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Power of culture

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

**MINUTES OF THE ONE HUNDRED-SIXTY FIFTH MEETING
OF
MASS CULTURAL COUNCIL**

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2025

ONLINE MEETING

Council Members Present were

Marc Carroll, Chair
Jo-Ann Davis, Vice Chair
Ché Anderson
Rhonda Anderson
Simone Early
Cecil Barron Jensen
Diane Asadorian Masters
Anika Lopes
Ashley Occhino
Petrina Martin
Ellice Patterson
Mark Snyder
Julie Wake

Also Present were Mass Cultural Council Staff Members Michael J. Bobbitt, David Slatery, Catherine Cheng-Anderson, Jen Lawless, Bethann Steiner, Ann Petruccelli Moon, Christian Kelly, Carmen Plazas, Erik Holmgren, Summer Confuorto, Dan Blask, and Carolyn Cole; Town of Franklin Director of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy Cory Shea.

Chair Marc Carroll called the meeting to order at 10:08AM and asked Deputy Executive Director David Slatery to read the Open Meeting Law statement.

After David read the statement, the Chair welcomed Council Members, staff, and guests to the meeting. He then invited the meeting's guest speaker, Town of Franklin Director of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy Cory Shea, to give her presentation. Cory. The Town of Franklin recently received state approval to use a portion of its opioid settlement funds to pilot an arts prescriptions program. Cory spoke about why this work was chosen, what went into getting the funds in place, and what the potential is.

Prepared on 3/31/25

Following the presentation, Ashley Occhino asked Cory if there is an arts and culture plan the town is following. Cory hopes to have a master plan for arts and culture within the next two years; right now, she is “flying the plane while she builds it” and gathering feedback from the community on what an arts and culture plan should look like. Cecil Barron Jensen asked how Cory will measure the success of the arts prescriptions program. Cory explained that Art Pharmacy has a method for measuring the impact of the work.

The Chair thanked Cory for her presentation and the work she is doing in Franklin. He noted that on March 5th there is a community discussion about arts prescriptions in Franklin that Michael and Manager of Strategic Partnerships & Advancement Erik Holmgren will participate in. Cory will share a link to more information about the event.

The Chair then asked Council Members if they had reviewed the minutes of the 164th Council Meeting included in their meeting materials and if they had, he would look for a motion to approve them. Mark Snyder moved to approve the minutes and Anika Lopes seconded the motion. By roll call vote, noting that Iván Espinoza-Madrigal, Secretary Yvonne Hao, David Kong, Emily Bramhall, and Donna Haghightat were absent, it was

RESOLVED: to approve the minutes of the November 13, 2024 Council Meeting in the form presented.

The Chair then gave his report. He shared that he was in Lowell at the Merrimack Repertory Theatre for the recent Cultural Districts Investment Grants celebration. He thanked Senior Director of Public Affairs Bethann Steiner and Public Relations & Events Manager Christian Kelly for organizing the event and Merrimack Repertory Theatre Executive Director Courtney Sale for hosting. The event was well attended, and everyone was incredibly appreciative of the Agency's support.

The Chair asked Council Members to mark their calendars for April 30th—Creative Sector Day at the Massachusetts State House. He then asked Bethann to share more information about the day. Bethann shared that this is the largest advocacy day for the sector on Beacon Hill, and Mass Cultural Council is a key partner alongside MASSCreative, Mass Humanities, MAPC, MassArt, and many others. Last year, the event coincided with the Governor's H2 budget filing, where she announced an increase in the Agency's funding. The day features a two-hour formal program in the Great Hall, followed by attendees engaging with legislators throughout the State House. Expect performances and artistic displays on the Grand Staircase, and a vibrant celebration of the creative community. It's a remarkable opportunity to showcase how engaged and essential the work of the creative community is. If Council Members would like help connecting with their legislators, Bethann is happy to assist. Also, the Cultural Policy Development Advisory Council is targeting April 30th to present recommendations to the Healey-Driscoll Administration.

The Chair continued his report sharing that yesterday, the Executive Committee met to discuss Executive Director Michael Bobbitt's compensation. A clarification issue came up during the meeting, but there was not enough time to resolve it before today's meeting. The Executive Committee has requested the necessary information to make the clarification, and as soon as they have it, will reschedule the discussion for another meeting.

The Chair asked Council Member Julie Wake, who also serves on the Cultural Policy Development Advisory Council (CPDAC), for an update on the work of the CPDAC. Julie shared that the CPDAC met for the second time in Amherst at the Yiddish Book Center on January 22. The members of the CPDAC had previously been divided into four focus areas: workforce, education, and talent; infrastructure for cultural spaces; economic impact; and community support. The four groups each worked together to develop four policy recommendations per area. The leaders of each group presented their findings at the gathering in January, sparking a great discussion. The recommendations were then evaluated and prioritized. A team from the Secretary of Economic Development's office will now review and refine these priorities before sending them back to the group for further consideration. Michael sent a letter to Secretary Hao's office outlining Mass Cultural Council's priorities. Julie believes Mass Cultural Council should take the lead in driving these efforts once the recommendations are determined.

The Chair then asked Michael Bobbitt for his Executive Director's report.

Michael began by sharing that on February 3 Mass Cultural Council was thrilled to join the Governor and Lieutenant Governor at the State House for the announcement and signing of an Executive Order establishing a Massachusetts state Poet Laureate. Michael will serve as Chair of a Nominating Committee which will make recommendations to the Governor on applicants for the position. Recommendations for that Nominating Committee have been shared with the Appointees office. Council Members will hear more about the plans and timeline for the Poet Laureate during the Program Operations update later in the meeting.

The annual budget-building process has commenced. Bethann and Michael were at the State House yesterday and had a very positive meeting with Senate Ways & Means Chairman Michael Rodrigues– more meetings are scheduled for the coming weeks. Bethann will share full details on the budget in her Public Affairs and Legislative update.

Other recent meetings have included a conversation regarding the Live Theater Tax Credit with our colleagues at MOTT and a very positive meeting with the Department of Conservation & Recreation (DCR) where we discussed the Historical Curatorship program and other potential collaborations. Later today Dave and Michael are excited to meet with Navjeet Bal the new President & CEO of MassDevelopment.

Michael visited the New Bedford Art Museum late last week and will visit the Harvard Art Museums this coming Friday. Earlier this week he attended a meeting of the Berkshires Arts & Cultural Alliance held at the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge. This is a group of 10 large cultural organizations in the Berkshires. The meeting yesterday went very well. It helped by starting off with the results of the asset inventory map. The group was blown away by the intel and shocked by the growth of applicants that Mass Cultural Council has seen. The conversation morphed into the need for the gathered organizations and arts organizations in general to operationalize advocacy – now more than ever – and to expand BACA to include all of the Berkshires arts organizations, for profits, and generators.

Michael recently posted a message to the field on the Agency's blog. The post clarified this year's grantmaking and reaffirmed our commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and access in light of ongoing changes and developments within the federal

government. Michael is planning to post one to two times each month moving forward and believes the focus of his next post will be exactly what he discussed with the Berkshires group – the need for operationalized advocacy, engagement, and a unified voice and strong presence from the cultural sector in any and all rooms.

Deputy Chief of Staff Ann Petruccelli Moon will send Council Members the full list of scheduled meetings and events for March in the coming days, but looking ahead at next week, Michael along the Advancement team are heading to Dennis for a tour of the Cape Cod Center for the Arts and a discussion on the possible future establishment of a Cultural District in Dennis. Michael is excited that Julie Wake will be part of this visit.

The Advancement Team has been focused on building the infrastructure for the new Advancement work at the Agency. Before drafting initial plans to define, communicate, implement, and evaluate this work, each program team was consulted to understand their vision of success, their unique collective assets, and their needs.

CivicMoxie was hired as the consultant to lead the redesign of the Cultural Districts Initiative. Fifty-five Cultural Districts have been surveyed, there have been 10 Partner Interviews, staff Interviews, seven focus groups, and a dynamic Statewide Cross-Sector Task Force representing 24+ state agencies, quasi-governmental offices, and nonprofit entities. Staff is getting together internally to start to look at the framework that has been proposed by CivicMoxie.

Arts Prescription Partnerships are growing:

- 430 Organizations in network, 401 prescriptions written, 77% attendance rate, and 126 arts organizations referred
- United Health Care national corporate office is supporting expansion
- Two dual eligible Medicare/Medicaid plans have incorporated social prescription into their 2025 plans
- Opioid Recovery funds in use in Franklin Massachusetts as you heard earlier.
- Department of Public Health program in Springfield targeting seniors of color is under development
- Dana Farber Center for Integrative Medicine is in talks with Art Pharmacy

Michael then shared some new data on the Impact of Social Prescription from Canada --- A savings of \$4.43 is achieved for every dollar invested in social prescribing.

Additionally, estimated savings include:

- \$296M savings in annual costs from reduced hospital admissions and emergency visits
- \$114M in annual cost savings from reduced primary care visits
- \$59.9M annual increase in employment income for youth with depressive symptoms
- 16,900 fewer cases of coronary artery disease
- 2,000 fewer cases of avoidable deaths.

He then gave a brief Equity progress report noting that a full report is included in Council Members' meeting materials.

- Staff is finalizing scopes of work for both the Native American and Indigenous Peoples Advisory Committee and the d/Deaf & Disability Advisory Committee. Invitations will go out to potential members in the coming weeks.

- Public Affairs continues its successful media partnership with *El Planeta* to ensure proactive external communications and outreach to Spanish speaking potential grantees, promoting both our funding opportunities and the investments made in this community by the Agency.
- In December the Agency hosted a Spotlight Series webinar for members of the creative and cultural sector with Open Door Arts to promote their Arts & Culture Accessibility Self-Assessment tool
- The Herring Pond Wampanoag Tribal Cultural Council announced their inaugural grant cycle with 8 grantees and plans for their own council programming
- This spring all staff will take part in an Anti-Ableist training as part of our continued internal learning.

When Michael finished Ellice Patterson shared that she attended a meeting with Michael at Converse last month and wondered if there was any follow-up from that conversation. Michael shared that this was a meeting with partners on the Agency's Cultural Asset Inventory project and that there was no follow up just yet.

Mark Snyder noted Michael's mention of the Agency's outreach to Spanish-speaking media and asked if there were efforts being made to reach other outlets given that there are 38 languages spoken in Massachusetts.

Bethann thanked Mark for his question and shared that as a state agency, Mass Cultural Council is legally required to make materials available in any language requested by a constituent. To ensure accessibility, the Agency has a translation service in place. Anytime a new program or application is announced, Mass Cultural Council prominently includes instructions on how to request translations. The Public Affairs team has partnered with *El Planeta*—now in our second year of collaboration—which has been highly engaged with our work. They've also explored partnerships with other targeted media outlets, though nothing has been finalized yet. A few years ago, the Agency received an earmark to create a program for AAPI cultural organizations, during which we ensured materials were available in multiple languages online. The Agency continues to work hard to meet people where they are through our external communications, whether in writing, audio, or translated formats. For info sessions, the Agency provides American Sign Language and Spanish interpretation. While we don't receive frequent translation requests, we are always prepared to respond when needed.

There were no further questions pertaining to Michael's Executive Director's report. The Chair asked Bethann to give her Public Affairs and Legislative report.

Bethann shared that we are in the early days of the legislative session, with the House and Senate working on rules. Committees can't be named until the rules are finalized, so we're waiting to see who will chair the Committee on Tourism, Arts, and Cultural Development. The Governor's budget was released in January, and Mass Cultural Council requested \$28 million—level with last year's ask. While last year's funding fell slightly short, we made progress, and if approved, this would be the highest amount we've ever received. That said, this will be a different kind of budget year given the state of the economy, federal government dynamics, and the legislature's cautious

approach. H1 was favorable, providing slightly over level funding—\$150K more than the current budget, bringing the total to \$26,045,152.

Michael and Bethann had the opportunity to meet with Senate Ways & Means Chair Michael Rodrigues, who was supportive but offered some caveats about the budget process. The Senate is expected to begin debates in May. We continue to stay in close communication with the House Ways and Means Committee and our usual legislative partners. A budget hearing is anticipated in March (date TBD), followed by House action in April.

On the legislative front, we're working on two key bills. The first, working with Senator Paul Mark, aims to amend the Cultural Facilities Fund statute which currently states that municipal facilities must be a certain number of years old and a certain size to be eligible for funding. This is a barrier to many facilities; the bill will seek to change that language. On the House side, there's an ongoing conversation about making a clear statement in support of STEM to STEAM. The proposal involves a technical correction to state statutes—updating three instances where "STEM" is referenced to instead say "STEAM." This change doesn't require funding but serves as an important symbolic step that could pave the way for more impactful conversations about the cultural sector.

The Agency is also gearing up for the launch of the Cultural Asset Inventory during the week of March 10 and there are several events at the State House this spring:

- **April 15:** celebration of the 20th anniversary of Poetry Out Loud
- **April 30:** Creative Sector Day
- **May 19:** Celebration for Grants for Creative Individuals recipients

There were no questions for Bethann. The Chair asked David to give the Business Operations report.

David explained that he was giving the report on behalf of Senior Director of Business Operations and Chief Financial Officer Catherine Cheng-Anderson who is on vacation. Seven months into the fiscal year, the Agency is on track with its spending. We are aware of developments at the federal level, particularly regarding funding from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Mass Cultural Council receives \$1.2 million from the NEA and had been waiting for the final \$400K. That funding has now arrived, meaning all expected FY25 funds are accounted for. However, next year remains an open question for everyone. Dave and Catherine and the Fiscal team have been working on a follow-up audit from the State Auditor's Office. As some members may recall, the State Auditor formally audited the Council in 2021, the first in over a decade. This new audit follows up on that process, though the exact scope has yet to be determined. Jen recently provided a walkthrough of the Grants Management System to the auditors. It has been an informative process, helping us refine procedures and ensure compliance. Overall, the audit has been routine. Finally, a rigorous cybersecurity program has been implemented, which the entire staff has now completed, further strengthening our operational resilience.

The Chair asked when the audit would be complete and Dave explained that staff do not, at this point, know what the timing will be, but it will be likely over the course of the next few months.

Julie Wake asked what the NEA funds typically go to. Dave explained that historically,

aside from federal funds specifically allocated to Poetry Out Loud and Traditional Arts, our federal funding has been used to supplement our regular grant programs. In the past, the Agency has allocated these funds to organizational support programs and creative youth development grants to organizations. Because federal money comes with specific requirements, we've aimed to distribute it to larger organizations that are better equipped to comply with the additional audit and reporting obligations that come with federal funds. While it's challenging to predict what the future of federal funds will be, we're all participating in webinars discussing NEA funding, but right now, there are still a lot of unanswered questions.

There were no further questions for Dave. The Chair asked Senior Director of Program Operations Jen Lawless for her report.

Jen noted that in the materials, members will find a wealth of information from the Programs Team. After today's meeting, we will have officially concluded our FY25 grantmaking. The Cultural Facilities Fund is finalizing its review via MassDevelopment's Cultural Facilities Fund Advisory Committee and that program will soon announce awards in May. Meanwhile, the Fiscal Team is working hard to process payments for grantees. The application for Operating Grants for Organizations for FY26 has opened with the goal of presenting a final funding list at the August Council Meeting, once we have clarity on our spending plan and allocations.

Next week, the new Creative Experiences Program opens, combining STARS Residencies and Festivals & Projects programs. This is a one-year, project-based funding opportunity with broad eligibility. Applicants can request either \$2,500 or \$5,000 in support. Council Members will receive more details when the program officially launches next week.

Jen then gave a brief update on the new Poet Laureate Program. The staff has worked closely with the Governor's Office—following the Executive Order—alongside Mass Humanities, and moved quickly to design the program. The initiative includes an honorarium recognizing achievement, with most guidelines set by the Executive Order. The Agency's priority was to create a simple, effective application process that encourages participation. The Poet Laureate Program gained momentum quickly, and Jen is happy to address any questions later in her update.

Then she asked Dan to give his presentation on Grants for Creative Individuals.

Dan said that he is pleased to join today's meeting. He is joined by Program Officer Summer Confuorto and they work alongside Program Officer Kelly Bennett to administer Grants for Creative Individuals which are \$5,000 grants for artists and cultural bearers across various artistic disciplines. Dan acknowledged the leadership at Mass Cultural Council and the Council Members' support for the program, as well as their commitment to increasing funding for artists. Dan explained that this year, the Agency is recommending awarding 447 grants of \$5,000 each. At the Programs Committee Meeting, the team presented 435 grants, as Jen mentioned. As we neared the end of the fiscal year, we were able to allocate unspent funds from other programs to add to Grants for Creative Individuals, allowing us to support even more artists. Dan then shared his screen to showcase some of the incredible work from the artists the team is recommending for funding this year. The goal of the presentation was to highlight the richness and diversity of creative expression among the proposed grantees and to celebrate work that is distinctly Massachusetts.

Chair Marc Carroll and Vice Chair Jo-Ann Davis both expressed their gratitude to Dan and his team for the presentation remarking that seeing the work made them feel proud and that it helped contextualize the vote the Council would take later in the meeting. There were no further comments or questions. The Chair asked Programs Committee Chair Cecil Barron Jensen for her report from the Committee's recent meeting.

Cecil began by taking a moment to thank Jen, Dan, and Summer for their presentation noting that it truly makes the Council feel encouraged as they prepare to review the recommendations from the Programs Committee. Cecil brought Council Members' attention to the report included in their meeting materials as it provides an excellent overview of the presentation the Committee received. She highlighted the consolidation update—noting that Council Members will see the immense amount of work that has gone into streamlining the Agency's grant programs, reducing 18 funded programs in FY21 to 11 in FY25. This reflects a strategic, deliberate effort to make our programs more impactful across the Commonwealth. The Programs Committee recommends to the Council funding for the Gaming Mitigation Program, Grants for Creative Individuals, Cultural Investment Portfolio/Operating Grants for Organizations, and the new Poet Laureate Program with full endorsement. Mark Snyder moved to approve the recommended grants; Diane Asadorian Masters seconded the motion. By roll call vote and noting that Iván Espinoza-Madrigal, Secretary Yvonne Hao, David Kong, Emily Bramhall, and Donna Haghighat were absent it was unanimously

RESOLVED: To approve the Gaming Mitigation Fund grants as presented at the Council Meeting.

RESOLVED: To approve the final list of Operating Grants for Organizations as described in the memo provided at the Council Meeting.

RESOLVED: To approve the Grants for Creative Individuals as described and presented at the Council Meeting.

RESOLVED: To authorize up to \$15,000 of any grants previously approved this fiscal year but which funds were returned or cancelled and any other funds made available by any other party (and, to the extent such funds are insufficient, funds from Mass Cultural Council's general appropriation) to provide a grant to the Massachusetts Poet Laureate as chosen under Commonwealth of Massachusetts Executive Order 640 as described in the memo presented to the Council meeting

The following Council Members abstained from voting and/or discussing grants pertaining to the organizations listed under their name:

Marc Carroll
 a. Boston Youth Symphony Orchestra
 b. The Rivers School

Jo-Ann Davis
 a. The Care Center
 b. Springfield Museums
 c. MASSCreative

Cecil Barron Jensen

- a. Artists Association of Nantucket
- b. Egan Maritime Institute
- c. Nantucket Cultural District

Che Anderson

- a. Worcester County Mechanics Association (Mechanics Hall)
- b. Worcester Historical Museum
- c. Worcester Art Museum
- d. Institute of Contemporary Art

Donna Haghighat

- a. WAM Theater

Julie Wake

- a. Arts Foundation of Cape Cod

Rhonda Anderson

- a. Ohketeau Cultural Center
- b. New England Foundation for the Arts
- c. Mass Humanities

Ellice Patterson

- a. Abilities Dance

Ashley Occhino

- a. Fall River Arts and Culture Coalition/One South Coast Community Foundation
- b. Southeastern Massachusetts Visitors Bureau
- c. SouthCoast Community Foundation
- d. Society of Arts and Crafts

There were no further comments or questions and the Chair adjourned the meeting at 11:35am.