

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

**Minutes of the Meeting of Mass Cultural Council
Executive Committee
Wednesday, February 11, 2026**

Online Meeting

Council Members Present:

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

Mass Cultural Council Staff Members Present:

- David Slatery, Acting Executive Director and Deputy Executive Director
- Cathy Cheng-Anderson, Chief Financial Officer
- Jen Lawless, Senior Director of Program Operations
- Bethann Steiner, Senior Director of Public Affairs
- Ann Petruccelli Moon, Acting Chief of Staff
- Carmen Plazas, Communications & Community Engagement Manager

Chair Marc Carroll called the meeting to order at 10:04am and asked Acting Chief of Staff Ann Petruccelli Moon to read the Open Meeting Law statement. He then asked if Committee Members had reviewed the minutes of their October 22 meeting and their Special Meeting on December 3. If they had, he would entertain a motion and a second to approve both sets of minutes. 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 approved unanimously.

RESOLVED: to approve the minutes of the October 22, 2025 - Executive Committee Meeting and the December 3, 2025 - Special Meeting of the Executive Committee in the forms presented.

Marc then began his report. He shared that the Task Force charged with finding an executive search firm to lead the Executive Director search held its first

meeting on February 4. The Task Force includes members of the Executive Committee, as well as Council Members Rhonda Anderson and Ashley Occhino. The next meeting is planned for March 6, after which the RFP should be ready for distribution. He then invited Acting Executive Director Dave Slatery to provide his update.

Dave began by recapping recent history and noting that, only a few hours after the last formal set of Council meetings concluded, the previous Executive Director, Michael Bobbitt, announced his intention to depart Mass Cultural Council at the end of December. Special meetings followed, and Dave was fortunate to be named by the Council as Acting Executive Director beginning at the start of the year. Since then, he has held several internal meetings with staff and reported that morale is positive. He noted that the February Advancement Committee meeting was canceled to allow space for the Task Force meeting and that a full advancement report will be presented at the February 25 Council Meeting.

Dave then shared budget news, describing how, at the start of the year, leadership had been eagerly awaiting the Governor's H2 budget. He and Bethann Steiner met with the Chairs of the Tourism, Arts, and Cultural Development Committee, who were supportive, and initially hoped the Governor might propose level funding. They were thrilled when the Governor mentioned arts and culture in her State of the Commonwealth address and even more pleased when she later proposed a \$1.3 million increase to the Agency's line item in her budget proposal. Dave emphasized that this represents only the first phase of the process, but noted that historically, the Governor's proposal has been the lowest figure, making this an encouraging starting point. He added that he had recently encountered both the Governor and Lieutenant Governor at separate events and thanked them personally for their support.

He continued by describing a busy period of external engagement and noting that he felt proud of the Agency's growing visibility. He attended a talk by Secretary of Economic Development Eric Paley and briefly discussed with the Secretary the possibility of creating an arts and culture subcommittee within the state's Competitiveness Council. He participated in several business and economic gatherings, including a MassEcon economic update and the AIM economic kickoff, where the Governor spoke. He also serves on the Charles River Chamber of Commerce Arts & Culture Committee. His goal, he explained, is to ensure that arts and culture are consistently included in conversations about economic development and business growth. He also attended the Commonwealth's STEM Committee meeting, recently held at a Boston University robotics lab, emphasizing how creativity and the arts contribute to innovation in STEM careers. Building on earlier discussions, the Agency has now been charged with formally constituting a STEAM sub-committee, with former Council Member, and current STEM Committee member, Matthew Keator already volunteering to serve.

Dave noted ongoing conversations about the Governor's Conference on Travel and Tourism about including an arts and culture panel. He also referenced a

recent convening of higher education leaders titled "Degrees of Change," which explored integrating business acumen into fine arts curricula and received very positive feedback. A second conference has been scheduled for April 17 at Worcester State University, with next steps already underway. He reported progress on an MITx asynchronous online course on arts entrepreneurship, expected to launch by the end of March. On the programs side, YouthReach is now open. He added that other states have increasingly reached out to learn from Massachusetts, including meetings with Pennsylvania colleagues about capital grant programs and a planned lunch-and-learn with the Illinois Arts Council. Finally, he announced that the Agency is essentially finalized on a lease for its office space. He concluded by noting that these developments represented the major accomplishments of the past six weeks and invited questions from Committee Members.

Marc thanked Dave for the update. Julie asked how the organization frames the transition from STEM to STEAM in technical environments and how best to communicate the concept. Dave responded that the message focuses on creativity as an essential component of STEM, with the arts serving as a pathway to innovation, noting that Erik Holmgren would elaborate further at the Council Meeting. Julie added that the humanities also play an important role in fostering creative thinking across sectors. Marc remarked on how busy the past six weeks had been, and Jo-Ann congratulated Dave on the work.

Marc then invited Bethann Steiner to give her Public Affairs update. Bethann began with the positive budget news. The Governor filed her spending recommendations in January, and this officially kicks off the state budget building exercise. We are very grateful and pleased with her recommendation for the Agency - she has proposed a 5% increase to our operating budget. This is a historic moment - if enacted, this would be the highest operating budget in our history. We have been counseled by various legislators that level funding was a win in FY27, so we are extremely grateful to be starting at this point. Next steps: we are meeting with the House Ways & Means Chair in early March, we expect to be called to testify on the Governor's budget in March, then the House debate is in April, followed by the Senate debate in May. This is great news for public investment in arts and culture.

She then shared that work continues on the two bills we have filed this session, both of which have advanced from their original committee, and now the Cultural Facilities Fund (CFF) bill is in Senate Ways & Means, and the STEM to STEAM bill is in House Ways & Means. Testimony has been submitted, and meetings with the lead sponsors have taken place. The sponsors are working to advance the bills, and we shall raise the issue in future meetings with the Committee Chairs.

Several public events are coming up in March, and Council Members are encouraged to register and attend. Events include:

- Creative Sector Day at the State House - March 3, 10am. Register now on MASSCreative's website.

- Northeastern Mass Grant Celebration - March 9, 1pm. Abbott Public Library in Marblehead.
- Hampden County Grant Celebration - March 23, 1pm. El Mercado Local in the Holyoke Cultural District. Donna and Rhonda confirmed to attend, as did Rep. Duffy and Rep. Arriaga.
- Bristol County Grant Celebration - March 30, 1pm, New Bedford Whaling Museum. Ashley and Cecil confirmed to attend, as did Rep. Hendricks and Rep. Howitt.

Marc thanked Bethann and expressed appreciation to the Governor and the broader sector for helping secure the proposed budget increase. He then asked Dave to explain the next agenda item: a proposed extension of the current Strategic Plan. Dave explained that given the leadership transition and the plan's expiration in five months, staff is recommending a simple two-year extension to the current plan with no significant changes. This would allow continued implementation while giving a future Executive Director time to undertake a more comprehensive planning process beginning in 2027. Dave noted that although not tied directly to funding, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) requires the Agency to maintain a strategic plan. Julie commented that extending the plan would be a gift to a new Executive Director, allowing time to settle in and develop a long-term vision. Jo-Ann and Cecil echoed their support, emphasizing continuity and stability. Marc asked for a motion and a second to recommend to the full Council the extension of the Strategic Plan. Ché Anderson moved to make the recommendation; Julie seconded the motion. By roll call vote and noting that Iván Espinoza-Madriral was absent, it was approved unanimously.

RESOLVED: To recommend to Mass Cultural Council a 2-year extension of the Council's FY24-26 Strategic Plan.

Marc then noted a required notification of staff out-of-state travel that he approved and invited Cathy Cheng-Anderson to explain. Cathy reported that Erik Holmgren had been invited to serve as a panelist on February 12 at a National Assembly of State Arts Agencies conference in Washington, DC, to present the Agency's role in opioid relief funding and highlight arts prescription work. The trip was largely covered by NASAA, but the uncovered part of the out-of-state travel cost was \$110, approved by Marc as Chair due to timing, and was being formally reported to the Committee. There were no questions.

The Committee then discussed the broader out-of-state travel policy. Marc explained that the Council has found it inefficient to spend meeting time approving minor expenses such as \$40 or \$110 travel requests. He proposed a framework in which the Executive Director would approve routine staff travel within the existing travel budget line, while the Council would retain oversight of Executive Director travel and any expenses exceeding a defined threshold. Dave clarified that the original statutory intent was for travel to be managed within an established budget line and agreed that oversight should focus primarily on Executive Director travel. Marc emphasized the desire to avoid reviewing minor expenses while still maintaining appropriate accountability. Ché

asked whether best practices from peer organizations could inform an appropriate threshold. Cathy noted that travel costs vary by industry and suggested reviewing internal historical data. Marc proposed analyzing travel expenses from the past two or three years to establish a reasonable threshold, an idea supported by Jo-Ann and Cecil. Dave suggested drafting a short framework paragraph for discussion at the February Council Meeting, with the goal of having the Council vote on a new policy at its spring meeting to take effect in FY27. All were in agreement.

Marc then asked Committee Members to review the draft agenda for the February 25 Council Meeting and asked whether there would be a Mission Moment. Dave explained that while there was no traditional mission moment planned, the presentation on Grants for Creative Individuals would include artwork from artists benefiting from the grants. Marc noted how much the Council values and enjoys seeing artists' work.

Before adjournment, Jo-Ann thanked Dave and the staff for ensuring a seamless leadership transition, and Marc echoed appreciation for the continuity and leadership provided during this period of transition. Marc, as Chair, adjourned the meeting at 10:54am.