October 2, 2023

Secretary Yvonne Hao

Executive Office of Economic Development

One Ashburton Place, Room 2101

Boston, MA 02108

Delivered Via Email

***Re: Arts and Culture and the State’s Economic Development Plan***

Dear Madame Secretary:

Following our recent meeting, Mass Cultural Council wishes to provide two recommendations for consideration by your Office as you continue with the Economic Development Planning Process. I am encouraged that you have a vision to center the creative and cultural sector, and our partners in tourism, in the Commonwealth’s new Economic Development Plan. And I hope the following ideas will be helpful to you as you continue this important work on behalf of the Healey-Driscoll Administration.

1. **Ensure the goals of the Massachusetts Cultural District Initiative are understood and employed across relevant state government offices.**

[Ch. 10, Sec. 58A](https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleII/Chapter10/Section58A) of the Massachusetts General Laws outlines the following collaborative vision to benefit state-designated cultural districts, an Initiative that Mass Cultural Council has administered on behalf of the Commonwealth since 2011:

*Section 58A. (a) The council shall establish criteria and guidelines for state-designated cultural districts. A cultural district shall be a geographical area of a city or town with a concentration of cultural facilities located within it. Cultural districts shall attract artists and cultural enterprises to a community, encourage business and job development, establish tourist destinations, preserve and reuse historic buildings, enhance property values and foster local cultural development. The council shall assist a city or town if the city or town wishes to develop or foster a cultural district. The council shall develop an application process, with specific guidelines and criteria, for a city or town that wishes to develop or foster a cultural district.* ***Executive branch agencies, constitutional offices and quasi-governmental agencies shall identify programs and services that support and enhance the development of cultural districts and ensure that those programs and services are accessible to such districts****. The council shall consult with the Massachusetts historical commission in developing and establishing criteria and guidelines regarding preservation and reuse of historic buildings.*

*(b) Notwithstanding any general or special law to the contrary,* ***executive branch agencies, constitutional offices and quasi-governmental agencies including, but not limited to, the council and historic preservation programs, shall review and revise regulations and other economic development tools, including the evaluative criteria of such historic preservation programs, in order to support and encourage the development and success of state-designated cultural districts.***

Today, Mass Cultural Council works with a vibrant network of [55 state-designated cultural districts](https://massculturalcouncil.org/communities/cultural-districts/designated-cultural-districts/) located in every region of Massachusetts. Our Cultural Districts drive economic growth, strengthen the distinctive local character of our communities, and improve the quality of life of Massachusetts families. By supporting arts, humanities, and science organizations, cultural districts attract tourists and entrepreneurs, which help their host communities foster their creative and cultural sector and expand their tax base.

We know the Initiative is making positive economic impacts across the state: in their FY23 Annual Reports, cultural districts counted over 1.3 million visitors and attendees to their programs and events. Forty-four cultural districts reported more than 200 new businesses or organizations that opened within their boundaries. Almost 91% of our districts reported an increase in visitation, and in total, the districts supported their local creative economies by paying more than $600,000 directly to local artists.

Further, SMU DataArts recently released their [ranking](https://culturaldata.org/what-we-do/arts-vibrancy-index/) of the most arts-vibrant communities across the nation. In every division of their official Top 40 Ranking of Vibrant Communities across the country exists a Massachusetts state-designated cultural district. We know – and are proud to note - that the Initiative is making positive economic impacts in their host communities statewide.

However, as we reflect upon the Initiative at this juncture, perhaps one goal has not been activated. **The expectation that Executive Branch agencies, Constitutional Offices, and quasi-public governmental agencies should ensure state-designated cultural districts are aware of and eligible to participate and benefit from their economic development tools, programs, and supports should be enshrined in the Economic Development Plan.** Mass Cultural Council stands ready to partner with you to make this a successful venture, develop relationships, and make introductions with those leading efforts across the network of cultural districts. We know they are well-poised and eager to engage with other public programs and resources, the outcomes of which will certainly benefit local economies.

1. **Establish an Annual Summit on Arts, Tourism and Economic Development**

We believe several state, regional, and local entities are working to promote arts, tourism, and enhance economic development across the Commonwealth, however these initiatives, programs, and public bodies are scattered across various state and local agencies and should be convened annually to build relationships and foster collaboration.

**We propose the Executive Office, in collaboration with Mass Cultural Council and other partners, convene an Annual Summit on Arts, Tourism and Economic Development in Massachusetts**. Various parties could be invited to participate and learn from one another, including but not limited to state agencies under your jurisdiction, local officials, state-designated cultural districts, Local Cultural Councils, TDI Districts, BIDs, downtown initiatives, regional planning commissions, etc. By bringing these various parties together partnerships will be established, resources will be identified and shared, and our state and local economies will be bolstered by creative new endeavors.

Lastly, we note that an outcome of this conversation we would support is that **all agencies within the Executive Office of Economic Development supporting the business community through grants, services, and small business initiatives should mindfully include arts and culture organizations as part of their portfolio and constituent base**. Ensuring maximum public support for Massachusetts’ arts businesses could increase the already substantial economic impact the creative and cultural sector has on the state’s economy.

Madame Secretary, thank you for your consideration of our proposals. As we discussed Mass Cultural Council wishes to be an equal partner with the Administration on “Team Massachusetts” and we stand ready to assist you on these and other shared priorities. Please do not hesitate to contact me, or Senior Director of Public Affairs [Bethann Steiner](mailto:bethann.steiner@mass.gov) if we can provide additional information or assistance.

Sincerely,

Text, letter

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Michael J. Bobbitt

Executive Director