



*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, JUNE 25, 2025**

#### **ONLINE MEETING**

**Executive Committee Members Present** were

Marc Carroll, Chair  
Jo-Ann Davis, Vice Chair  
Ché Anderson  
Cecil Baron Jensen  
Simone Early  
Iván Espinoza-Madrigal  
Julie Wake

**Council Members Present** were

Donna Haghighat  
Anika Lopes  
Ashley Occhino

**Staff Members Present** were

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

Chair Marc Carroll called the meeting to order at 10:03am 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 April 16 meeting and if they had he would entertain a motion and a second to approve them. Julie Wake moved to approve the minutes; Simone Early seconded the motion. By roll call it was unanimously

**Prepared on 7/28/25**

RESOLVED: to approve the minutes of the April 16, 2025 Executive Committee Meeting in the form presented.

The Chair briefly reviewed the schedule of upcoming Committee and Council meetings:

- Executive and Programs Committees will meet on August 6
- Advancement Committee will meet on August 11
- The next full Council Meeting is scheduled for August 19

He then moved to the next item for discussion: the Executive Director's Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA). The Chair noted that he invited all Council Members to join this meeting specifically to participate in this conversation, as he was aware a few members had questions about the Executive Director's salary. This portion of the meeting is dedicated to addressing any concerns or thoughts on the proposed adjustment. As such, Council Members Anika Lopes, Ashley Occhino, and Donna Haghighat had joined the Executive Committee Meeting. The Chair then shared a written comment from Council Member Ellice Patterson who was unable to attend the meeting:

"I want to be clear that this is not an indicator of performance. My concern is simply a fiduciary concern. As we all discuss the demands outweighing the needs of grant requests in a time where federal cuts will impact us in the coming fiscal years, I am concerned that two raises within a year might not be fiscally appropriate. I voted yes on the raise since it was in regards to the performance Michael was doing. However, I just want us to consider a COLA so soon from that raise might not be the best this fiscal year and can resume in other fiscal years. Even if the COLA is small, that could still be 1 - 2 impactful grants that could go back out to the larger community. I'm open to hearing other viewpoints from the council on the matter. "

The Chair then took a moment to clarify logistics. He asked Chief Financial Officer Catherine Cheng-Anderson to confirm that, if approved, the Executive Director's COLA would take effect with the first full pay period in July. Catherine confirmed this and explained that the increase has been factored into the agency's financial planning. She also noted that while the July increase is included, the previously anticipated January 2026 adjustment remains under review by the Administration. The Chair then opened the meeting for discussion.

During the discussion, Simone Early asked whether not approving the COLA would have a tangible impact on the Agency's grantmaking budget. The Chair invited Catherine Cheng-Anderson to respond. Catherine explained that if the COLA were not implemented, the associated funds—approximately \$4,000—would remain within the agency's general payroll allocation under the operations budget. These funds could then be reallocated later in the fiscal year based on agency needs. She clarified that the amount in question is relatively modest and would simply remain in the payroll line unless repurposed. Simone then inquired whether the COLA had already been incorporated into the budget and, if the Agency had not yet received its final appropriation, how the funds would be returned to the budget.

David Slatery added context that the Agency doesn't typically receive the final state budget until July, so at this point in the year the team is always working in anticipation of

it. The Council still votes to approve the annual spending plan, which includes payroll projections. He explained that Catherine prepares a detailed spending plan each year, which include a set-aside for staff compensation including COLA for all employees, the Executive Director, and any projected hires. He reiterated that the amounts being discussed for the Executive Director's COLA if not used, it would simply be reabsorbed into general operations.

Simone asked David to confirm that the Agency receives the funds regardless of whether the Executive Director receives a COLA; David confirmed that this was correct.

Donna Haghighat commented in support of Michael's leadership of the agency. Anika Lopes expressed her appreciation for the thoughtful comments made today and voiced her strong support for Michael Bobbitt's leadership. She understands the need for fiscal prudence, especially given budget pressures, but supporting Michael at this moment feels critically important; recognizing and supporting leadership, even in small ways like a COLA, sends a powerful message.

Iván Espinoza-Madrigal expressed that he fully understands and respects the fiscal concerns raised. The current environment is challenging, and we're navigating serious funding pressures. That said, Iván believes it's essential to recognize the leadership that's guiding us through these times. A COLA reflects our values—it's not just about compensation; it's about investing in the people who carry the weight of the work. Iván strongly supports the COLA for Michael and urges other Council members to do the same. We can—and should—make grants, but we also need to ensure our internal capacity remains strong.

Julie Wake expressed her appreciation for what her fellow Council Members stated; she also deeply appreciates Michael's leadership during this difficult period. She asked for clarification about the process; why the discussion is taking place today, what were the concerns that brought this back to the Committee, and could those challenges be framed and clearly outline the positives and negatives of moving forward with the COLA.

The Chair explained that today's discussion stems from the previous Council vote regarding Michael's salary. The Council has the authority to approve or deny any change to the Executive Director's compensation. In the last meeting, the vote allowed for the COLA to proceed *unless* the Council determined there was a reason to withhold it. A few members reached out to the Chair after the vote, suggesting that now might not be the right time for a COLA—so the Chair determined that this meeting would be the right forum to revisit the issue and hear from Council Members.

He explained if enough members felt strongly, the Council could hold another vote. But from what has been shared thus far in the discussion, that doesn't seem necessary. Vice Chair, Jo-Ann Davis and all Committee Members agreed, and it was determined that the July COLA for the Executive Director will go into effect in July as planned. The Chair also noted that the Council still reserves the right to revisit any future salary adjustments. David added one further clarification—the statute specifically states that the Executive Director's compensation is subject to Council approval. So, while the July COLA can be implemented, when the Council votes on the FY26 spending plan in August, the final payroll number will include this adjustment.

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

Michael thanked the Committee Members for their support. He and the staff have been working hard to close out the fiscal year, engage in budget advocacy, share the results of the Cultural Asset Inventory, begin to build plans for FY26 grant programs, make operational improvements, and to continue the strong Agency-wide focus on advancement work. At the core of all this is Mass Cultural Council's commitment to putting money and jobs into the cultural sector. One exciting success: our arts prescription program continues to gain traction. The Agency recently engaged with the Town of Franklin, which approved the use of opioid settlement funds to support the program. The Agency also held a well-received webinar with the Mass. Municipal Association and are now in active conversations with several other municipalities.

Tomorrow, Mass Cultural Council will be part of a press announcement with MassPort to launch Live Music at Logan—a new program to bring local performers to the airport. We're hopeful this will serve as a model to inspire similar busking initiatives across the state. We're also in talks with MassDevelopment, the Massachusetts Restaurant Association, and the Mass. Lodging Association to potentially expand this model to include visual artists as well.

We're also finalizing fundraising for an exciting partnership with MITx and the Sloan School of Management on an arts entrepreneurship course. Michael has seen the presentation deck, and it's impressive. We have a bit more money to raise, but we're close to the finish line.

Last month, the Governor announced the appointment of Regie Gibson as Massachusetts' first-ever Poet Laureate.

Our work on the Cultural Asset Inventory continues. We've been sharing early findings with stakeholders; a briefing is planned for Secretary Lauren Jones and her team at the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development. We're exploring ways the data can inform workforce programs, including partnerships with MassHire.

We've also begun our work with the Disability Advisory Council and the Native American and Indigenous People's Advisory Committee.

Senior Director of Public Affairs Bethann Steiner will update you shortly on the FY26 budget process. Senior staff is currently reviewing the fine details of our draft FY26 spending plan, and we'll present the final version at the August Council Meeting.

Meanwhile, we continue to monitor potential federal cuts to the National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, and Institute for Museum and Library Services. Mass Cultural Council received news of a \$1.31M grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). While this is welcome support, we are concerned accepting the funds and the required certifications may conflict with the agency's diversity, equity and inclusion goals, and we're carefully reviewing our options. The response deadline for accepting the offer is July 11. There is a state legislative oversight hearing on the topic of federal funds on July 15, which will be an opportunity to share updates and inform lawmakers' decisions. Michael asked David and Catherine to share more about the NEA funding.

David shared that the Agency has received preliminary approval for a \$1.31M grant from the NEA. However, accepting the funds would require Mass Cultural Council to certify that it does not operate any programs that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in ways that could be interpreted as violating federal anti-discrimination laws—per the terms of a recent executive order issued under the Trump administration. This language is not in alignment with our Agency's values, and we are currently reviewing the implications. Senior staff is still discussing this. It's important to note that the NEA accounts for only about 4-5% of the Agency's total funding, unlike many other arts agencies in other states, where it can range from 20% to 40% or more. Our concern is that accepting this relatively small amount of funding, which we would also need to match with our own dollars, could subject us, and any Massachusetts cultural organizations who are sub-grantees of such, to increased risk of federal audit and oversight under a potentially hostile regulatory framework. If we were to decline the funds, we estimate the impact on our grantees would be in the range of a 3-4% reduction, which we would need to plan for in our allocations. This issue raises significant legal questions, particularly concerning whether accepting the funds would expose both the Agency and our grantees to additional scrutiny or liability under this federal directive.

The Vice Chair asked if the NEA funds pertain to FY25 and they do not; all FY25 funds from the NEA have been received at this time.

The Chair asked if there might be political repercussions if the Agency does not accept the funds. Dave stated that, depending on how much publicity the Agency received, it could potentially make Mass Cultural Council a target. Michael added that we fear that accepting the funds could potentially undo all the work the Agency has done pertaining to equity over the past four years.

Iván stated that the issue of complying with federal executive orders and priorities is being widely discussed among grant recipients. He has heard strong advice to have legal counsel review contracts to ensure compliance doesn't require compromising core programs or values. He is glad to see this level of thoughtfulness—especially in today's climate, where strategy and caution are more important than ever. The state may also have its own review process, so he appreciates the due diligence being done before accepting these funds.

Dave shared that as the agency's counsel, he has reviewed the matter, though he hasn't seen the final documents. The NEA requires recordkeeping and assurance of compliance, with the risk of having funds reclaimed if those terms are found not to have been met. The Agency's position is that its past and current practices comply with federal civil rights laws—even if the current executive order suggests a different viewpoint. Jen added that it's not just about Mass Cultural Council, the requirements would apply to every constituent who was a subrecipient. Anyone who receives these funds would need to make the same attestations. Michael added that our diversity, equity and inclusion work isn't just part of the Agency's grantmaking—it's embedded in everything the Agency does. Accepting this funding under these terms could compromise years of progress.

The Chair and several Committee Members agreed. Cecil Barron Jensen asked if as part of advancement efforts, the Agency has identified foundations that could help offset the potential funding loss. Michael has within his personal network, there are possibilities,

though the Agency hasn't formally approached them yet. If Mass Cultural Council decides to decline the NEA grant, it would be a defining moment that could be used to galvanize support. Cecil shared that major foundations might be looking for opportunities to fill funding gaps. Iván has heard that Fidelity Investments and others may be considering stepping in; Julie added that Community Foundations might also be able to help. Simone suggested that perhaps some of the larger organizations receiving funding might be able to sacrifice funding to help some of the smaller groups.

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

Bethann shared that the FY26 state budget is currently in Conference Committee. The House and Senate each passed their versions in April and May. The good news for Mass Cultural Council is that our base appropriation—\$26 million and change—was identical in the Governor's, House, and Senate budgets. That means it is not subject to conference negotiations, so we're anticipating that amount for FY26 and using it as our internal planning figure. What is in conference are the earmarks, which differ between the House and Senate. We'll be watching to see which ones are retained and funded, as well as resolving reporting requirements, where the deadlines differ. Those are the two areas the conference committee will settle. The Agency has submitted testimony and received encouraging feedback—there's support and enthusiasm for our work. We're confident we'll see the \$26 million appropriated. It's a small increase over level funding, but in this fiscal environment, that's significant.

Separately, for the first time since 2019, the House and Senate agreed on a House Rules package, which changes how they operate—including new deadlines and procedures. The aim is to improve efficiency, accessibility, and transparency. We're staying in close contact with the Tourism, Arts, and Cultural Development Chairs and staff, whose public hearings will begin this summer, likely on Tuesdays. We'll provide oral or written testimony as needed. Also, there's an oversight hearing on July 15 at the State House, focused on the impact of federal funding cuts to the cultural sector. Mass Cultural Council has been asked to testify—this is a great opportunity for the sector to share its story.

In other updates:

- Dawn Heinen and Lisa Simmons are leading a digital campaign for the 45th anniversary of the Local Cultural Council (LCC) program, which will roll out over the next year.
- Public Affairs has published FY25 investment reports on our website and are working on FY26 promotional materials, which will go live after the next Council meeting.
- There is a Cultural Facilities Fund (CFF) event at Zumix this Friday at 10:30 AM. Chari Marc Carroll and Iván Espinoza-Madrigal plan to attend.

There were no questions for Bethann. The Chair asked Catherine to give the Business Operations update.

Catherine provided an update on the agency's office lease, explaining that while there are no new developments to report at this time, the lease renewal is progressing through the Division of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance (DCAMM). She noted that DCAMM is reviewing the lease terms and expects to draft a formal agreement later this year.

David Slatery added that the lease has reached the Commissioner's desk at DCAMM and clarified that the leasing process is controlled entirely by DCAMM and the agency's landlord. DCAMM welcomes and is informed by Mass Cultural Council's input, but the final decisions rest with them. Dave also mentioned that a member of the DCAMM staff was slated to attend today's meeting, but a conflict arose. The key message they wanted to convey is that while the proposed lease includes an increase for a five-year extension, the deal we secured ten years ago was exceptionally favorable for the agency, and the market has since shifted significantly since- even with the effects of Covid on the market. We've worked collaboratively with DCAMM, and they have approved the terms. We're now looking forward to finalizing the extension before the current lease expires in January.

The Chair asked for further clarification on timing. David shared that it is unclear exactly when the lease will be final, but it will be before the current lease expires in January. Assuming it moves forward it will be part of the FY26 Spending Plan which will be voted on at the August Council Meeting.

The Chair invited Catherine to present the final agenda item: a request for out-of-state travel approval. Catherine shared a proposal on behalf of Program Officer Charles Baldwin, who has been invited to participate in the 2025 LEAD Conference in Cleveland, Ohio. She noted that this annual national convening—centered on arts accessibility and aligns closely with the agency's strategic plan and equity priorities. Charles has played a key role in developing the conference agenda and will lead several professional training sessions. Catherine estimated the total cost of travel, including hotel, airfare, and related expenses, at \$1,639. She confirmed that the request had been reviewed and approved in accordance with the agency's standard internal travel authorization procedures. She also noted that for the past four years, the Council has consistently supported staff participation in this event.

The Chair agreed that Charles' attendance at LEAD is an asset to the Agency and asked for a motion and a second to approve the request. Simone moved to approve the request; Jo-Ann seconded the motion. By roll call vote and noting that Iván was no longer present it was unanimously

RESOLVED: to approve the staff-recommended out-of-state travel request as presented to the Committee.

The end of the agenda had been reached and there was no further discussion. The Chair adjourned the meeting at 11:05am.