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Mass Cultural Council

Power of culture

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

Minutes of the Meeting of Mass Cultural Council's Executive Committee Thursday, October 15, 2026

Online Meeting

Council Members Present:

- Ché Anderson, Chair
- Jo-Ann W. Davis, Vice Chair
- Cecil Barron Jensen
- Simone Early
- Julie Wake

Mass Cultural Council Staff Members Present:

- David Slatery, Executive Director
- Jen Lawless, Deputy Director
- Bethann Steiner, Deputy Director, Policy & Public Affairs
- Ann Petruccelli Moon, Chief of Staff
- Erik Holmgren, Senior Director, Strategy & Partnerships
- Carmen Plazas, Communications & Community Engagement Manager
- Evelyn Nellum, Records Management Officer

Chair Ché Anderson called the meeting to order at 10:02 a.m., then asked Chief of Staff Ann Petruccelli Moon to read the Open Meeting Law notice.

The Chair asked the Committee if they'd reviewed the minutes from their last meeting held on August 13, 2026, and if they had, he would call for a motion and a second to approve them.

Julie Wake moved to approve the minutes; Vice Chair Jo-Ann Davis seconded the motion. By roll-call vote, noting that Iván Espinoza-Madrigal was absent, it was unanimously

> RESOLVED: to approve the minutes of the August 13, 2026 Mass Cultural Council Executive Committee Meeting as presented.

Ché Anderson delivered a concise report with three main points. First, the Chair acknowledged team members' recent participation in the National Assembly for State Arts Agencies (NASAA). While deferring to Executive Director David Slatery for more details on the conference, Ché emphasized that the Agency remains highly regarded nationwide for its impactful work as a state arts agency. The Chair noted that this recognition reflected both the staff's dedication and the Council's strong leadership. He expressed pride and gratitude for the Agency's ongoing efforts and achievements.

Ché then shifted focus to the ongoing search for a new Executive Director. He thanked the Search Task Force members leading the process, describing it as highly intentional and diligent, and welcomed continued feedback, expertise, and thoughts on the process.

The Chair also informed the Committee that the official job description is expected to be released soon, marking the start of the formal search process.

Additionally, Ché discussed the comprehensive surveys that were distributed to the sector and staff, and that the results will be used to inform the priority areas and desired qualities for the next Executive Director. The Chair thanked everyone who contributed feedback, highlighted the value of honest, open responses, and encouraged ongoing engagement as the process advanced.

The Chair invited any questions and, hearing none, handed the meeting over to David Slatery for the Executive Director's Report.

Executive Director David Slatery began by highlighting the Agency's strong representation at the recent National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) meeting, held earlier this month in Washington, D.C. He noted that eight staff members attended, with several selected and supported by stipends. This robust participation reflected the Agency's leadership in the field. He also said that the team gained valuable insights from the conference and assured the Committee they would receive a more detailed report on their key takeaways at the Council Meeting on October 29.

He continued, sharing that arts and health was a major national focus area and that this initiative is supported by what NASAA described as the "three Ps": *practice, proof of concept, and policy*—all aligning favorably. He noted that Mass Cultural Council has been a national leader in this area, launching the arts prescription program in 2020 under former Executive Director Anita Walker, then propelling it forward under former Executive Director Michael Bobbitt and current staff like Erik Holmgren.

Dave also introduced the concept of "Arts and ...", referring to the expanding role of the arts in various social domains such as health care, housing, community development, and security. These were areas where the national movement had been concentrating, with multiple presentations at the conference. He expressed pride that the agency had been a pioneer in these efforts, which were now being adopted nationwide by other state arts agencies. He emphasized that while the Agency had a strong reputation, these

conversations were unfolding independently at the national level, further validating Mass Cultural Council's pioneering work.

Dave observed that another benefit of attending NASAA was the chance to engage with peers from other states facing different challenges and solutions. He shared that they learned about potential new revenue sources, including settlement obligations such as those involving META and Ticketmaster, and the idea of community benefit agreements related to new data centers. He also conveyed that the arts should have a role in these emerging frameworks and that artificial intelligence (AI) was a major topic of discussion.

Dave then acknowledged Ché's modesty for not mentioning his own election to the Board of Directors of the National Assembly of State Art Agencies (NASAA) during the business meeting, a development that ensured the Agency's national representation.

Dave then went on to reflect on his experience attending the conference for the first time as Executive Director, rather than Deputy Director, and participating in executive director breakout sessions. He remarked that the Agency was in a very strong position compared to many others, being one of the best-funded in the country and enjoying the advantages of operating as an independent agency. Unlike many state arts agencies that function as sub-departments, this agency can advocate directly for policy and communicate with legislators, a structural independence that has contributed to its respected status and success.

Dave referenced the staff update in the meeting materials and addressed internal organizational changes necessitated by the departure of the Chief Financial Officer earlier in the summer. This has led to a reorganization within the Agency, including new roles for key staff: Jen Lawless as Deputy Director with oversight of Finance and Programs, Bethann Steiner as Deputy Director for Policy and Public Affairs, Ann Petruccelli Moon as Chief of Staff, and Erik Holmgren as Senior Director for Strategy and Partnerships, which is now a senior leadership role. The Agency also made additional staff changes and created new program director roles. Dave explained that these changes were intended to build a strong foundation for the future, particularly for his successor as executive director, and that all changes are within the current spending plan.

There were no questions from the Committee. David returned the floor to the Chair, who then invited Bethann to provide her update.

Deputy Director for Policy & Public Affairs Bethann Steiner thanked the Chair and began her Public Affairs report. First, she noted that the Legislature is continuing to meet informally twice weekly, and the 12 conference committees are still meeting. Mass Cultural Council is waiting for the Mass Wins economic development bond bill to come out of conference, and we are hoping the final bill will retain our CFF eligibility expansion language, which was included by the Governor and the Senate.

Mass Cultural Council met with the Chair of House Ways and Means earlier this month to discuss our STEM to STEAM bill, H. 561. The Chair confirmed that there

was no opposition to the bill recorded on file, and he directed his staff to take another look at it. Mass Cultural Council pitched that a good time for the House to advance the bill was the week of Oct. 19, as this is STEM Week. After the meeting, Mass Cultural Council, MassArt, and MASSCreative sent a letter of testimony asking the House to move the bill to the Speaker and House Ways and Means.

Switching to events, Bethann noted that tonight was the 2026 Massachusetts Storytellers of the Year awards ceremony in Holyoke. Mass Cultural Council and Mass Humanities are jointly hosting the event. Thank you to Tom and Anika from the Council for attending.

Also, Public Affairs is planning two grant celebrations this fall: Nov. 16 (since then the date has changed to Nov. 20) in the Berkshires at Mass Moca for Western Mass award recipients and Dec. 1 at La Casa in Boston's South End for Greater Boston recipients. All Council members are welcome.

Lastly, Bethann showed the Committee a Proclamation, which was given by the Governor and Lt. Governor, naming October as Arts and Humanities Month in Massachusetts. Bethann wished the Committee a happy Arts and Humanities Month and explained that Mass Cultural Council requested the Proclamation from the Governor's Office and would be bringing it to the Storytellers Award event tonight for people to see it.

Che' Anderson expressed deep appreciation for Bethann and her team's efforts, highlighting their work in establishing the legislature and strengthening the relationship with Mass Humanities. He also thanked Bethann for her upcoming visit to Holyoke and acknowledged her dedication. Che' mentioned he owes Brian a favor and intends to follow up soon. The remarks ended and Ché invited Senior Director of Strategy & Partnerships Erik Holmgren to provide the advancement update.

Erik began by referencing Dave and Bethann's recent comments and his August report to the Council. He reiterated the agency's commitment to expanding its leadership role in the arts sector, particularly by establishing a path toward long-term financial sustainability.

Erik outlined three main areas of focus: arts and health, community development and housing, and workforce development. In the realm of arts and health, he underscored the agency's national leadership, noting that this was a major theme at the NASAA conference and a current priority for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). He described a direct conversation with NEA Chairperson Mary Anne Carter, in which he discussed the significant opportunity presented by new billing code changes introduced in Massachusetts in 2026, which could allow Medicare, Medicaid, and MassHealth to reimburse arts prescriptions. As a result, Mary Anne Carter expressed interest in having Erik present at an international summit on arts and health, scheduled by the NEA for November 2027, which will convene ministers of culture and health. He stressed the importance of maintaining the agency's visibility and leadership in this rapidly developing area.

On community development and housing, Holmgren reported that the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC) and MassHousing invested $3.8 million over the past year in creative placemaking grants. These funds support artistic programming and engagement within resident facilities, and Jen Lawless has played a significant role in building these partnerships over the last several years. The agency is actively involved in connecting artists and organizations to these new funding opportunities across communities.

Turning to workforce development, Erik announced the upcoming Creative Entrepreneurship Summit at MassArt on November 7th, in which the Agency is a key partner. Several staff members, including Dave, will participate as panelists and speakers. The summit aims to address the lack of dedicated spaces and resources for creative entrepreneurs in Massachusetts. Erik also highlighted ongoing collaborations with the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development and the Commonwealth Corporation, which administers over $200 million annually in workforce funding. He will be engaging with all 16 regional workforce development boards to explore further connections between the arts and workforce sectors and noted that while professional development is often difficult to fund, reframing it as workforce development opens up significant state resources, as reflected in the $566.5 million allocated across 37 line items in the FY27 budget.

Finally, Erik discussed efforts to diversify the sector's financial support beyond philanthropy. He shared that the agency is in advanced conversations with several Massachusetts philanthropic entities and shared that Aspen Institute is very interested in establishing a collective fund for youth arts. He added that, with support from the Aspen Institute, a process could be facilitated in 2027 that could bring together major funders and donor-advised funds, potentially positioning the launch of a new initiative in 2028. He also indicated that the Council would receive more information about the Creative Wealth Fund, including its mission and objectives, at the October 29th meeting. Erik concluded by inviting questions and turning the meeting back to the Chair.

Ché thanked Erik and invited comments and questions from the Committee.

Cecil Barron Jensen thanked Erik and shared that she liked the idea of using the term Workforce Development instead of professional development.

Seeing no more questions, Ché asked Deputy Director Jen Lawless to provide the Programs and Finance Update.

Jen began by reflecting on conversations at NASAA, expressing surprise and gratitude for the national recognition Massachusetts receives. She explained that many colleagues said they use Massachusetts' grant programs, guidelines, and websites as models when updating their own. Jen was especially struck by how familiar others are with our Agency's program guidelines, and that this recognition reinforced Massachusetts' strong reputation and highlighted the significant national impact of the Agency's work.

Jen gave the Programs update, noting that this period has been particularly busy for the Programs team, especially with the Local Cultural Council (LCC) and Tribal Cultural Council (TCC) application deadlines that very day. She reported that as of 9 a.m., 10,200 applications had been submitted, with expectations that another 4,000 would arrive before the midnight deadline, compared to last year's total of just over 13,000 applications. She commended the Grants System Management team, the Communities team, and others for their efforts managing the high volume and last-minute questions.

She added that the Grants for Creative Individuals program was still open, with an application deadline of October 27. At the time of this update, the program received about 1,500 applications. Jen anticipated a significant increase in submissions as the deadline approached, especially since 4,000 pandemic recovery grantees are now eligible to apply again this year, likely leading to another high-volume cycle.

She further reported that the Cultural Facilities Fund (CFF) had opened for applications, with a December deadline, and encouraged the Committee to share this opportunity with organizations that might benefit; and that the Cultural District Designation application was also open to both existing districts working toward redesignation, while new districts were submitting letters of intent (LOIs).

Jen previewed additional updates for the Programs Committee, including recommendations for three social prescription grants and the reopening of the UP-Designation program, which focuses on accessibility and supporting people with disabilities.

She reminded the Committee that the Council approved about 1,500 grant awards at the end of August, and since then, the Program and Finance teams have worked diligently to complete required contracting and payment processes. The teams have conducted information sessions for new grant recipients to guide them through the state contracting process, and the finance team is nearly ready to issue payments, with some possibly scheduled for today.

Jen concluded with an update on the assignment and disbursement of federal funds from the NEA, noting that last year the Agency identified approximately 90 recipients of Youth Reach, CIP, and OGO programs to receive either direct federal funds or matching funds. While changes to federal grant agreements and executive orders had previously raised concerns, the agency followed the same process this year, giving recipients time to raise any issues before accepting the funds. She was pleased to report that, out of 79 grantees awarded federal or state matching funds this cycle, all but five have fully executed contracts and are ready for payment. After these agreements are finalized and paid, the Finance team will turn its attention to processing payments for the remaining recipients.

Ché thanked Jen for her update and for taking on both program and finance responsibilities, acknowledging the difficulty of the dual role.

Jen credited Controller Kate McDougall as a key member of the Finance team and emphasized her commitment to supporting Kate and the team's excellent work.

Ché reiterated the importance of teamwork, recognized Kate's contributions, and brought the Committee's attention to the last item: approval of the draft agenda for the 171st Meeting of Mass Cultural Council, scheduled for October 29, 2026, and asked if there were any questions or comments about the agenda.

Dave highlighted that the Council would review three NEA public health grants and engage in a conversation about the Creative Wealth Fund, a new approach to funding creative enterprises modeled after startup financing in other industries. He emphasized that the Agency seeks input as they refine this innovative funding model.

Ché thanked Dave and the Advancement team for their work thus far on the Creative Wealth Fund idea and reiterated feedback he often hears from the field: while there is gratitude for programs like the Cultural Facilities Fund, there is also a strong desire for additional funding opportunities. He encouraged further exploration of creative strategies to bring more resources into the sector. There were no further questions, so Ché called for a motion to approve the agenda for the upcoming meeting.

Simone moved to approve the draft agenda as presented; Jo-Ann seconded the motion. By roll-call vote, noting that Iván Espinoza-Madrigal was absent, it was unanimously

> RESOLVED: that the Executive Committee approves the draft agenda for the 171st Meeting of Mass Cultural Council on October 29, 2026, as presented.

The end of the agenda having been reached, Ché Anderson, as Chair, adjourned the meeting at 10:34 a.m.