



Power of culture

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

MINUTES OF THE MEETING

MASS CULTURAL COUNCIL ADVANCEMENT COMMITTEE

THURSDAY, MAY 15, 2025

ONLINE MEETING

Committee Members Present were

Iván Espinoza-Madrigal, Co-Chair
Diane Asadorian Masters
Rhonda Anderson
Anika Lopes
Petrina Martin
Marc Carroll – ex officio
Jo-Ann Davis – ex officio

Staff Members Present were

Michael J. Bobbitt, Executive Director
David Slatery, Deputy Executive Director
Jen Lawless, Senior Director of Program Operations
Bethann Steiner, Senior Director of Public Affairs
Erik Holmgren, Manager of Strategic Partnerships & Advancement
Christian Kelly, Public Relations & Events Manager
Ann Petruccelli Moon, Deputy Chief of Staff

Co-Chair Iván Espinoza-Madrigal called the meeting to order at 1:02pm and asked Deputy Executive Director David Slatery to read the Open Meeting Law statement.

Iván asked Committee Members if they'd reviewed the minutes from their last meeting held on February 5, 2025. If they had, he would look for a motion and a second to approve those minutes. Diane Asadorian Masters moved to approve the minutes; Anika Lopes seconded the motion. By roll call vote and noting that Committee Co-Chair Ché Anderson and Committee Members Petrina Martin, Allyce Najimy, and David Sun Kong were absent, and Rhonda Anderson abstained it was unanimously

RESOLVED to approve the minutes of the February 5, 2025, Advancement Committee Meeting in the form presented.

Committee Member Petrina Martin joined the meeting a short time after the vote was taken.

Iván then gave his Co-Chair's report stating that one encouraging development, even in the current climate, is the continued momentum around cross-sector collaboration in Massachusetts—with Mass Cultural Council remaining front and center in many of these partnerships. Arts and culture continue to be prominent in public discourse, often as areas of tension, but also as vital points of connection. As reflected in the minutes from our last meeting, it's great to see several introductions made to potential new partners. The Advancement Committee is working to connect Executive Director Michael Bobbitt with new allies to ensure this momentum continues. Michael had previously joined Iván for a conversation with Bain Capital. There is a strong interest in reconvening and exploring further opportunities for collaboration and thought partnership. While there's significant uncertainty across the cultural sector, strengthening these partnerships will help offset potential losses in federal support or from those stepping back due to perceived controversy. This remains a key area for collaborative growth. Iván will meet with his Co-Chair, Ché Anderson, next week to continue the conversation around new partners and allies. He then asked Michael for his Executive Director's report.

Michael echoed the Co-Chair's sentiments noting that the Agency's advancement work is more critical than ever. One ongoing concern is the ripple effect seen when the government pulls back—often the cultural sector is quick to feel the impact. That's why partnership work is so essential. The Advancement team has been receiving outreach from individuals outside the sector who are eager to support the work; and they've been busy building a strong foundation to operationalize advancement efforts and collaborating closely with staff teams to identify which leads to pursue. This year is all about refining the Agency's advancement strategy—identifying the right agencies to work with and moving toward “sealing the deal.” Michael is also focused on supporting the staff as they build business development skills and learn how to cultivate and maintain relationships. The Agency now has over 50 leads, and the team is working incredibly hard. One exciting highlight: Mass Cultural Council is partnering with Massport on a pilot busking program at Logan Airport. It will take place at the baggage claim area and is an opportunity to entertain travelers with live performances by Massachusetts artists. Artists will be allowed to accept tips, and there will be a call for artists and a press launch soon. We're also in active discussions with the MBTA and the Convention Center Authority to hopefully spur similar busking initiatives. Our hope is that this inspires other public spaces to open their doors to the arts—busking is a great way to bring creativity into places where people already gather.

Michael also highlighted the work of the Governor's Cultural Policy Development Advisory Council. On April 30, during Creative Sector Day at the State House, the committee presented its recommendations to the Governor. We're excited about the reception and even more excited that colleagues in other states are watching closely—this could become a national model. The report outlines five key recommendations. We expect to continue working with the Governor's office on implementation. A key question we're asking ourselves—and the sector—is: What more can we do to support the cultural ecosystem beyond grant funding? As we know, current funding only

reaches a small portion of the sector. What are we doing for those who don't receive grants?

We've been sharing data from the Cultural Asset Inventory across different fields to help answer that. There's a real opportunity to extend the value the cultural sector brings—not just in terms of beauty and inspiration, but in economic and community impact.

Iván commented that one key takeaway for him from Michael's update is the significant availability of space due to high vacancy rates. This presents an especially compelling opportunity: using these spaces to bring together community-centered initiatives, artists, and cultural organizations. These types of interventions allow for real conversations with developers, brokers, and others who control real estate and shape neighborhoods. Thinking strategically about how to activate these spaces—aligned with the Agency's vision—could yield long-term benefits. As relationships with property stakeholders solidify, these partnerships could remain valuable even if return-to-office trends pick back up and vacancy rates decline. Embedding arts and culture into these environments could be a crucial element moving forward. The connection between arts, health, and wellness is particularly relevant in today's climate, and it's an area this Committee could actively help move forward as projects evolve.

Chair Marc Carroll asked Iván to share more about the conversation with Bain Capital and how a venture capital firm would be able to benefit the Agency's advancement work.

Iván explained that he has been collaborating with Bain on a pro bono project focused on analyzing the economic impact of creating cultural districts. The goal is to use data and analytics to build a strong economic case for how cultural districts can drive local development. This includes research that supports why these initiatives should be backed by government, small businesses, and other stakeholders. The relationship is new and ongoing. As Michael said, the work is about engaging people outside the sector and getting them to see how they can support and promote arts and culture. We're especially focused on reframing culture in terms that resonate with those who may not typically consider its economic value. By connecting arts and culture to return on investment—particularly through activation of vacant spaces—we're working to show why it makes economic sense. The stronger our arguments, the more likely we'll see real estate and business leaders offer access to unused spaces. This effort is still early but has been well received, and building these relationships is key to ensuring Mass Cultural Council and artists are part of future economic development conversations.

Marc asked Manager of Strategic Partnerships & Advancement Erik Holmgren if there are specific issues he is looking at, how he is compiling prospect lists, and if Marc could join Erik for a future meeting.

Erik shared that it's been exactly six months since the Advancement team was formed. The team is thinking about how to evolve our systems; this includes building a new tracking tool for partnerships into the Agency's Grants Management System (GMS), setting up automated notifications, and developing a comprehensive list of out-of-sector collaborators. During his presentation later in the meeting, Erik will highlight a few of the new partnerships the team has already established as well as the fresh opportunities in the pipeline. Erik also thanked Vice Chair Jo-Ann Davis for the introduction to her husband, David Longworth, experienced in healthcare organizations,

at a recent State House event. There is an upcoming meeting between David, Erik, and Art Pharmacy. David is a huge advocate for primary care, so this will be a meaningful connection.

There were no further questions from the Committee. The Co-Chair asked Senior Director of Public Affairs Bethann Steiner for her report.

Bethann shared that Public Affairs is planning a celebration of Grants for Creative Individuals recipients on Monday, May 19 at 1:00 p.m. at the State House. More than 200 people are expected, including the State Treasurer and many legislators. The next celebration will be the final one for FY25: Thursday, June 27 at 10:30 a.m. at ZUMIX in East Boston, where the latest round of Cultural Facilities Fund (CFF) grantees will be celebrated. Council Members are encouraged to attend both events; Bethann noted that Iván has already confirmed his attendance at the CFF event.

She then gave an update on the FY26 budget building process noting what a remarkable moment this is. As Committee Members are aware, there's been serious talk on Beacon Hill about belt-tightening and fiscal uncertainty. The Commonwealth, like every state, received substantial federal funding over the past few years—but the Governor has been clear: we won't have the resources to fully backfill those resources if they are withheld or removed by the current administration. That said, despite the environment, all three versions of the state budget—the Governor, the House, and the Senate—have held steady support for the Mass Cultural Council. The Agency asked for \$28 million. It won't hit that number this year, but the team is very encouraged to be looking at a slight increase over level funding, with the Senate Ways and Means Committee recommending just over \$26 million—the highest operating budget in Mass Cultural Council's history. That's no small thing.

There's strong support in both chambers and we've had excellent advocacy conversations with policymakers, especially during the April 30th Advocacy Day, where we made the case for the value of public investment in the creative sector. Looking ahead, next month the team will continue its tradition of transparency by publishing detailed funding reports by county and legislator. The reports will be online and available before the end of June and will serve as excellent conversation starters with stakeholders.

Mass Cultural Council is collaborating with a strong coalition of partners—including the New England Foundation for the Arts, MassCreative, and national organizations like Americans for the Arts—to stay aligned on what's happening at the federal level. Close attention is being paid to data collection practices and grantees are being encouraged to continue documenting any losses or challenges they face. The pandemic taught staff how critical storytelling and data are when relief funding becomes available. Just yesterday, the Healey-Driscoll Administration launched a new tool to collect sector-wide impact data. It's essential that our sector continues to participate—so if there is future relief, we'll be at the table.

Bethann also shared that last week, she and Chair Marc Carroll joined a roundtable hosted by Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley at the Museum of African American History, with leaders including Boston Mayor Wu and other City of Boston officials. It was a powerful space. The message was clear: hands off our museums, hands off our history. It

was a strong and affirming moment for cultural advocates, and Bethann and Marc also had the chance to share some of the positive steps happening across Massachusetts.

Finally, Bethann shared that the Agency had previously considered hosting a large convening or awards ceremony next year. However, with a level-funded agency budget and a spending plan that avoids major new expenses, staff have decided to pause that plan for now. Michael had a great idea to revisit this as part of our next strategic planning process. Bethann thanked the Committee for their previous feedback on the proposed awards ceremony.

Iván thanked Bethann and underscored a few key points from her presentation. He is excited about the CFF event at Zumix on June 27 and grateful to the Council Members who can attend. He also highlighted the power of storytelling and transparency, particularly in democratizing access to information. He acknowledged the Agency is facing a moment where budgets may be cut, programs rolled back, or organizations may choose to opt out, especially if resources come with strings attached. He wonders if there's a way to meaningfully capture this reality: so many groups have been defunded, and it's critical the Agency documents the impact.

Iván moved to the next and final agenda item: a presentation by Strategic Partnerships & Advancement Manager Erik Holmgren on the Agency's advancement work.

Erik shared a PowerPoint presentation including an update on the work of the Advancement team; a copy of the presentation is available upon request.

During the presentation Diane Asadorian Masters asked Erik about data in a in the presentation which did not have a source and hoped that could be avoided. Erik explained that he is unable to cite the last bullet point referenced as it is proprietary information from a healthcare company, and they've specifically asked that we not share it publicly but he had wanted to share the information with the Committee nonetheless so they could have a sense of the impact. The other data points come from reports produced by the Agency's partner in social prescription work, Art Pharmacy. Erik agreed with Diane noting that, especially in this field, decisions are often driven by data. There have been some early-stage concerns around sharing proprietary patient data, but moving forward, the team will make every effort to provide as much transparent, shareable data as possible.

After the presentation Iván asked Erik if the information included would be available for dissemination in a report in the future. Erik explained that Art Pharmacy has agreements in place with health insurance providers to track and analyze data. He expects to have a comparison of cost savings available in white papers within the next six to 12 months. Art Pharmacy is currently working with their payor partners to determine when and how that data can be disseminated. Due to HIPAA considerations, they need a bit more time before any firm conclusions can be drawn or shared.

Vice Chair Jo-Ann Davis thanked Erik for his presentation and proposed sharing it with the full Council to ensure engagement and encourage the introduction to potential partners. Iván seconded Jo-Ann's suggestion and added the idea of challenging the Council to each make one strong introduction for the staff; Advancement Committee meetings could serve as a rallying point for that effort. Michael suggested staff could also come to the Committee with a prospect list, adding that there are several

conversations the Committee hasn't yet been updated on: MOTT, MBTA, Mass Convention Center Authority, MassDOT, etc. This might help identify gaps and challenge members to help fill them. Jo-Ann agreed this would reinforce the core goal of advancement, helping Council Members understand the work and the motivation for it.

Iván asked if the team has a test company lined up to roll out the employee arts benefit. Erik explained this is still in the works. One Digital is a broker that works with multiple companies and benefits providers. They're currently identifying which partners are the best fit.

Iván asked if the team was planning to expand arts prescriptions work beyond the fantastic work being done with the Town of Franklin.

Michael confirmed the team is working on this; a recent webinar with the Mass Municipal Association brought the work to the attention of more than 75 town administrators, managers, mayors, and city councilors and there have been numerous follow-up inquiries from municipalities across the Commonwealth. It is anticipated that Art Pharmacy will continue receiving further inquiries. As for the arts benefit model, it has real potential. If even 10% of employers offered it, that could generate significant new revenue for the sector.

There were no further comments or questions, and the end of the meeting agenda had been reached. Iván, as Co-Chair, adjourned the meeting at 2:22pm.