

Posted on 12/5/25



Power of culture

UNOFFICIAL DRAFT SUBJECT TO APPROVAL BY THE COUNCIL AT ITS NEXT MEETING

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING
OF
MASS CULTURAL COUNCIL**

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2025

**MASS CULTURAL COUNCIL HEADQUARTERS
10 SAINT JAMES AVENUE, 3RD FL., BOSTON, MA 02116**

Council Members Present were

Marc Carroll, Chair
Jo-Ann Davis, Vice Chair
Ché Anderson
Tom Bernard
Emily Bramhall
Simone Early
Diane Asadorian Masters
Anika Lopes
Ashley Occhino
Ellice Patterson
Julie Wake

Also Present were Mass Cultural Council Staff Members Michael J. Bobbitt, David Slatery, Catherine Cheng-Anderson, Jen Lawless, Bethann Steiner, Ann Petruccelli Moon, Carmen Plazas, and Charles Baldwin; Nicole Agois, Portia Brown, and Dani Rose from Open Door Arts; and Kelsey Rode from MASSCreative.

Chair Marc Carroll called the meeting to order at 12:03pm and asked Deputy Executive Director David Slatery to read the Open Meeting Law statement.

Marc opened the meeting with a brief welcome to Council Members, staff, and guests who had gathered in-person at the Agency's offices in Boston. He then asked Executive Director Michael Bobbitt and Program Officer Charles Baldwin to introduce the meeting's guest speakers from Open Door Arts: Dani Rose, Nicole Agois, and Portia Brown. Each introduced themselves and provided an overview of their work and the Access HUB, a free online platform developed with support from Mass Cultural Council that guides organizations through every stage of the accessibility cycle and brings together a wealth of access-related resources. Nicole, Dani, and Portia gave a brief tour of the HUB demonstrating how it works and mentioned that artwork used on the site

Prepared on 12/5/25

provides context rather than decoration.

A short discussion followed regarding how the HUB was developed—Marc asked about the process and Julie Wake spoke to early impressions of its impact, noting that although it may be too early to analyze success, there is a sense that the work is on the brink of meaningful progress. Ché Anderson asked whether Open Door Arts had worked directly with organizations to catalyze change agents in local communities and inquired about success in Worcester and what support might be helpful. The speakers explained that they have a gallery presence in Worcester and that their UP office hours have helped them monitor participation and success. They noted that engagement has been strong and that there are opportunities to connect and expand further.

Michael added observations about lessons learned, praising Charles Baldwin's leadership at the agency, and shared hopes to maintain funding and scale the project as they head into phase three of the four-phase initiative. He expressed his intention to grow the UP Learning Network, eventually offboard components of the program, and encouraged thousands of people to engage in learning and consider UP designation. Ellice Patterson suggested returning in a year to see how the work has been implemented and how communities are being impacted. Dani noted that internally they joke about preparing for "round four," and that ongoing community presentations help them understand what is and isn't working, though more analysis is needed to understand how organizations are implementing ideas.

The Chair then asked Council Members if they'd had a chance to review the minutes from their last meeting and if they had he would entertain a motion and a second to approve the minutes in the form presented. Ché moved to approve the minutes, and Julie seconded the motion. All were in favor, and it was unanimously

RESOLVED: to approve the minutes of the 167th Meeting Mass Cultural Council in the form presented.

During his Chair's report, Marc shared that he had traveled to New York City the previous Thursday to see his daughter perform at Lincoln Center. She plays the cello, and the performance centered on the history of San Juan Hill in New York City. The production used jazz, spoken word, DJ turntable, and symphonic orchestra to tell the story of a once-thriving African American and Puerto Rican community that existed until the construction of Lincoln Center. The piece depicted the community's activism around civil rights and the injustices—including police brutality—experienced there. Marc explained that in the 1940s a politician labeled the neighborhood a slum, leading to the displacement of 7,000 families. He reflected on how art can weave a complex historical narrative in a way that captivates audiences. Ché added historical context about Robert Moses and how his urban planning decisions displaced lower-income residents, contrasting his approach with Jane Jacobs' ideas and noting the significant role many affected communities played in shaping the arts ecosystem. Allyce asked whether the performance included a call to action; Marc said it was more a reflection on the past and a reminder not to repeat it.

Michael then gave his Executive Director's report, noting that it has been a busy fall. He described continuing conversations with the Restaurant and Lodging Associations as part of the Agency's plan to launch a statewide campaign focused on buying art locally in the new year. There have been many other productive conversations and

engagements as of late. Michael was the keynote speaker on the first day of the OneCape Summit in Harwich and joined Council Member Julie Wake as a panelist for a discussion on placemaking and the arts on the second day. Dave attended the Associated Industries of Massachusetts (AIM) annual outlook and the quarterly STEM Advisory Council Meeting along with an event presented by Mass Humanities at which their very first Massachusetts Storyteller Award was presented. Michael and staff visited the Berkshire Museum in Pittsfield at the invitation of Senator Paul Mark and were joined by Tom Bernard. Conversations with MassDOT and the Mass Office of Travel & Tourism continued, and a new connection was made with recently appointed Secretary of Economic Development Eric Paley; Michael noted that conversations with MassDOT will resume when a new Secretary is named. He thanked the Advancement team – Dave, Erik Holmgren, and Carolyn Cole for their ongoing work which is leading to significant resources for the field and the Public Affairs team for planning excellent and well-attended grant celebrations throughout the fall. He concluded by telling the Council about an event the Agency is co-hosting with Boston University College of Fine Arts on Friday focused on improving outcomes for graduates of Massachusetts arts higher-education programs. Council Members are welcome to attend; Ché Anderson will be a panelist during one session. There were no questions for Michael.

Marc asked Senior Director of Public Affairs Bethann Steiner for her Public Affairs update.

Bethann noted that Public Affairs had assembled informational packets for each of the Council members and asked them all to look at our promotional, marketing, and events materials. There's even stickers, which are a part of two ongoing campaigns to celebrate the 45th anniversary of the LCC program and truly welcome new and first-time grantees.

She thanked members for attending the regional grants celebrations hosted to date this fall in Cambridge, Plymouth and Cummington and noted that in the folder there is a Save the Date page with more upcoming events noted. Next week we will be on Cape Cod and then on Dec. 1 we will be in MetroWest. Further, our partners at MASSCreative have authorized me to share that Creative Sector Day at the State House will be March 3, 2026 and that is always a wonderful day, so please save the date.

Legislative advocacy continues, with meetings, written testimony and attending and presenting at public hearings. We anticipate the Education and State Administration and Regulatory Oversight Committees will act on our STEM to STEAM and CFF technical correction bills next month. Additionally, if you look at your folders, you'll see a handout entitled "Written Testimony as Easy as 1, 2, 3" - with thanks to Council Member Tom Bernard, Bethann went over the handout that showcased 3 simple steps to submitting written testimony.

Bethann noted that yesterday Michael and she spent the day in Medford and Arlington at the invitation of House Leader Paul Donato and Tourism, Arts and Cultural Development Committee Chair Sean Garballey, and it was a wonderful day touring and meeting and speaking with various creative and cultural leaders in those communities.

Lastly, Bethann mentioned some breaking news that was published while this meeting started. The Governor has chosen the portrait of former Governor Samuel Adams to hang in her ceremonial State House office, in honor of the upcoming 250th Anniversary

of the American Revolution. When she first assumed office she brought a number of arts leaders, including Mass Cultural Council, to advise on how to decorate her State House office space.

Michael praised the Public Affairs team for their creativity and noted the importance of focusing on newly funded grantees, especially as program changes mean some legacy groups are no longer receiving grants. Celebrating new grantees, he explained, helps counterbalance frustration. He emphasized that the Agency is only able to fund a small percentage of the sector with unique grants in a calendar year.

Julie asked what feedback the Agency is receiving from colleges about the higher-ed work. Michael described conversations that began two years ago and his own MBA studies that informed his thinking about needed change. He said faculty resistance to more business and civics acumen focused courses has been a challenge, as some see business training as conflicting with artistic integrity. Deans and department chairs tend to be more supportive, recognizing enrollment pressures and financial realities. He noted that Brittany Butler from the Harvard Kennedy School will help with stakeholder mapping during Friday's session. He anticipates deeper conversations in the spring and said Mass Cultural Council is incorporating more political engagement into this work. He noted progress among conservatories: New England Conservatory now requires business training, MassArt offers a business minor, and Montserrat College of Art requires students to have part-time jobs.

Michael added that he is having discussions around childcare initiatives, referencing Heritage Museums and Gardens and cultural assets on the Cape. He noted the Cape Symphony's childcare program, which parents speak about enthusiastically, and said that many cultural groups are already working with EEC on similar models. He reiterated that MCC is still in the pitching phase and hopes to move toward implementation, which is why staff recommends extending the strategic plan.

Marc asked a clarifying question about Michael's role at the Boston University event and how it aligns with Ché Anderson's. Michael explained that he is acting as the host/moderator for the day and Ché is a panelist during a panel discussion during the second half of the day.

Marc then asked Chief Financial Officer Cathy Cheng-Anderson for her Business Operations update.

Cathy began by sharing that last week during the Federal Government shutdown the Agency received 2/3rds, (\$865,000) of this year's Federal Funding allocation. This is very good news as delays were expected.

She then shared that, as Council Members are aware, Mass Cultural Council was awarded \$1.3 million in FY26 from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). The federal award requires a \$1.3 million state match, bringing the total program impact to \$2.6 million that will be assigned as a direct grant. These funds are subject to additional federal requirements that do not apply to all other grantees. To assign Federal Grants the Agency has administratively selected which approved grantees receive federal/match funds based on their administrative capacity and staffing or whether the grantees have accepted such funds in the past. This has long been the Agency's practice when it comes to distributing federal funds. As of today, all proposed grantees

have been notified of their allocation source. We heard from three large grantee institutions who have raised concerns about accepting federal funds under the current federal administration: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Institute of Contemporary Arts, Boston, Sterling & Francine Clark Art Institute, all of whom were approved to receive \$55,000 grants

The nature of their concerns varied: One organization has requested clarity on legal protections or Agency support if they proceed with accepting federal funds while the other two have expressed a stronger inclination to decline federal funding altogether due to political and compliance concerns.

In response Agency has placed these three grants on hold while we try to assign the grant to other approved grantees who would be willing to accept federal funds. Once the reassignment is confirmed, we will notify the grantees concerned and finalize their awards using state match dollars instead. While unlikely, if reassignment is not feasible, the organization's declination will be accepted, and funds will be redirected to the next eligible organization on the grants list.

Of the 91 Federal grant grantees 86% have executed a contract. YouthReach, Cultural Investment Portfolio, and Operating Grants for Organizations contracts who have already executed their contracts will be paid by the end of the day.

Emily Bramhall asked for clarification on the grant amounts, and Cathy provided context around NEA and federal funds requirements established under the Trump administration. She further explained that the Agency was able to reallocate funds by using six grantees to meet match requirements and provide grant coverage; three of the six proposed replacement grantees have accepted so far.

Marc asked whether the Agency would notify organizations after all funds are reassigned; Cathy confirmed yes, noting that the money will ultimately come from the state.

Anika asked whether this type of federal reassignment had happened before. Jen Lawless explained that it is rare—usually one or two cases, owing to additional reporting and auditing requirements.

Allyce asked where the state money came from to cover the shift, and staff explained that all funds are drawn from the same state allocation and that federal dollars supplement existing state funds.

Cathy then moved to the next topic and reported that on October 22 the Executive Committee approved \$325 for Michael to attend the Capacity Interactive Bootcamp conference on November 6 and 7 in New York City. The Committee has also discussed the Agency's travel policy. Cathy provided a brief summary of that discussion, then provided some context and framework for the discussion in today's meeting.

Context:

- Mass Cultural Council is increasingly being called upon to represent Massachusetts nationally. The Agency shares best practices, brings in resources, and strengthens partnerships that benefit the Massachusetts cultural sector.

- To date, most out-of-state travel is done by the Executive Director, and in many cases that travel is partially or fully paid for by outside partners who invite Michael to present or participate in their convenings.
- The chart Council Members received this afternoon (copies of which are available upon request) confirms that we have consistently remained below the Council-approved spending plan for out-of-state travel over the past few fiscal years. Even as the Agency's national engagement grows, it continues to operate in a disciplined and responsible manner.
- The Agency maintains very strong compliance practices. When a staff member travels out of state, it requires preapprovals and documentation — including Travel Authorizations, Procurement Requests, and State Ethics disclosures when applicable — these must be completed and approved before any travel arrangements are made.

Framework:

The Council and staff share dual priorities:

1. Ensuring responsible, transparent use of public dollars
2. Enabling timely responses to high-impact national opportunities that advance the cultural sector in Massachusetts.

The current Out of State Travel Policy requires Council approval for each out-of-state trip. This process was created in 2019 after some press reports on state out of state travel. The Legislature directed Mass Cultural Council in the next annual budget to adopt a pre-approval process for out-of-state travel in its budget language.

At the October 22 Executive Committee meeting, at the request of a Committee Member, Committee Members and staff discussed whether there is a more efficient policy structure that upholds accountability and transparency while streamlining the staff and the Council's administrative processes.

Staff determined that the goal is to refine the Agency's administrative process to support timely decisions for mission-critical out-of-state travel while ensuring the Council's time is well spent on discussions such as setting priorities and driving leadership for the cultural sector — rather than approving individual, small dollar value travel logistics.

With those goals in mind, the Executive Committee reached consensus to bring the following framework forward for Council discussion today:

First, approval of one annual travel budget line, rather than trip-by-trip votes. Staff would manage travel within that approved budget. Staff would establish a variance threshold — for example, 10–15 percent — above which any additional spending must be approved by the Chair and reported to the Council. Staff would maintain transparency through preparing quarterly standalone reports on any travel for inclusion in the Council Meeting book. All fiscal and state compliance rules would be kept in place, and alignment with all state finance laws and procedures would be maintained. All travel must have a clear public purpose; reasonable, lowest-cost travel options must be used; and manager approval is required.

Tom Bernard asked whether a not-to-exceed amount or percentage threshold could be used instead of case-by-case approvals. The Executive Committee did not reach a consensus but hopes to arrive at a framework for a vote at a future meeting.

Vice Chair Jo-Ann Davis stated that in-state travel currently has no threshold. She suggested establishing a line item managed by staff with internal criteria, while still giving the Council some role in oversight. She proposed that staff provide a travel report every six months rather than seeking approval for each trip.

Ashley Occhino asked what existed before the travel policy was established and what issues arose. Marc explained that a reporter had reviewed numbers and raised questions, and although nothing inappropriate occurred, the legislature directed Mass Cultural Council to institute a formal travel policy.

Cathy noted that the Agency files a legislative report annually that includes travel expenditures, and that if Mass Cultural Council exceeds a subsidiary account in the budget, it must report it to the Council. Marc added that he noticed FY26 approved travel spending is lower, and Cathy explained that the reduction is based on past usage.

Michael added that the Agency did not receive a significant increase in its line item and had underspent for the past three years. In FY27, out-of-state travel could be reported out more clearly for transparency.

Marc highlighted the main question: whether the Council has consensus on a travel budget number. Tom noted that the fiscal year ended with \$14,000 underspent and asked whether staff can reallocate such funds; Cathy confirmed that yes, the Agency can do this.

Ché added that it may be more important to articulate the Council's level of comfort—focusing on top-line numbers and broad oversight rather than constant review of individual trips. Marc said he would be comfortable with an end-of-year wrap-up summarizing where travel occurred and whether the Agency remained on budget. Anika agreed. Cathy said that for this fiscal year the Agency will use \$17,000 as the figure and will return in February with a draft new policy for review based on the discussion today, beginning with the Executive Committee.

There was a brief break and when the Council returned, the Chair moved to the next agenda item and asked Michael to explain staff's recommendation to extend the strategic plan. Michael explained that many operational and programmatic goals are still in progress, and staff feels they are halfway through implementation. Extending the plan through 2028 would allow the Agency to build a stronger foundation. In FY27 they would engage a consultant to begin the next planning cycle. He drew Council Members' attention to page 39 in their meeting materials to review the three main goals of the plan along with related accomplishments and then summarized the addendum.

Marc described the Executive Committee's conversation pertaining to the strategic plan extension, and Jo-Ann reiterated that the full Council should discuss the matter. She suggested developing a dashboard to visualize progress. Ché spoke about preparing for future challenges, including the year 2035. Marc praised the strong foundation staff has built and emphasized the importance of being in key rooms for advocacy and

advancement. He supported Jo-Ann's dashboard suggestion. The Council did not vote; rather, they agreed to continue discussing extension over the next two meetings.

Tom said he supports an extension, noting that staff already has significant work underway and that starting a new planning exercise prematurely would burden the team. Allyce asked whether the Agency's strategic objectives include work around housing or healthcare for artists. Michael said it is complicated, as the arts sector does not consistently show up in those conversations. He described an adaptive challenge: encouraging artists and arts groups to engage in policy arenas they traditionally avoid. He referenced a large meeting in the Berkshires and four recent housing meetings where participation from artists was low. He recommended leveraging the 58 cultural districts to pitch ideas, such as using affordable housing tax credits for artist housing. Dave added that staff is making inroads in both housing and healthcare through advancement work, including social prescribing, though concrete strategies are still developing. Allyce suggested the next strategic plan should incorporate these issues.

Julie referenced AFTA's policy tools and asked whether Mass Cultural Council has a similar one-sheet for housing advocacy. She noted that housing meetings occur weekly but can feel intimidating without clear guidance. Michael said he can facilitate connections and described the challenge of getting the sector into these rooms. Ché raised concerns about how affordable housing is defined and the need to ensure artists—many of whom are low-income—are included in development conversations. He noted that getting artists to testify could open important opportunities for the creative community. Tom said that while climate change may seem beyond MCC's scope, environmental justice has clear intersections with the arts. Ellice spoke about financial barriers that prevent artists from participating in policy discussions, suggesting that institutions could shoulder some of the cost through paid engagement. She emphasized the real affordability barriers facing artists in Massachusetts. Michael reflected that shifting hearts and minds is one of the hardest parts of the job and noted that the legislature and cross-sector partners are increasingly receptive. The Housing Secretary recently raised the issue of teacher housing, which parallels concerns for artists.

Ellice suggested offering grantees a toolkit to support civic engagement and make them feel more confident. She asked how Mass Cultural Council could set artists up for success without overshadowing advocacy partners. Simone added that conversations about housing naturally tie to broader poverty reduction, though such framing can be difficult. She suggested using dashboard indicators within the strategic plan to determine whether extension is warranted. If new priorities emerge that are not included in the current plan, the Council may need an interim structure. Advancement work, she noted, is increasingly expansive.

Senior Director of Program Operations Jen Lawless then provided a high-level Programs update. More than 180,000 applications have passed through the system this year, including LCC submissions. Last night's Grants for Creative Individuals deadline resulted in 3,231 applications, the same as last year, though Mass Cultural Council is budgeted to fund only 450. She noted that the Cultural Facilities Fund application is open through December 11 and that staff is working to finalize Cultural Districts Initiative and UP Innovation grants.

She shared that Alison Rosenthal has been hired as a new member of the Grants team.

She also shared that the Agency has condensed 18 grant programs down to nine, and is seeing increased participation due to outreach, pushing more people into the system. She shared that by spring, when the YouthReach program opens, staff will have completed a full review of every single grant program.

Michael added that he regularly hears gratitude from the sector about program consolidation and that applications will continue to grow as the Agency moves through asset inventory work and continues its outreach efforts.

Jen then provided an overview of the Cultural Districts Initiative redesign highlighting and its continued alignment with its statute; she also described the Agency's work with CivicMoxie, a consultant with national experience. She explained that many municipalities already have the components needed for designation and will be able to complete the new application easily. Existing districts will have 18 months to come into compliance with the new guidelines. She highlighted improvements to abutter identification and mapping requirements and emphasized the goal of reinforcing peer-to-peer learning. Jen emphasized that discussion with the districts is ongoing and we have always viewed this redesign as an iterative process.

Jo-Ann thanked Jen for the context, saying it clarified the importance of the initiative. She stressed the need for strong communication about the "why," especially for districts that may struggle to meet new parameters and suggested proactive outreach to avoid backlash. Staff noted that the virtual Cultural Districts Meeting in November would be an important moment in this process and an opportunity to begin explaining the upcoming changes to the program.

Marc then moved to the final item on the agenda: a vote on additional FY26 Grant Recommendations including NEA Arts & Health Grants in the amount of \$75,000; a Creative Advantage grant to Mass Challenge for \$25,000; and a recommendation that staff can re-allocate unused approved grant funds for any program to other grant applicants who would have been next eligible for such funds under such program or any other FY 26 recommended program. The Council decided to take one vote on the two grants and the allocation recommendation. The Chair then asked Dave to review the conflict of interest policies. Dave asked if any member had a conflict of interest with any of the four proposed grantees noted in the meeting materials. Marc disclosed, as he previously done at the Programs Committee meeting, that he had a connection with Fenway Community Health Center and that he would abstain from voting and/or discussing grants pertaining to Fenway Community Health Center.

Upon motion made and duly seconded and with abstentions noted, it was

RESOLVED: To approve the Social; Prescription: NEA Arts & Health Grants in the amount of \$75,000 as recommended by the Programs Committee.

RESOLVED: To approve a Creative Advantage grant to Mass Challenge of \$25,000, as recommended by the Programs Committee.

RESOLVED: To approve the ability of staff to re-allocate unused approved grant funds for any program to other grant applicants who would have been

next eligible for such funds under such program or any other FY 26 recommended program as recommended by the Programs Committee.

In closing, Marc commended staff for doing a fantastic job and emphasized the importance of amplifying Mass Cultural Council's work, especially during this time when communities need support and leadership. The Chair adjourned the meeting at 3:10 p.m.