

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

MINUTES OF THE MEETING

**MASS CULTURAL COUNCIL
PROGRAMS COMMITTEE**

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2026

ONLINE MEETING

Committee Members Present were

Julie Wake, Co-Chair of the Programs Committee
Marc Carroll, Council Chair
Emily Bramhall
Simone Early
Donna Haghghat
Ashley Occhino

Staff Members Present were

David Slatery, Acting Executive Director
Jen Lawless, Senior Director of Program Operations
Catherine Cheng-Anderson, Chief Financial Officer
Bethann Steiner, Senior Director of Public Affairs
Ann Petruccelli Moon, Acting Chief of Staff
Lillian Lee, Program Officer
Colin Baylor, Grants Management System Officer
Allison Rosenthal, Grants Management System Officer
Dan Blask, Program Manager
Käthe Swaback, Program Officer
Carmen Plazas, Communications & Community Engagement Manager

Co-Chair Julie Wake called the meeting to order at 1:02pm and asked Acting Chief of Staff Ann Petruccelli Moon to read the Open Meeting Law statement. Julie then asked if Committee Members had reviewed the minutes of their last meeting held on October 22, 2026, and called for a motion to approve them. After motion made and duly seconded, by roll call vote and noting that Jo-Ann Davis and Cecil Barron Jensen were absent it was unanimously

RESOLVED: that the Programs Committee approves the minutes of the October 22, 2026 Programs Committee Meeting in the form presented.

Julie welcomed Committee Members and staff to the meeting. She did not have any updates and asked Acting Executive Director Dave Slatery for his report.

Dave began by recapping recent history by noting that only a few hours after the last formal set of meetings concluded, 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 is scheduled for 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 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 is 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.

Council Chair Marc Carroll added to what Dave mentioned about the Search Task Force. The group met last week, and Marc noted that this is the first of two task forces he plans to convene—this one focused specifically on selecting a search firm. A second task force has not yet been assembled and will focus on identifying Executive Director candidates. The process is moving along, and regular updates will be provided. Right now, the task force is in the process of creating and finalizing an RFP.

Julie then asked Senior Director of Program Operations Jen Lawless for her report.

Jen noted that the Agency is now halfway through the fiscal year. The staff has finished taking in applications, though the Cultural Facilities Fund is still in process. Today's presentation on grants is the last one of the fiscal year. Jen referred Committee Members to the memo in their meeting materials for more detailed information but shared some high-level points: in FY26, 19,896 applications were received through GMS, which includes direct grants as well as all LCC grant cycles that Mass Cultural Council administers. This represents a 3% increase from FY25, and compared to FY21, it's a 65% increase. Jen paused to emphasize that GMS only works because of the amazing staff and introduced the newest member of the grants team, Allie Rosenthal, who has been with the team for six months. Allie introduced herself, noting that she, along with Jen and Colin Baylor, is responsible for administering the GMS, ensuring it runs smoothly. She described the system as efficient and appreciated the opportunity to learn how everything works and is looking forward to continuing her work. Colin, who has been with the team for three years, greeted everyone and thanked Jen for the invitation.

Jen highlighted that the increase in applications shows that Mass Cultural Council is reaching many organizations, though some still cannot access funding. Discussions have been underway about consolidating programs while minimizing overlap. Looking ahead to FY27, programs are already opening: YouthReach is open, and Creative Experiences will open in early March. This is a project-based program for schools. The programs that open now will have recommendations presented to the Committee in August.

Jen provided a quick update on the Cultural Districts Initiative. When the Committee met in October, the initiative was discussed and draft revised guidelines had been rolled out to districts. This generated substantial feedback. Some of it stating that the changes were coming too quickly. In response, the team listened to the feedback and made appropriate modifications keeping the goals of the redesign while considering the comments, reiterating that the program is based on statute, which focuses on geographical coverage and outlines six goals. The redesign aimed to realign the program with these goals, strengthen municipal participation, ensure district sustainability, and position districts as integral drivers of economic growth. Modifications were made to the proposed guidelines: instead of requiring an ordinance, cities will submit a resolution with specific language, and tangible municipal investment is required. Cultural District grants will remain, giving current districts two full years to meet new requirements and develop relationships with their municipalities. This modified plan, which was shared with districts in January, has been well received. The program will reopen to current districts in 2027 and to new districts later that year, eliminating rolling applications and opening in early spring.

Julie asked how many districts would be allowed. Jen explained that this is a challenge. While the designation does not carry a cash award, some funding has been provided, which is especially valuable to new districts. The process for newer districts will involve engagement with state partners, letters of intent, informal site visits, and a panel of sister agencies to determine readiness for visits. Given limited capacity, districts that don't get funding in the first year will be considered in the second year.

Donna asked about designated districts paying staff members and whether stipends or donations could be used. Jen explained that flexibility is preferred, noting that districts may have seasonal needs and varying hours. The goal is to move toward sustainable staffing models, recognizing tight budgets. Julie asked about developing relationships within municipalities and points of contact. Jen responded that many districts are already deeply engaged as municipal entities, though some may have a new mayor or management team since their designation, providing an opportunity to reengage with elected leaders. Julie suggested that the program committee could visit applicants, and Jen noted that formal site visits haven't been conducted for a while but could be scheduled for 2027. Dave added that the team did well incorporating feedback, even if the feedback came later in the process than would have been ideal.

Program Officer Käthe Swaback then gave an update on the Agency's YouthReach program, which has been redesigned and just reopened. A copy of Käthe's presentation is available upon request. Donna thanked Käthe and the team for the work and asked about managing multiple changes at once, including transitioning from three-year to four-year funding and broadening the applicant pool. Käthe noted that this first year includes a two-year cycle plus the four-year cycle, providing time to assess organizations before launching longer-term funding. Jen added that they are trying to

balance these changes. Julie asked about the applicant pool, noting that this first round is a smaller practice run supporting partnerships like YAIN, and expressed interest in visiting or reviewing reports. A recent blog post covered the current year, and a two-year report will follow next summer.

Dave then reviewed the conflicts of interest list and procedures, noting no changes. When a Committee Member is connected to an organization under discussion, they recuse themselves from the discussion and the vote.

Jen then introduced Program Officer Lillian Lee, who works on the Gaming Mitigation program. Lillian provided a quick overview of the memo included in the meeting materials, describing herself as a mid-30s female with indigo hair and glasses. She noted that grant totals this year were \$3,568,500, about \$57,000 less than last year, with the grant range remaining \$6,000 to \$200,000 and formula funding factors unchanged. Jen added that the program has been run very well and received positive feedback.

Ashley asked about planning for the next two-year cycle and anticipated applicants for FY27. Lillian noted that in the final report, an impact and advocacy section was added, capturing challenges such as cost increases and uncertainty. The redesign aimed to be more inclusive of smaller organizations. Intentional outreach ensures a good fit, with cold calls also considered. Jen emphasized that funding use is statute-based and highlighted Lillian's detailed work, particularly outreach to organizations that applied but were not successful.

Jen then asked Dan Blask to introduce the Grants for Creative Individuals grant recommendations. Dan described the program as focused on individual artists and the creative industry, noting that funding was redesigned and rolled out in FY24. He gave an overview of applicants and mentioned that slides depicting images of the artists' work would be presented at the Council Meeting. Julie praised the program for providing unrestricted funding to artists and asked about opportunities to increase funding. Dan explained that while the program historically provided larger grants, in recent years it has distributed a greater number of smaller grants. Julie concluded by thanking Jen and the team for their work.

There were no further questions and Julie asked for a motion and a second to recommend both the Gaming Mitigation Fund and Grants for Creative Individuals recommendations to the full Council. Donna Haghighat moved to recommend the grants, Emily Bramhall seconded the motion. By roll call vote and noting that Jo-Ann Davis and Cecil Barron Jensen were absent, it was unanimously

Section 7(a) - Gaming Mitigation Program

RESOLVED: To recommend to Mass Cultural Council the Gaming Mitigation Program grants as presented at the Programs Committee Meeting.

Section 7(b) - Grants for Creative Individuals

RESOLVED: To recommend to Mass Cultural Council the Grants for Creative Individuals, as presented at the Programs Committee Meeting.

For the official record, the following Committee Members abstained from voting and/or discussing grants pertaining to the organizations listed under their name (note- many of

the organizations, if not all, were not included in the grants reports at today's meeting but the listing is included as a matter of course) :

Marc Carroll

- a. Boston Youth Symphony Orchestra
- b. The Rivers School

Jo-Ann Davis

- a. The Care Center
- b. Springfield Museums
- c. MASSCreative

Cecil Barron Jensen

- a. Artists Association of Nantucket
- b. Egan Maritime Institute
- c. Nantucket Cultural District

Julie Wake

- a. Arts Foundation of Cape Cod
- b. Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute

Ashley Occhino

- a. Fall River Arts and Culture Coalition/One South Coast Chamber Foundation
- b. Southeastern Massachusetts Visitors Bureau
- c. SouthCoast Community Foundation
- d. Textile Society of America

Donna Haghighat

- a. WAM Theater

Julie, as Co-Chair, adjourned the meeting at 2:16 pm.