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Power of culture

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

**Minutes
Mass Cultural Council
Advancement Committee
Thursday, June 4, 2026**

Online Meeting

Committee Members Present:

- Ché Anderson, Co-Chair
- Rhonda Anderson
- Diane Asadorian Masters
- Tom Bernard
- Joyce Linehan
- Allyce Najimy

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
- Erik Holmgren, Manager of Strategic Partnerships & Advancement
- Ann Petruccelli Moon, Acting Chief of Staff
- Carolyn Cole, Special Projects Manager for Advancement
- Carmen Plazas, Communications & Community Engagement Manager

Co-Chair Ché Anderson called the meeting to order at 10:06am. He asked if members had reviewed the minutes of their October meeting, and if they had, he would entertain a motion and a second to approve them. Diane Asadorian Masters moved to approve the minutes; Joyce Linehan seconded the motion. By roll call vote and noting that Co-Chair Iván Espinoza-Madrigal, Jo-Ann Davis,

David Kong, Anika Lopes, Petrina Martin, and Vinny deMacedo were absent, it was unanimously

RESOLVED to approve the minutes of the October 9, 2025
Advancement Committee Meeting in the form presented.

Ché welcomed Committee Members and staff to the meeting. He then shared that since he had been appointed Council Chair, he does not plan to continue as co-chair of the Advancement Committee. He is currently in conversation with Iván Espinoza-Madrigal about who will be appointed in his place. Ché then took a moment to welcome Joyce Linehan, who had recently been appointed to the Committee. He then remarked that it has been amazing recently to step into so many spaces and hear, "I just saw Dave the other day," or "I saw Erik recently." Between them and Bethann being everywhere on the public-facing side, Mass Cultural Council is out there. He expressed his gratitude to the team for everything they are doing on the Advancement front. There were no questions for Ché, and so he asked Dave for his Acting Executive Director's report.

Dave thanked Ché, the Committee Members, and all individuals watching the livestream on YouTube. A full Advancement report is included in the meeting materials, and the team will walk Committee Members through it in more detail. Before they do, though, Dave emphasized just how far the work has come.

It's been about three years since the Agency adopted its strategic plan and made strategic partnerships and advancement a key pillar of its work. Since then, we've really taken off. We're doing programs at a nationally recognized level, and we're in rooms where the arts simply weren't represented before.

A lot of people deserve credit for that. Former Executive Director Michael Bobbitt helped lay the foundation; Ché and several Committee Members have built relationships, and with Erik Holmgren and Carolyn Cole stepping into full-time advancement roles, the team has been able to intentionally channel and focus their efforts.

As Committee Members look through the report, they'll see the breadth of the work. The team is engaged in workforce development, education, healthcare, climate, housing, and community development—areas where, just a few years ago, we didn't have a significant presence. Today, Dave and the team are helping those sectors see the value of the arts, and in turn, those partnerships are creating real benefits for the entire cultural sector.

Dave also highlighted a couple of blog posts that were published this spring, thanking Bethann Steiner and Dawn Heinen for their work on them. One post focuses on creative entrepreneurship—something artists have always done and understood—but through the Agency's partnerships with the Massachusetts Restaurant Association and Massachusetts Lodging Association, we've developed tools to better support and strengthen that work. It's exciting to see how much momentum is being built and how visible the arts have become.

Before turning things over to Erik and Carolyn, Dave asked Bethann to give a summary of upcoming events. Bethann shared that there would be grant celebrations on Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard on June 15 and a virtual grant celebration on June 25. Committee Members were encouraged to register for the virtual celebration, and the link to do so was shared in the chat.

Erik and Carolyn were then invited to share their update on the Agency's Advancement work.

Erik thanked Ché and the Committee Members for the opportunity to provide an update on the work. The written materials the Committee received cover the last quarter of work, but they also represent an important milestone. The team has now completed its first full fiscal year with Advancement formalized as a cross-agency function. This has been a staff-wide effort. Advancement isn't the work of one team—it's work that touches every part of the Agency.

It's also different work. This is long-term work. It's systems-change work. It's adaptive work. It's different from grantmaking, and our staff has consistently stepped up and shown an incredible ability to build new relationships, think differently, and seize opportunities.

Before he got into the specifics, Erik took a step back and talked about what the team means when we talk about Advancement. Traditionally, the cultural sector has been viewed primarily as a recipient of grants and philanthropy. What Mass Cultural Council is saying is that the cultural sector in Massachusetts has only scratched the surface of the value it can bring to other sectors. Our goal has been to formalize that work and expand the narrative around what arts and culture contribute.

That work has two primary goals. First, to position the arts and cultural sector as a partner in solving some of the Commonwealth's biggest challenges. Second, to leverage resources from other sectors for the benefit of our own.

For a long time, the arts have relied heavily on philanthropy as their primary source of support. Philanthropy will always be important, but it can't be the only pillar of sustainability. We must diversify the sector's portfolio.

Over the past year, the team has helped leverage millions of dollars into the cultural sector through partnerships in housing, creative placemaking, workforce development, and healthcare. Massachusetts is the only state in the country where two major health insurance companies are investing directly in arts organizations. We have five clinics at Mass General Brigham integrating arts programming. Through the Department of Public Health, Massachusetts is also the only place in the country using arts prescriptions supported through opioid settlement funding.

Those dollars are flowing into the sector because partners increasingly see arts and culture as helping them achieve their own goals.

The Agency is also influencing policy and changing conversations. Whether it's participating in the STEM Advisory Council or contributing research that demonstrates improvements in mental health, we're helping shift the understanding of what the arts do.

For years, we emphasized the creative economy, and that was important. But sometimes the conversation became too narrow. As former Executive Director Anita Walker often reminds us, we are not an economic development agency. Yet when we do our work well, economic development is an outcome. Improved public health is an outcome. Stronger communities are an outcome.

The narrative is expanding.

We've found that this work grows in several stages. It starts with individual relationships, because people create change. Those relationships become partnerships. Partnerships become systems. And over time, those systems begin to reshape policy and practice.

One lesson we've learned is that we often spend too much time answering the wrong question. The question isn't, "Why the arts?" The question is, "How?"

How do we integrate arts and culture into housing? Into healthcare? Into workforce development? Into climate resilience? Once people understand the value, the conversation becomes practical. It's about implementation.

We've also learned that government silos are real—and they're thick. Arts and culture have a unique ability to cut across those silos and connect people who otherwise wouldn't be working together.

With that, Erik turned the floor over to Carolyn, who has been leading the work at the community level and can speak to where we've been and where we're headed.

Carolyn shared that it is a privilege to be doing this work. She is incredibly proud of our staff. Every new partnership creates ten more opportunities, and that's a great problem to have. Thank you all for your continued support.

Dave added that Carolyn's efforts have been central to our work with the Executive Office of Economic Development and with MassDevelopment. She started by building on the ideas that came out of the Cultural Districts Initiative, but she's taken those ideas much further—developing partnerships across state government and helping agencies see arts and culture as part of their work.

Erik noted that there are several players in the municipal and community development space, and Carolyn has done an outstanding job of mapping that landscape, building relationships, and opening doors. Because of that work, the Council is now having conversations it simply wasn't having before and making sure arts and culture are part of discussions about business development, community investment, and local growth.

Dave concluded by saying there is much more the Committee could discuss, but the purpose of the meeting is really to have a conversation. The team is eager to answer questions, hear ideas, and learn from the Committee. As members of the Advancement Committee, each person around the table has a role to play in moving this work forward, and the staff deeply appreciates the committee's continued support and partnership. Ché then opened the meeting for questions from the Committee.

Diane Asadorian Masters asked Erik to share the peer-reviewed data on arts prescriptions; Erik confirmed that he would send the data from Frontiers in Public Health.

Tom Bernard has a colleague interested in learning more about opioid relief funds as they pertain to arts prescriptions; Erik will connect Tom with his contact in Franklin, MA who can share information about various models.

Ché asked whether there were innovations in community development that stood out to the team.

Carolyn shared that she's seeing pieces of innovative work emerging, but the dots haven't all been connected yet. Much of that has come through the Council's partnership with the Massachusetts Association of Community Development Corporations (MACDC), which represents 68 member CDCs across the state. Those organizations receive approximately \$15 million annually and are required to work with community partners. Increasingly, many of them have begun collecting data in their annual reports about creative activations and partnerships with the arts, creating an important foundation for understanding how they are already engaging with the creative sector.

That work has snowballed into new educational opportunities. Cultural Districts have begun partnering with local CDCs, while CDC members are learning more about how arts and culture can strengthen their work. In some communities, successful partnerships have even led to the creation of independent 501(c)(3) arts organizations affiliated with CDCs because community leaders recognize the value and impact of the arts.

Carolyn said she sees tremendous potential in bringing these efforts together. Her goal is to develop a working group that can connect these emerging initiatives, identify common themes, and ultimately expand them into broader policy conversations.

Ché noted that the Committee has discussed several innovative models from outside Massachusetts and emphasized the importance of continuing to look both inward and outward for ideas that could benefit the Commonwealth.

Erik agreed, adding that precedent matters when building relationships with new partners. He pointed to Canada, where arts integration is more advanced in several policy areas, and to the United Kingdom's leadership in social prescribing, as examples the Council continues to watch closely. At the same

time, he emphasized that Massachusetts has its own unique strengths. While the arts sector is naturally imaginative, imagination also brings responsibility. The challenge is translating local successes into broader systems change. Rather than reinventing models developed elsewhere, the Council's role is to adapt proven ideas, so they work within Massachusetts' unique context. Looking ahead, he said, the Agency will continue learning from innovations elsewhere while recognizing that its capacity will always be smaller than its imagination.

Ché asked whether there were any additional questions from Committee Members. Hearing none, he thanked Erik and Carolyn for their presentation and asked if there were any final thoughts or other business. With no further discussion, he thanked everyone for their participation, noted that he looked forward to seeing everyone again soon, and proclaimed "Knicks in Four" as he adjourned the meeting at 10:45am.