



Power of culture

Unofficial Draft Subject to Approval by the Council at its next meeting

Minutes of the 169th Meeting of Mass Cultural Council Tuesday, May 19, 2026

Jackie Liebergott Black Box Theatre, 559 Washington Street, Boston, MA

Council Members Present:

- Ché Anderson, Council Chair
- Jo-Ann W. Davis, Council Vice-Chair
- Tom Bernard
- Vinny deMacedo
- Simone Early
- Joyce Linehan
- Anika Lopes
- Diane Asadorian Masters
- Ellice Patterson
- Julie Wake

Mass Cultural Council Staff Members Present:

- David Slatery, Acting Executive Director
- Jen Lawless, Senior Director of Program Operations
- Bethann Steiner, Senior Director of Public Affairs
- Ann Petruccelli Moon, Acting Chief of Staff
- Erik Holmgren, Manager of Advancement and Strategic Partnerships
- Christian Kelly, Public Relations & Events Manager
- Lindiana Flores, Program Officer
- Lauren Bjella, Program Officer
- Amy Chu, Program Officer
- Käthe Swaback, Program Officer
- Timothea Pham, Program Officer
- Miranda Cook, Program Officer
- Evelyn Nellum, Records Management Officer

Chair Ché Anderson called the meeting to order at 1:10 pm and asked Acting Chief of Staff Ann Petruccelli Moon to read the Open Meeting Law Statement.

The Chair then asked Council Members if they had reviewed the minutes from their last meeting and if they had he would entertain a motion and a second to approve them. Diane Asadorian Masters moved to approve the minutes. Anika Lopes seconded the motion. Noting that Joyce Linehan abstained it was unanimously

RESOLVED: to approve the Minutes of the February 25, 2026 Council Meeting in the form presented.

Ché thanked the Council and staff for their work over the past nine weeks, saying the organization is fortunate to have such an outstanding team. He emphasized the importance of continuing to find ways to responsibly steward resources while building toward the future.

Reflecting on a recent visit to Watertown hosted by State Representative Steve Owens, Ché spoke about both the challenges facing communities and the energy and innovation happening on the ground. He said it was inspiring to see that momentum and viewed it as a strong foundation for what comes next.

He acknowledged that one of the biggest questions ahead is the ongoing Executive Director search process, and said this is also a moment to take a hard look at the organization itself — asking difficult questions, identifying allies, recognizing opportunities for growth, and finding ways to bring skeptics into the conversation.

Ché encouraged the Council to think broadly about the future of the organization and its ecosystem, and to prepare now — both systemically and operationally — for how to accelerate progress as conditions improve. He said he is excited about what lies ahead and hopes Council Members share that optimism.

He then provided an update on the Executive Director search including information about who he sees comprising the search task force and a potential timeline. The Executive Director search for the Mass Cultural Council will be led by a community-centered Search Task Force made up primarily of external agency partners, community stakeholders, and regional leaders, supported by a professional executive search firm. This structure is designed to promote transparency, broaden perspectives, strengthen public trust, and identify candidates with strong collaborative leadership skills across sectors such as education, healthcare, workforce development, arts and culture, government, and philanthropy. The process will unfold over several phases from June through January, beginning with task force formation and search firm selection, followed by stakeholder engagement and leadership profile development in July, active national recruitment and screening from August through October, finalist interviews and Council selection in October and early November, and concluding with announcement and transition planning in December, with the new Executive Director expected to begin or prepare for a January start. He then opened the meeting for questions and discussion.

Diane Asadorian Masters asked how the process would unfold if the Council was interested in having Ché himself as the Agency's next Executive Director.

Ché responded that when he'd agreed to be Chair, his top priority was to help ensure a fair, transparent, and inclusive process. He is still thinking through the details, but at this stage his focus is on building a process that casts a wide net and gives the Council the strongest possible pool of candidates.

Tom Bernard also offered suggestions. First, as the Task Force is assembled, he encouraged a strong emphasis on regional equity and representation, including Council representation, so the group reflects all regions of the Commonwealth. Second, drawing on recent experience with search processes, he offered a note of caution that the Task Force may need to be more actively engaged in the initial vetting stages than is sometimes typical. He also suggested that as the search firm is selected, expectations should be clear and include a defined "job description" for the Task Force that outlines its roles, responsibilities, and level of involvement throughout the process.

Julie emphasized strong support for regional equity in forming the Task Force, while also cautioning against making it too large. She suggested keeping the Task Force at a manageable size but building in additional layers of participation so that more people can still be meaningfully involved. For example, she proposed creating structured opportunities for broader community members to engage with candidates through smaller, focused interactions, rather than expanding the full Task Force. Drawing on experience from prior searches, she noted that very large task forces can sometimes become unwieldy or overly political, and recommended instead designing clear, accessible ways for participation without losing efficiency or focus during the process.

Ché shared that when it was first announced that Michael Bobbitt would be stepping down, he began one-on-one conversations with cultural leaders in Worcester to better understand what they would be looking for in a new Executive Director. He would encourage all Council members to do the same in their own regions—get out into your communities, set up a few conversations with leaders of organizations of different sizes, and meet with artists directly to hear their perspectives.

Tom added that often a search firm will include 15 to 20 stakeholder interviews in their work.

Joyce Linehan shared that she is excited to hear the thinking around sister agencies. There are multiple constituencies to consider, including the Legislature and the Executive Office, as well as peer organizations like MassDevelopment, Massport, and the Mass Convention Center Authority. The cultural sector needs to do a better job of engaging across that broader ecosystem, and she applauds Ché for framing the work in those terms.

That concluded the conversation regarding the Executive Director search process. Ché asked Acting Executive Director David Slatery for his report.

Dave first paused and gave newly appointed Council Member Vinny deMacedo an opportunity to introduce himself to the group as it was his first Council Meeting.

Dave then shared that the Agency continues to move forward at full speed. Even with the departure of the Executive Director, there has been no slowdown in our work, and operations remain strong across the organization.

This quarter we've been especially busy with county-based grant celebrations, attending various community events and Local Cultural Council celebrations, and ongoing grants administration. It is fair to say the Agency is very well respected—and even deeply appreciated—for the work it does.

We also received positive feedback from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). While Dave consistently praises staff, it is especially meaningful to share recognition that came directly from national reviewers. Preliminary information indicates the Agency will receive a similar level of NEA funding as last year—\$1.268 million, a slight decrease of \$50,000 due to the separation of two side programs related to America 250 and health initiatives.

At the Executive Committee, we also discussed the MITx partnership, which reflects significant investment and effort. To date, more than 1,447 students have enrolled, with 13% choosing to pay for the certificate. Approximately 80% of participants report being from the Greater Boston area, and additional reporting is forthcoming.

Finally, advancement and cross-sector partnership work continues to grow. There has been strong expansion in collaborations across economic development, workforce development, housing, and climate sectors, reflecting a broader and more integrated approach to the Agency's mission.

There were no questions for Dave. Ché asked Senior Director of Public Affairs Bethann Steiner for her Public Affairs update.

Bethann Steiner shared a positive update covering the FY27 budget process, bond bill, legislation, and recent events.

She noted that it is her “favorite week of the year,” referring to the Senate budget debate. There were no major amendments, and funding levels remain consistent across the Governor's budget proposal as well as proposals from the House and Senate—reflecting a strong “trifecta” outcome. The budget includes a 5% increase, marking a high-water mark and the highest operating budget to date at \$27.35 million. A small number of amendments were proposed to earmark specific projects, though only a handful of Senators pursued these changes.

Turning to the economic development bond bill, she explained that the Governor files this bill every other year. The current bill was filed in April, and the Agency submitted testimony on April 1, with the bill formally filed 15 days later. Several priorities for the Agency are included in the legislation. These include eligibility changes related to the Cultural Facilities Fund (Section 7 of the bill), as well as new capital spending opportunities relevant to the sector.

The bond bill includes two new major initiatives: a \$25 million Creative Economy Grant Program through EOED and a \$25 million Downtown Vitality Grant Program, of which Mass Cultural Council participated in a three-year coalition effort to advance. Cultural Districts are eligible recipients, reinforcing that the sector is recognized as a driver of economic development.

Bethann also extended thanks to Council members who signed a recent thank-you letter, including Ivan, Tom, Jo-Ann, Ashley, Rhonda, Che, Donna, and Ellice; and others still able to sign on through Friday.

Finally, she thanked Council Members for attending recent grant celebrations and noted upcoming events, including two in-person gatherings on June 15 in Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard, and a virtual celebration on June 25 at 11:00 a.m.

There were no questions for Bethann. Ché asked for the Business Operations report.

Dave noted that Senior Director of Business Operations Cathy Cheng-Anderson was currently on vacation and that he would be delivering the report in her stead. Dave first summarized a recent out-of-state travel request approved by Ché. Senior Director of Business Operations Cathy Cheng-Anderson and Program Officer Greg Torrales would attend the Americans for the Arts Conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico in early June. The cost is \$2,055. Staff became aware of this conference after the April 14 Executive Committee meeting. Because the travel is scheduled for the week of June 1, there was not an opportunity to bring the request before the Executive Committee in advance. Consistent with the policy, staff sought and received Chair approval and is reporting the travel to the full Council at the meeting.

Dave then summarized proposed changes to the Agency's out-of-state travel policy: at the April 14 Executive Committee meeting, Council members discussed revisions to the Agency's out-of-state travel policy that have been under review since the fall. The proposed policy would establish a Council-approved annual travel budget within the overall spending plan, allow the Executive Director to approve most staff travel within that budget, and require only higher-cost trips above set thresholds to come back to the Executive Committee or Council for approval, with a lower threshold of additional approval for the Executive Director's own travel to avoid self-approval of higher-cost expenses. The Committee supported shifting away from routine review of lower-cost travel while maintaining oversight for higher-cost and Executive

Director-related travel, and staff is now bringing the proposed policy forward to the full Council for consideration and a vote.

Ché expressed his strong support for the revised policy and asked if there were any questions from the Council. There were not, and so he asked for a motion and a second to approve the policy as presented. Tom moved to approve the policy. Julie seconded the motion. All were in favor and it was

RESOLVED: To approve the Agency's updated Out-of-State Travel Policy as presented to the Council at its May 19, 2026 meeting.

Senior Director of Program Operations Jen Lawless then gave a brief Programs report noting that the final round of FY26 grants through the Cultural Facilities Fund have been determined. She also shared that the FY27 cycle is already underway, with Creative Experiences and YouthReach currently in the review process, and recommendations expected in August. Additional program recommendations will be reviewed at the June Programs Committee meeting, where a full overview of grantmaking data will also be provided. There were no questions or comments from the Committee.

Ché, as Chair, adjourned the meeting at 1:49 p.m.