others, and the "hot ticket in town" difficulty of securing tickets is vital to The Cabaret's brand.
- The Cabaret is viewed as one of the key institutions that makes Indianapolis and Central Indiana competitive and stand-out from other cities. Many suggested tourism, city branding committees would be wise to leverage The Cabaret as a differentiating factor for Indianapolis.
- The sense that The Cabaret is still a "hidden gem" came up multiple times. Others mentioned that The Cabaret feels like a club, but not in an exclusionary way; instead in a way that people seek out to be a part of.

Conclusion

The listening sessions confirm that The Cabaret is in a strong position, with clear alignment among stakeholders on its core identity: **intimacy, high-caliber talent, and radical hospitality**. At the same time, there is a willing appetite for modest growth in seating capacity, provided it does not dilute the essential character of the organization.

In the words of a medical professional who was interviewed, The Cabaret would be wise "to do no harm" but instead, as echoed by the majority of interviewees, to consider only modest, incremental upgrades rather than wholesale or radical changes.

Stakeholders consistently expressed pride, loyalty, and excitement for The Cabaret's future, with many articulating a vision of the organization as not only Indianapolis' most distinctive arts experience, but also a regional and national leader in cabaret performance.

Appendix C

SURVEY SUMMARY

A survey was conducted to receive feedback from a broader segment of the community. The survey was deployed August 15 through September 1, 2025. 354 respondents participated in the survey.

The following is a summary of key findings from the survey as well as supporting data and quotes that illustrate the themes.

Survey Participant Overview

- **Total responses:** 354 participants, with a 70% total completion rate, and 8:33 of typical time spent.
- **Respondent mix:** Majority identified as mainstage attendees (92%), with notable subgroups including donors (34%), The Alley Series attendees (21%), and students (7%).
- Responses covered both **quantitative satisfaction ratings and open-text feedback**, giving a rich picture of audience experience and expectations.
- The survey device was open for collection from August 15, 2025, to September 1, 2025.

Attendance Frequency

- About 45% attend 4-7 times per year.
- ~30% attend 1-3 times per year.
- ~10% are monthly or near-monthly attendees.

1. OVERALL SATISFACTION WITH THE VENUE

- **84% of respondents reported being satisfied or very satisfied with the Cabaret's location, parking, and amenities.**
- **Venue amenities (bar, restrooms, coat check, gallery space) were especially praised, with 90% positive ratings.**
- **Parking and valet services were rated slightly lower, with 72% satisfied or very satisfied.**

Supporting Quotes

- "Nice, relaxing atmosphere. Enjoying good music."
- "I am happy with the venue. Look forward to potential renovation as well."
- "Wish you could pick your table when you buy your tickets online."

2. FOOD & BEVERAGE SERVICE (JAZZ KITCHEN PARTNERSHIP)

- Satisfaction here was more mixed compared to other areas.
- About **65% satisfied or very satisfied, but 20% neutral and 15% dissatisfied.**
- Common requests: broader menu variety, faster service, and easier online ordering.

Supporting Quotes

- "More choices of food selections."
- "Booking online could be simpler and less complicated."
- "The food is fine, but we come for the performances."

3. BOX OFFICE & TICKETING EXPERIENCE

- **79% satisfied or very satisfied, but 12% neutral and ~9% dissatisfied.**
- Most frequent concerns: **table selection at purchase and ease of online booking.**
- Several praised the friendliness of front-of-house staff.

Supporting Quotes

- "Wish you could pick your table when you buy your tickets."
- "Box office staff are always friendly and helpful."
- "Keep it going - love the staff support."

4. DONOR & SPONSOR EXPERIENCE

- Among donors (34% of respondents), **88% reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their experience.**
- Survey responses consistently highlight appreciation for recognition and personal hospitality.

Supporting Quotes

- "As a donor, I always feel valued and welcomed."
- "The Cabaret is very personal; leadership knows your name."
- "Great stewardship of gifts and sponsors."

Overarching Highlights

The survey reinforces the strength of The Cabaret's core experience:

world-class performances in an intimate, welcoming venue.

While satisfaction levels are high overall, two areas stand out as opportunities for growth:

1. FOOD & BEVERAGE SERVICE

Expand menu options and streamline ordering.

2. BOX OFFICE & TICKETING

Improve ability to select tables if realistic given other factors and simplify ticket purchase process.

Respondents consistently express deep loyalty and enthusiasm, with donors, patrons, and community members alike underscoring that The Cabaret is one of Indianapolis' most distinctive and beloved arts experiences.



The Cabaret is an entirely precious institution, not only within the culture and identity of Indianapolis and Central Indiana, but in terms of its role nationally and within the entire artform of Cabaret.

"I WANT YOU TO FEEL LIKE YOU ARE OUR GUEST AT OUR COCKTAIL PARTY." – A staff member of The Cabaret

This statement stuck with us. When we heard that exclaimed energetically from the staff member, it perfectly captures the vibe of the institution. We've held that sentiment close to us during this process.

As the institution looks toward the future, a strategic plan helps guide its decision making and track progress. At times, the strategic plan will serve as a tool to ensure focus on the matter at hand, identifying the difference between a tremendous opportunity and a risky distraction. At other times, this strategic plan becomes a jumping-off point from which the institution and its leadership can intentionally chart a new path.

By any measure the vision before The Cabaret is electrifying and is apt to invite new people into the magic of this most unique of experiences. Similarly, this vision is poised to deepen existing relationships with educational collaborators, community partners, audience members, generous donors, dedicated staff members, and resolute volunteers.

We encourage all staff and volunteer leaders at the organization to revisit your strategic plan often. The real power of your plan lies not in it simply sitting on a shelf, but instead through the realization of these dreams.

Thank you for including Cape Fletcher Associates as part of your strategic planning process. We celebrate you and The Cabaret for being a gem in the crown of humankind, and we look forward to seeing your vision realized... enveloped by footlights, spotlights, and electrifying rounds of applause!

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