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## Region selected as prime area for arts pilot project

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The very first Celebrate Our Artists Weekend kicks off on June 6.

Just over a year ago, Ontario's first Status of the Artist legislation was passed, including a proclamation that the first weekend of June would be dedicated to recognizing the importance and value of our artists.

The festival is now called spOtlight: -- with a big "O" for Ontario, and a colon that suggests open possibilities.

For the inaugural version, which is designed to be a pilot project, the banner reads spOtlight: Cambridge, Guelph, Kitchener, Stratford and Waterloo.

I've seen a digital version of the program. It's impressive: There are more than 100 different activities, imaginatively conceived, wonderfully various, spanning all arts disciplines.

The invitation is to "discover the arts in you and your community" through tours, talks, performances, workshops and other participatory activities. All five cities are well represented; there is also a spOtlight: Elora, a spOtlight: Erin and a spOtlight: St. Jacobs.

Something like 250 artists are directly involved. The tone is welcoming; offerings are open to everyone, and free of charge.

Before week is out, 100,000 copies of the brochure will be distributed through various channels, including delivery with your Record. A website -- [www.spOtlightfestival.ca](http://www.spOtlightfestival.ca) -- went live yesterday.

Aileen Carroll, Ontario's Minister of Culture, will be here for the opening celebrations. She explains that it is "the abundance of arts activity in this region" that makes it "an ideal location" for the pilot.

Kitchener MPP John Milloy sees this development as "a recognition of all that's going on in our community," and a well-deserved opportunity to draw some provincewide attention to our cultural accomplishments.

Like many others, I was pleased when it was announced that this area had been chosen to lead the way, but also worried: Things didn't get started until February, which left just a few months to prepare. Expressions of interest were due in two weeks; full proposals in just over a month.

But artists and art presenters came through with flying colours.

So did the staff at the Ontario Arts Council, especially Natalie De Vito, who worked as Project Manager & Artistic Producer.

When I wrote about this project just after it was announced, I mentioned the challenge of communicating across a diverse range of cities that have very limited connections with one another.

So how did they manage to pull it off? By working with each community separately, on its own terms, starting, interestingly enough, with the mayor's office.

Artists have delivered. The cities came through. Volunteers came forward to help. The list of community sponsors and partners is impressive, especially from the media.

The last test involves the community itself: Will people come out and take advantage of opportunities get a behind the scenes look at the art making process, or to experiment with singing, songwriting, conducting, dancing, painting, writing, conducting, drumming, sword-fighting, improv theatre or pottery?

Quite unintentionally, spOtlight: coincides with two of the most significant ways the communities of Waterloo Region have been celebrating our artists for many years:

The Mayor's Celebration of the Arts in Cambridge, which is tied to the grand opening of City Hall this year, happens Friday evening.

And on June 8 at 7 p.m., after all the comings and goings of spOtlight: have wrapped up, there will be a mass celebration of the 20th anniversary Kitchener-Waterloo Arts Awards at Centre in the Square.

This one is not free, and not officially part of spOtlight: -- tickets are \$29, and available at the Centre in the Square box office (519 578 1570) and online at [www.kwartsawards.ca](http://www.kwartsawards.ca).

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