

UNOFFICIAL DRAFT SUBJECT TO APPROVAL BY THE COMMITTEE AT ITS NEXT MEETING

MINUTES OF THE MEETING

**MASS CULTURAL COUNCIL
ADVOCACY COMMITTEE**

**FRIDAY, MARCH 5, 2021
11:00 AM**

ONLINE MEETING

Chair Troy Siebels called the meeting to order at 11:03AM

Committee Members Present were

Troy Siebels, Co-Chair
Sherry Dong, Co-Chair
Nina Fialkow
Marc Carroll
Matthew Keator

Staff Members and Partners Present were

Michael Bobbitt, Executive Director
David Slatery, Deputy Director
Bethann Steiner, Public Affairs Director
Jen Lawless, Operations Director
Ann Petruccelli Moon, Public Engagement Manager
Brian Boyles, Executive Director, Mass Humanities
Emily Ruddock, Executive Director, MASSCreative

Committee Chair Troy Siebels called the meeting to order at 11:03am. Deputy Director David Slatery dispensed with reading the open meeting law notice as no guests were present.

Troy asked if Committee Members had reviewed the minutes from their last meeting on March 3, 2019. Matthew Keator moved to approve the minutes, Co-Chair Sherry Dong seconded the motioned, all, voting by roll call, were in favor,

and the minutes were approved, noting that members Susan Leff, Victoria Marsh, Allyce Najimy, and Ann Murphy were absent.

Troy thanked staff for sending background information to Committee members prior to the meeting and noted that the question he heard come up earlier that week at the Executive Committee meeting was whether to be more aggressive with the Agency's budget ask this year or not. He further framed the conversation for Committee members: do we ask for level funding acknowledging that the state is in a bind due to the pandemic, or do we take the opportunity to ask for a budget increase knowing that our sector itself is in a bind. He then asked Public Affairs Director Bethann Steiner to provide an update on advocacy efforts and the crafting of the Agency's budget request thus far.

Bethann stated that staff knows through the Agency's continued surveying of the field – individuals and organizations – that 11 months into the pandemic, cultural organizations have been hit hard with up to \$588M in lost revenue. The number of cultural jobs lost is hovering around 30K, and individuals (artists, teaching artists, humanists, and scientists) have lost \$30.4M in personal income. We also know that not all cultural organizations are open just yet. That is what we know as to the ongoing crisis. What we know in terms of the Commonwealth's revenue picture: the state Department of Revenue recently reported its February tax collections with a striking headline: **February Tax Shatters Expectations**. This is strong language when talking about revenue and tax collection and that the number – Bethann believed it to be around \$24.8M – was higher than anticipated. More revenue has been collected this year than last year. Right now, because of that difference in taxes collected, the state has a \$1.1B cushion. If tax collection continues to come in as expected in the months to come, the Commonwealth will head into June with a \$2.531 billion cushion. When there is a surplus like this, supplementary budgets happen. Bethann explained that she shares all of this because she thinks the Agency can make a case that the state's economy is doing well; our budget hearing is falling during a robust time.

Executive Director Michael Bobbitt stated that he is comfortable pushing for a \$20M allocation, which represents a \$1.82M increase.

Emily Ruddock, Executive Director of MASSCreative added that the cultural sector is mobilized and she believes support can be built around advocating for a \$20M allocation, particularly when talking about a package with the COVID recovery bill, and trying to get Governor Baker to prioritize space for the \$31M bond bill.

Bethann agreed, that is what staff has been thinking about as messaging is crafted. We have our annual allocation to support and stabilize and Senate Tourism, Arts & Cultural Development Committee Chair Ed Kennedy's relief bill to provide one-time relief during a crisis – those two complement each other. We

have not yet determined how to frame the bond bill dollars in that picture, that is still to be determined.

Troy noted that he is optimistic legislators will couple the Agency's annual allocation and the relief bill, that they will commingle the ideas.

Bethann agreed but flagged that sometimes there can be a "you don't need this, because you have that" mentality and that we will need to challenge that thought process should it arise. She is hopeful the budget will continue on its regular cycle and be finalized by July 1, but there is no telling when bills will be assigned or when federal dollars will show up. Emily stated that she believes there is room to clarify the two asks, and Michael added that without federal support the general operating budget will not work.

Troy agreed and said that \$20M will not save the sector, as the sector is in such a deep hole, and ideally a conversation about federal money would happen sooner – before the passage of the state budget.

Council Chair Nina Fialkow noted that former Executive Director Anita Walker would frequently bring someone from the cultural sector to budget hearings and meetings with legislators and asked if that is something to consider incorporating into this year's hearings and meetings; would this add a human component and enhance the Agency's message. Matthew Keator recalled this and believes it to be a good idea, as did Vice Chair Marc Carroll.

Bethann let the Committee Members know that bringing visitors to a hearing is typically frowned upon but in the past the Joint Committee on Ways & Means had allowed it. Bethann thinks with the hearing taking place on Zoom this year and with the excitement of introducing the Agency's new Executive Director that bringing representatives from the cultural sector is something staff could pursue for follow-up meetings with legislators instead. Michael added that only eight weeks ago he was running a cultural organization and can therefore speak to the devastation cultural organizations are experiencing.

Matthew followed up with a suggestion of having a press conference on the steps of the State House that included representatives from cultural organizations. Bethann agreed this is a good idea and noted that it's well-timed as the agency is about to announce its most recent Covid impact data collected from the field. The data will be released on Monday and staff is working to secure media coverage Monday evening into Tuesday morning so that the Agency can go into the Ways & Means hearing with some attention. The Chairs of the Tourism, Arts, and Cultural Development Committee know we are preparing to release this data and are ready to share it with their House and Senate colleagues so that it's in-hand before our testimony. Bethann is also anticipating a significant amount of coverage in this Sunday's *Boston Globe*

and noted that once testimony is complete it will be published on the Agency's website.

Nina agreed that data is extremely important, that legislators appreciate it, and that human stories are also very important.

Bethann stated that she believes Emily Ruddock and Brian Boyles, Executive Director of Mass Humanities, are gearing up to launch all of their members into advocacy.

Emily confirmed this stating that MassCreative's main strategy is direct connection with law makers. In addition to data and media coverage, direct points of contact are what she and her team will push for. Brian stated that he has been messaging all of his committee members and that they will receive a package next week reaffirming messaging around advocacy; he is also working to identify grantees in key districts to buttress the case-making.

Michael added that he had personally reached out to the press. Bethann reiterated that there would be a spread in the Globe on Sunday, and that it would appear online on Friday.

Bethann then read into the record an email from Committee Member Ann Murphy who was unable to join the meeting:

I think that if we can make a case for going larger it always helps us because then if they scale us down, we would have some negotiation room. And if they say OK to our request, all the better as we can distribute it to needy arts and culture organizations. I think we have already proven the economic value of the arts and culture in Mass. and also that MCC has done a great job in identifying and disseminating funds to organizations small and large, in particular, to the local grassroots orgs who would be gone without our help. Just my two cents!

Nina asked if Ann was saying the Agency should ask for more than \$20M. It was noted that it was unclear.

Troy stated that he believes asking for more than \$20M would be a mistake. He thinks the Agency should separate its budget request from the greater relief request and asks what other tools staff needs to prepare for next week's hearing.

Deputy Director David Slatery noted that the legislature heard the Agency ask for \$20M last year before the pandemic began, so this request is in keeping in the same mode of how we approached the legislature in previous years.

Marc thought this was a good point made by David. Since a similar request was made last year, it's something legislators should expect and fund given all the good the grants have done this year. He added that the data Bethann has pulled together is compelling. He believes this is a solid case to actually receive a \$20M allocation.

Troy asked a question about relief bills noting that Senator Kennedy's was a substantial one, are there others that are competing, and do we have issues with support for more than one relief bill.

Emily stated that MassCreative's approach was to work with coalitions across the sector to ask for endorsement: the live events coalition and Save Our Stages both signed off on the bill. MassCreative has made the case that this is the bill the cultural sector is behind and as the bill was drafted the team tried to make something that that folks could see themselves benefitting from. MassCreative has heard a few rumblings that the bill is not enough, but is making the case that all will be heard from and that Mass Cultural Council is the best agency to distribute the funds.

Troy asked where Emily had heard that this bill may not be enough.

Emily responded that she'd had a conversation with leaders on the Cape who felt they weren't getting prioritized. Also, some of the larger organizations in Boston wanted to see specific carve-outs for themselves. There is also concern amongst BIPOC leaders that this bill will have large organizations getting large grants and equity not being taken into account. Emily reiterated that MassCreative's job is to hold together as large a coalition as possible, and that on occasions she's told those she's speaking with, "that sounds like something you should talk to Mass Cultural Council about."

Bethann stated that she thinks this might be one of the most comprehensive cultural sector proposals she has seen. It talks about jobs, equity, racial equity, geographic equity; she doesn't think in the past those things would have been included so strongly and this signifies a change of direction based on Michael's vision and the Council's backing.

Troy asked if there are other sectors that have similar proposals for the federal money; are there any requests for earmarks? He is curious if our approach is similar to what other sectors are doing. Bethann did a quick scan and sees similar requests from small businesses, restaurants, and seasonal workers, but has not read the requests in detail and couldn't state with full confidence where they are requesting funds from. Mass Cultural Council isn't requesting funds from the rainy-day fund or from state taxes, the Agency's message focuses on federal money coming into the state.

Michael noted that he wasn't sure how much federal money there would be and Emily responded that it's about \$8.4 billion with the states getting a little more than local government. Right now, the bill is with the Senate and democrats added language stating that eligibility prioritizes local economic recovery efforts including the hardest hit sectors. We are poised to say that the cultural sector is one of the hardest hit.

Troy asked what else staff needed in order to prepare for the budget hearing and Michael thanked Troy and the Committee for their points and ideas and he thinks staff is well-prepared to draft testimony. Bethann agreed and stated that she would draft testimony for a \$20M request for the Agency.

David noted that it still needed to be determined what the Agency would ask the Governor for in terms of the \$31M from Economic Development bond bill in the Governor's capital plan. Michael stated that he, Nina, and Marc are scheduled to meet with Governor Baker on March 24th.

Bethann reminded the Committee that there are four areas of interest in the economic bond bill: first, a commission chaired the Joint Committee on Tourism, Arts, and Cultural Development to look at the impact of the sector - we have a seat, so does MassCreative. Second, three new capital spending accounts. The first account is broad: a new grant program administered by Mass Cultural Council to promote artists of all disciplines and cultural organizations to make sure they can showcase their work remotely, that is a \$6M account. The second account is a competitive grant program administered by Mass Cultural Council in consultation with the state Department of elementary and Secondary Education to assist public school districts in providing access to cultural experiences, this is a \$5M account. The third account would create a non-profit equipment grant program; capital grants to help cultural organizations do what they need to do to reopen, that is a \$20M account. There is a conversation to be had around all of this.

Michael let the Committee know that staff would come back to them with thoughts on the bond bill and seek their opinions on strategy around it.

Troy as Chair adjourned the meeting at 11:41am.