



Power of culture

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

MINUTES OF THE MEETING

MASS CULTURAL COUNCIL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 16, 2025

ONLINE MEETING

Committee Members Present were

Marc Carroll, Chair
Jo-Ann Davis, Vice Chair
Ché Anderson
Julie Wake

Staff Members Present were

Michael J. Bobbitt, Executive Director
David Slatery, Deputy Executive Director
Catherine Cheng-Anderson, Senior Director of Business Operations & Chief Financial Officer
Christian Kelly, Public Relations & Events Manager
Ann Petruccelli Moon, Deputy Chief of Staff

Chair Marc Carroll called the meeting to order at 10:10am and asked Deputy Executive Director David Slatery to read the Open Meeting Law statement. He then asked if Committee Members had reviewed the minutes of their February 12 meeting and if they had he would entertain a motion and a second to approve them. Ché Anderson moved to approve the minutes; Julie Wake seconded the motion. By roll call vote and noting that Cecil Barron Jensen, Simone Early, and Iván Espinoza-Madrigal were absent it was unanimously

RESOLVED: the Executive Committee approves the minutes of the February 12, 2025 Executive Committee Meeting in the form presented.

The Chair then asked Committee Members if they'd reviewed the minutes of the open session of their February 25 Special Meeting and if they had he would entertain a motion and a second to approve those minutes as well. Ché Anderson moved to approve the

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minutes; Julie Wake seconded the motion. By roll call vote and noting that Cecil Barron Jensen, Simone Early, and Iván Espinoza-Madrigal were absent it was unanimously

RESOLVED: the Executive Committee approves the Open Session minutes of the February 25, 2025 Executive Committee Meeting in the form presented.

The Chair noted that there were two successful public events earlier this week: a grant celebration for Gaming Mitigation grant recipients at the Guthrie Center in Great Barrington on Monday and a celebration of the 20th anniversary of Poetry Out Loud at the State House yesterday. He then asked Michael for an update on the work of the Governor's Cultural Policy Development Advisory Council.

Michael shared that the work of the Cultural Policy Development Advisory Council was nearing completion. The full Council met earlier this year to pare down the recommendations made by the four working groups. The Executive Office of Economic Development is now working to pull the final recommendations together into a report that will be presented to the Governor at Creative Sector Day on April 30 – Council Members are encouraged to attend this event. Michael is excited that beyond the final set of recommendations, the work of the Council has yielded many other policy ideas that could be explored. Julie Wake, who is a member of the Cultural Policy Development Advisory Council, agreed that a pipeline of ideas has been created through the work of the Council and that even the recommendations that don't make the final report provide new strategies for the cultural sector across Massachusetts.

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

Michael reiterated that Creative Sector Advocacy Day on April 30 is an important day for the sector. It is virtually sold out. Michael met with MASSCreative Executive Director Emily Ruddock earlier and she shared that she is exploring how to increase room capacity. Michael saw Lieutenant Governor Kim Driscoll recently and she has suggested acrobatic performers for the event.

This moment feels like the beginning of real momentum in the Agency's advancement work and the right time to think about how we encourage organizations to operationalize advocacy year-round and how we help funders understand and support advocacy infrastructure. Michael has a monthly meeting with major arts service organizations (Mass Humanities, NEFA, NEMA, etc.), and we're beginning to explore coordinated action. This includes responding to challenges at the federal level—the group is considering hosting town halls with our congressional delegation. Despite the broader policy turbulence, it's a powerful time to step up our efforts.

The Agency hired Arts Consulting Group (ACG) to survey federal and national fundraising opportunities. It was a deep dive. Their recommendation: don't hire a fundraiser right now, due to instability at the federal level. Michael noted that other state agencies do employ fundraisers, but the data didn't support it for Mass Cultural Council at this time so the Agency's Advancement team will continue to lead that work.

The staff has commenced planning for the next fiscal year. They've been asked to keep budgets flat as no increase in funding is expected. Michael will present a proposed extension of the Agency's Strategic Plan and Racial Equity Plan at the August Council

Meeting; he has a list of items he'd like to include and will begin drafting that framework soon.

Advancement work is gaining traction. Manager of Strategic Partnerships & Advancement Erik Holmgren and Special Projects Manager for Advancement Carolyn Cole are building out the foundation strategy as part of each staff team's annual planning. Strong partnerships continue to emerge within the Agency's arts based social prescription work.

Secretary of Economic Development Yvonne Hao is stepping down; Ashley Stolba will be the Interim Secretary of Economic Development. Secretary Hao was appointed to the Agency's Governing Council as a private citizen from Western Massachusetts but engaged with Mass Cultural Council in her capacity as Secretary. We hope to clarify the next steps with her seat on the Council soon.

Finally, 123 individuals have applied to be Massachusetts' first-ever Poet Laureate. That pool will be narrowed down to 15 to 25 individuals for the Nominating Committee to consider; and two will be recommended to the Governor who will make the final selection and name the Poet Laureate. Michael has suggested that the Governor also name a group of posthumous Poet Laureates.

The Chair asked Michael to send the final fundraising report from Arts Consulting Group with the Council and asked a follow-up question pertaining to their recommendations: was the recommendation against hiring a new staff member to focus on fundraising due to the uncertainty within the federal government? If things were more stable, might they have recommended the Agency hire a full-time fundraiser? Michael explained that the recommendation is largely due to the uncertainty within the federal government but that there was also little evidence that there were funds that could come to the Agency for redistribution; it is easier for organizations to apply directly.

Vice Chair Jo-Ann Davis asked Michael for an update on the status of the audit of Mass Cultural Council. Senior Director of Business Operations & Chief Financial Officer Catherine Cheng-Anderson shared that the Agency is still providing documents to the auditors and there is no update on the timing or next steps yet.

The Chair asked Senior Director of Public Affairs Bethann Steiner for her Public Affairs and Legislative update.

Bethann began by thanking the Council for attending and supporting the Agency's recent events. It has been a busy stretch with many events taking place in recent weeks and many more on the way. As the Chair mentioned there was a celebration in Great Barrington of FY25 Gaming Mitigation Fund grants. It was a beautiful ceremony at the Guthrie Center, with 32 participants, including Senator Paul Mark, Chair Jordan Maynard of the Gaming Commission, and Vice Chair Jo-Ann Davis. Media coverage is anticipated. Yesterday at the State House the 20th anniversary of Poetry Out Loud (PoL)—a national program funded by the NEA and administered in each state—was celebrated. April is National Poetry Month, so it was the perfect moment for a celebration. Mass Cultural Council co-hosted the event with The Huntington Theatre's Education Department and had a lovely gathering of around 50 people, including current and past Poetry Out Loud champions, student mentors, and guests from across the Commonwealth. Bethann thanked Council Members Julie Wake and Diane

Asadorian Masters for attending. We were thrilled to see the Lieutenant Governor in the front row, along with House Chair of the Committee on Tourism, Arts, and Cultural Development Sean Garballey, Vice Chair Steven Owens, and many legislative staff members. It was a powerful celebration of student creativity and civic pride.

Bethann encouraged Committee Members to let her know if they plan to attend the next event at the State House: Creative Sector Day on April 30.

Today the House Committee on Ways and Means will release its budget proposal. Bethann has a meeting with the Chairman Garballey this afternoon and will send an update later today. The Agency's budget request is \$28 million, plus \$15,000 for the Poet Laureate. For context, level funding would be \$25.9 million. 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.

Julie Wake shared that there are plans for a Cape Cod celebration after Creative Sector Advocacy Day. She then asked if there are specific policy requests the Agency would like Council Members to talk to their local legislators about. Bethann advised that this will become much clearer after the budget is released later today.

The Chair then asked David and Catherine for an update on the Agency's office space lease.

Catherine reported that she and David have been working closely with the Division of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance (DCAMM) to renegotiate the Agency's office lease, which is set to expire in January 2026; they have been meeting with DCAMM biweekly. DCAMM is leading the lease negotiations on Mass Cultural Council's behalf to ensure compliance with state regulations, secure favorable terms, and oversee the appropriate use of public funds for real estate under the Administration. Based on DCAMM's market analysis and real estate portfolio strategy, they have recommended that Mass Cultural Council pursue a five-year lease renewal at its current office location. In short, DCAMM does not believe the Agency would secure a better deal elsewhere. DCAMM's data—derived from statewide RFP responses—shows that market rates for comparable office space in the area have risen significantly, now averaging around \$80 per square foot.

Catherine further reported that while a lease renewal would result in an estimated \$120,000 in increased costs to remain in the current location, it would allow the Agency to avoid more than \$200,000 in one-time expenses associated with relocation. These include extensive construction costs for a new space, physical moving expenses, IT infrastructure transitions, and resulting impacts on staff productivity and operations. She emphasized that committing to a renewal now can help avoid both escalating rent and the financial and operational burden of relocation. She noted that while any increase in lease costs will require careful budgeting, she is committed to managing these changes

responsibly. However, given DCAMM's guidance and broader market conditions, she believes that securing a five-year renewal at this time represents the most fiscally prudent course of action. It would allow the Agency to maintain operational stability and avoid significant one-time costs, especially at a time when future state budget allocations may be uncertain due to changes in federal funding. Catherine will continue to keep the Council informed as lease negotiations progress.

David added that 10 years ago, when the current lease was negotiated, the building where the Agency's offices are located was owned by Liberty Mutual. It has since been sold to an investor from Japan. Catherine has worked hard to negotiate the terms she mentioned and while nothing is final just yet, the team wanted to provide the Committee with an update.

The Chair asked Catherine if the estimated \$120,000 increase is annual, and she confirmed that it is. The Chair asked Catherine about the decision to pursue a five-year lease instead of a ten-year lease and she explained that a ten-year lease is not an option at this time with the Agency's current office space and if the Agency were to go out to market with an RFP the increase would be greater. She added that the current lease procured by David 10 years ago is extremely low in terms of cost per square foot. The Chair asked why the cost was so high even considering high office vacancy rates; the DCAMM staff had shared with David and Catherine that the real estate market exploded in the late teens and has remained expensive despite the office vacancies in the wake of the pandemic.

The Vice Chair asked if there is any reason why the Agency's offices need to be in Boston especially given that the staff is hybrid and not in the office full-time. Michael explained that with policy work being a top priority, it is important to have proximity to the State House and to be able to attend meetings with leaders in other sectors important to the Agency's advancement work – most of whom are based in Boston. David and Jen Lawless added that Boston is the center of the spoke of public transportation and being in that hub is important for staff who need to commute to the office.

The Chair asked if the team had considered downsizing the office space since the staff is hybrid and not in the office all together every day. Catherine explained that DCAMM had done an analysis of this and determined that the current space is appropriate for the size of the staff. David added that when the lease was negotiated 10 years ago, the Agency had a staff of 24; the Agency now has a staff of 39.

The Chair moved on to the final agenda item: reviewing and approving the draft agenda for the Special Council Meeting scheduled for April 22. The Chair anticipates a brief meeting with the primary focus being to vote on Executive Director Michael Bobbitt's compensation. David explained that since it is anticipated the Committee will soon enter a closed executive session and discuss the agenda, the vote can be taken now, but the Chair should fully confirm with David after the session that the Committee has reached a consensus on the agenda so the appropriate version can be posted. The Chair asked for a motion and a second to approve the agenda. Ché moved to approve the agenda; Julie seconded the motion. By roll call vote and noting that Cecil Barron Jensen, Simone Early, and Iván Espinoza-Madriral were absent it was unanimously

RESOLVED: that the Executive Committee approves the draft agenda for the April 22, 2025 Special Meeting of Mass Cultural Council in the form presented.

The Chair then stated that in accordance with Massachusetts Open Meeting Law, he is hereby requesting that the Executive Committee go into executive session for the purposes of conducting strategy sessions in preparation for negotiations with nonunion personnel- specifically to review and make a recommendation to the full Council at its next meeting on compensation for Executive Director Michael Bobbitt which the full Council must approve per the terms of the Agency's enabling act.

- He asked that only members of the Executive Committee remain in the meeting for this executive session and the YouTube broadcast of this meeting be suspended at the start of the executive session.
- Discussion in the executive session will be limited to the matters for which the executive session is called.
- Minutes will be kept of the executive session but will not be publicly released until after the negotiations have been concluded.
- Members must vote by roll call vote to enter an executive session and must affirm that no other person is present or able to hear the discussion at their remote location.
- We will not reconvene in the open session but will adjourn at the conclusion of the executive session

He then called for a motion and a second to enter the executive session. Julie moved to enter the executive session and Ché seconded the motion. By roll call vote and noting that Cecil Barron Jensen, Simone Early, and Iván Espinoza-Madrigal were absent it was unanimously

RESOLVED: that the Executive Committee of Mass Cultural Council enter into executive session for purposes of discussing compensation for Executive Director Michael Bobbitt and making a recommendation to the full Council and that each member voting on this resolution affirms that no other person will be present or able to hear the discussion at such member's remote location and that the Committee will adjourn at the conclusion of the executive session.

The executive session began at 10:57am, staff departed the meeting, and the YouTube broadcast of the meeting ended.