



Power of culture

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

Minutes of the 168th Meeting of Mass Cultural Council Wednesday, February 25, 2026

Online Meeting

Council Members Present:

- Marc Carroll, Council Chair
- Jo-Ann W. Davis, Council Vice-Chair
- Ché Anderson
- Rhonda Anderson
- Emily Bramhall
- Thomas Bernard
- Vinny deMacedo
- Simone Early
- Donna Haight
- Cecil Barron Jensen
- Anika Lopes
- Diane Asadorian Masters
- Allyce J. Najimy
- Ashley Occhino
- Ellice Patterson
- Julie Wake

Mass Cultural Council Staff Members Present:

- David Slatery, Acting 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
- Dan Blask, Program Manager
- Summer Confuorto, Program Officer
- Erik Holmgren, Manager of Advancement and Strategic Partnerships
- Colin Baylor, Grants Management System Officer
- Allison Rosenthal, Grants Management System Office

Also Present:

- Jordan Maynard, Chair, Massachusetts Gaming Commission
- Emily Ruddock, Executive Director, MASSCreative

Chair Marc Carroll called the meeting to order at 10:05 a.m. and asked Acting Chief of Staff Ann Petruccelli Moon to read the Open Meeting Law Statement.

The Chair then asked Council Members if they had reviewed the minutes from their last two meetings and if they had he would entertain a motion and a second to approve them. Tom Bernard moved to approve both sets of minutes. Ché Anderson seconded the motion. By roll call vote and noting that Petrina Martin, David Kong, and Iván Espinoza-Madrugal were absent it was unanimously

RESOLVED: to approve the Minutes of the October 29, 2025 Council Meeting and the December 10, 2025 Special Council Meeting in the form presented.

Marc then noted that this was the first regular Council meeting since the departure of former Executive Director Michael J. Bobbitt. In January, Marc and Vice Chair Jo-Ann Davis met with senior staff to discuss the executive director transition and created a Search Firm RFP Task Force comprised of members of the Executive Committee plus Council Members Rhonda Anderson and Ashley Occhino. Once finalized, the RFP will be sent out publicly with the goal of hiring a search firm to assist in the search for a new executive director. After that process begins, a new task force will be formed to oversee the selection of the next executive director.

Marc also reminded members about Creative Sector Day at the State House coming up on March 3 and encouraged them to attend. He noted that he is always impressed by the turnout each year. Registration is still open on the MASSCreative website.

Dave then provided the Acting Executive Director's update, noting that since January 1 he has been in the office meeting regularly with staff. The team is continuing to implement the FY26 spending plan while also actively engaged in discussions about the FY27 budget; Bethann and Dave recently met with the Chairs of the Committee on Tourism, Arts, and Cultural Development to discuss the budget process. Dave also mentioned that in the State of the Commonwealth address the Governor highlighted arts and culture and then followed that up with a 5% increase to the Council's line item in her proposed FY27 state budget, but Bethann will speak more about that in the Public Affairs report. Over the past eight weeks he has attended a number of events. At an event earlier in January he spoke with Secretary of Economic Development Eric Paley about the newly established Competitiveness Council and the possibility of creating an arts and culture subcommittee. He also referenced conversations with MassEcon, AIM, and the Charles River Chamber of Commerce, emphasizing the importance of ensuring that the broader business community sees and understands the cultural sector's role. At the Governor's Tourism Conference, Mass Cultural Council will participate in a panel discussion. Dave noted that Jen will provide a thorough Programs update later in the meeting, including an update on the Gaming Mitigation Fund; Dave thanked Gaming

Commission Chair Jordan Maynard for attending the meeting. The applications for YouthReach and Creative Experiences are both currently open.

Dave then highlighted something he is particularly proud of: the Agency has recently met with representatives from two other states interested in learning about Massachusetts' work. Cathy will provide a full Business Operations report later in the meeting, but Dave shared that the Agency's lease for another five years in its current location is almost completed.

He then transitioned to the Advancement report, explaining that the Executive Search Task Force meeting had taken the place of the Advancement Committee on the calendar in January, so we are reporting today at the Council Meeting on the Agency's Advancement work. Advancement is a relatively new pillar of the Agency's work and was part of Michael Bobbitt's vision to position the arts and cultural sector as a visible and recognized resource in other policy areas across the Commonwealth. The goal is to ensure that the sector shows up in rooms where it previously was not present and becomes an expected participant in conversations. The effort is about leveraging resources from outside the sector and ensuring that arts and culture have a seat at the table in policy discussions.

Advancement and Strategic Partnerships Manager Erik Holmgren described Advancement work as taking the things the Agency already believes in and practices internally and extending them outward into other sectors. He noted that the Lieutenant Governor recently highlighted at a STEM Committee meeting that the sector is only beginning to tap into its potential. Two weeks earlier he attended a National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) convening in Washington focused on arts and health. During the opening keynote panel, speakers discussed the concept of arts prescriptions, something Massachusetts has been discussing for five or six years. He said it was encouraging to see that three additional states are now preparing to pursue similar work, demonstrating both the growing interest in arts and health and Massachusetts' leadership as a state arts agency in this area. He also mentioned an upcoming April 10 convening at UMass Amherst focused on arts and health that will include MA Dept. of Public Health Commissioner Robbie Goldstein.

Ché added that the arts should be seen at the center of every table and offered a shout-out to Bethann Steiner, thanking her and the Public Affairs team for focusing on these areas and for the work they are doing.

Marc asked a question about the two convenings in April. Erik clarified that the April 10 convening is being run by and will take place at UMass Amherst and will focus on arts and health. The second convening, on April 17 at Worcester State University, which is a Council effort, will bring together presidents and leadership from higher education institutions involved in the arts. That meeting will focus on gaps in alumni data and how to better track and retain arts graduates in Massachusetts.

Dave then noted that since 2020 staff has provided an equity report at every Council Meeting. The Agency continues to report progress, including the work of two advisory committees focused on the d/Deaf and Disabled and Native and Indigenous communities. He also highlighted ongoing work to improve and make fully accessible all of the Agency's documents and websites. He said additional details are included in written materials and encouraged members to direct questions to him so they can be routed to the appropriate staff member.

Bethann then provided the Public Affairs update. She thanked the Chair and stated that she would try to hit on some of the important topics the Chair, Dave, and Erik previously mentioned without taking up too much time.

The team is very pleased with how we are starting the FY27 state budget process. The Governor's recommendation for Mass Cultural Council is \$27.35 million, which is a 5% increase to our operating budget. H2 does not contain earmarks so this figure, if enacted, would be the highest operating budget in the history of the Agency, for which we are very grateful. We have met with our legislative partners and champions, and they are also quite pleased with this starting point. I would be remiss if I did not thank our partner in advocacy, Emily Ruddock of MASSCreative, who is here with us today as her organization circulated a thank you letter to the Governor and an advocacy letter to the House and Senate asking them to retain the Governor's recommendation in their budgets. Hundreds of people from the cultural sector signed this letter. Thank you, Emily.

Next week we meet with the House Ways & Means Chairman and will discuss our hope that the House budget retains the Governor's funding recommendation for the Agency, as well as again provide a \$25,000 funded earmark for the Poet Laureate stipend, which we successfully secured in FY26. We will also mention our "STEM to STEAM" bill which is pending review by the Committee as we hope it will advance this session. Further, we are expected to testify during a budget hearing in Barnstable on March 9.

Both our bills, STEM to STEAM and a proposed Cultural Facilities Fund (CFF) amendment, have advanced from their first committees and are now under review by House or Senate Ways & Means. We hope they both are brought before the full Chamber and we are working with our sponsors and with the Committees to try to move these bills this session.

We have many events coming up this spring. Next week, as the Chair mentioned in his report, is Creative Sector Day at the State House - March 3. Please join us and please register on MASSCreative's website. I am told there are more people registered this year than who attended last year, which is wonderful, this is a fun and exciting day on Beacon Hill.

Additionally, Public Affairs is ready to host regional grant celebrations - join us March 9 in Marblehead; March 23 in Holyoke; and March 30 in New Bedford. Thank you to Simone, Jo-Ann, and Ashley for joining us at these events and please we'd love all Council members to join us if able. Public Affairs looks

forward to an event in April celebrating Card to Culture programmatic milestones and further grant celebrations in Worcester and Berkshire Counties in May.

As Dave and Erik mentioned, we are working closely with our partners at MIT to launch the Online Arts Entrepreneurship Program with MITx. The registration should launch today, and we will start marketing this new opportunity tomorrow widely.

She noted that since the last Council meeting Public Affairs has worked with the Program and Advancement teams to publish 37 Power of Culture blog posts - each telling the rich stories of our efforts, relationship building, investments, and successes. Through the blog and other digital channels, Public Affairs is taking the conversations happening across the Agency and sharing them externally with our stakeholders and our cross-sector partners. We do this as an effort to celebrate achievements and build momentum, helping to keep these initiatives moving forward and modeling the behaviors we'd like others in the sector to emulate.

The Public Affairs memo included in the meeting materials has a number of other updates about team projects, achievements, campaigns, and new digital tools. Bethann thanked Dawn Heinen, Carmen Plazas, and Christian Kelly for their hard work. She thanked the Chair and offered to answer any questions from the Council.

Vice Chair Jo-Ann Davis shared that she will attend the upcoming grant celebration in Holyoke. There were no further comments or questions. The Chair asked Cathy Cheng-Anderson for her update.

Chief Financial Officer Cathy Cheng-Anderson shared that, as of the end of February, Mass Cultural Council is nearly eight months into Fiscal Year 2026. She reported that spending to date is aligned with the planned budget and noted that a steady increase in spending is anticipated through the remainder of the fiscal year. She also directed Council members to the spending breakdown included in their meeting packets.

Cathy announced the Commonwealth's launch of a new financial system, Mosaic, describing it as a major statewide modernization of the state's financial ledger system after 23 years. She explained that the system went live for Mass Cultural Council and all Commonwealth agencies effective this past Monday and noted that, over the next several months, staff will be engaged in training and adjusting workflows while continuing to process grant payments and provide case management to grantees.

Cathy noted that, as with any system conversion, she expects temporary slowdowns while staff adjust to the new system. In anticipation of the change, she shared that the fiscal team worked extensively to process as many transactions as possible before the cutoff date in the old system. She also stated that she had reprioritized work and added support to the team during the

transition. She emphasized that the team's top priority is to keep grant payments and grantee support moving as smoothly as possible and said she will continue to monitor progress closely.

From a financial oversight perspective, Cathy stated that the transition will also require updates to Mass Cultural Council's internal financial workflows and procedures. She shared that the agency plans to update its internal controls in the spring so they align with the new system and revised processes, and she noted that a revised Mass Cultural Council Internal Control Plan will be presented in a future Council meeting packet.

She added that the next large-scale statewide system conversion will occur in a few years, when the Commonwealth transitions its payroll and human resources systems to a product named Workday. She described this future change as another significant modernization for all agencies, but remarked that one system conversion is enough to manage at the moment.

Switching to the lease update, Cathy reported that Mass Cultural Council has executed a new lease with the building and is awaiting follow-up procedures from DCAMM. She stated that the lease terms have been fully negotiated and settled and can now be publicly shared. She also noted that Dave had been a great partner throughout the project and added that, when she returns to the table in four years to negotiate again, she feels she will be well trained for the process.

Turning to staffing, Cathy reported that the agency is in the final stages of the selection process for two Program Officer positions on Jen's team. She shared that one candidate has accepted a position and is scheduled to begin on April 13, 2026, while the second position remains in process.

Cathy paused to allow time for remarks or questions before transitioning to the travel discussion.

Cathy then informed the Council that, prior to the last Executive Committee meeting, the Chair had approved \$110 in out-of-state travel costs for the Manager of Advancement and Strategic Partnerships, Erik Holmgren. She explained that Erik had been invited to serve as a panelist at the NAASA convening on February 12, 2026, where he presented on the role of Opioid Relief Funds in Massachusetts.

Cathy then transitioned the discussion to Dave to begin review of the Executive Committee proposed revisions to the out-of-state travel policy.

Dave provided context that this discussion continued from the Council's October Council meeting conversation. He noted that staff had intentionally not drafted a full policy yet, so as not to get ahead of Council direction. He summarized the overall intent of the proposed approach. The goal is to avoid using Council or Committee meeting time to approve very small travel expenses, such as a trip costing around \$110. Instead, the idea would be to

create a clearer approval structure in which the Council approves a travel budget for the staff, Executive Director approves staff travel up to a certain limit within that budget, while Executive Director travel above a certain limit would require third-party approval (such as the Executive Committee or Board). Thresholds would determine when a travel item would need to come back for formal approval.

Marc outlined the proposed parameters in more detail. The proposal would begin with Council approving a travel budget at the start of each fiscal year. If staff travel remains within that approved budget, no additional approvals would be needed. As a safeguard, any individual trip that exceeds a set threshold would return to the Council or Executive Committee for review. Executive Director travel would be subject to a lower threshold and third-party review. Dave emphasized that all standard travel policy requirements would still apply, including a clear public purpose and selecting the lowest-cost option.

Marc encouraged Council Members to share their thoughts and suggestions.

Marc then moved to the next item, the extension of the Strategic Plan. Dave explained that this idea had been discussed last fall when Michael Bobbitt was still in his role. Because the Agency is now searching for a new Executive Director, the proposal is to extend the current Strategic Plan, which would otherwise expire in June, is even more important. Instead of covering FY24 through FY26, it would be extended through FY28 without other changes. This would allow a new Executive Director time to learn the Agency before beginning a new strategic planning process. Dave noted that Michael Bobbitt had approved this concept before his departure, and Executive Committee members agreed that it would give a new leader the space needed to get established before undertaking a full strategic planning effort. There were no questions for Dave. The Chair asked for a motion and a second to extend the Agency's strategic plan. Cecil Barron Jensen moved to approve the extension; Ché Anderson seconded the motion. By roll call vote and noting that Petrina Martin, David Kong, and Iván Espinoza-Madriral were absent it was unanimously

RESOLVED: To extend Mass Cultural Council's current FY24 - 26 Strategic Plan for two years through the end of FY 2028.

The Chair then asked Jen for her Programs update.

Jen described the spring as a very busy period and shared some high-level numbers. So far this fiscal year the Agency has received just under 20,000 applications through the Grants Management System, including Local Cultural Council and Tribal Cultural Council applications. That represents about a three percent increase over last year. Over a longer timeframe the growth has been more significant, reflecting the Agency's equity outreach efforts and expanded eligibility. Compared with FY21, the Agency has seen a 65 percent increase in applications in FY26. Charts illustrating these trends were included in the meeting materials. Jen emphasized that the work is possible because of the strong team managing the grants system and introduced colleagues Allie

Rosenthal and Colin Baylor who coordinate all grants management system efforts. She continued and shared that the Council book materials include updates from all Programs teams. Charles Baldwin has been working with Open Door Arts on an online accessibility tool, Timothea Pham is working on the Cultural Districts Initiative with plans to open the program to new districts in mid to late March, and Jay Paget and Miranda Cook are continuing work on the Cultural Facilities Fund.

Dave then reviewed the conflict of interest list included in the meeting materials. No changes were reported by the Council.

Marc then invited Massachusetts Gaming Commission Chair Jordan Maynard to say a few words. Jordan thanked the Chair for the opportunity to attend. He noted that he has known both the Acting Executive Director and the Chair for quite some time and was pleased to see Ann and Bethann as well as others he remembered from his time with the Governor's office. He explained that when Massachusetts established its gaming regulatory framework, one goal was to capture revenue that had previously gone to offshore betting and illegal bookmaking and redirect those funds toward public purposes. The Gaming Commission takes its responsibility for those funds seriously, particularly in relation to responsible gaming and public investment. He said the Commission is proud to remit funds to the Mass Cultural Council and is interested in strengthening the relationship between the two organizations. In recent months he has visited several organizations that have received funding, including the Guthrie Center, the Hanover Theatre, and the Marilyn Rodman Performing Arts Center, and has been impressed by how the funds are being used. He said he is very pleased with the continued partnership. He also mentioned that he had unexpectedly run into Michael Bobbitt the previous weekend while having dinner in downtown Boston and echoed others' comments that Michael will be missed. Jordan concluded by saying he would be happy to answer questions and that he looks forward to continuing the strong partnership.

Dave also thanked Chairman Maynard and his staff, noting that they have been extremely helpful in administering the program and that the relationship between the agencies has been very positive. He also expressed interest in exploring additional arts and cultural collaborations.

Marc then returned the floor to Jen so she could share grant recommendations. Jen thanked the Programs Committee for its engagement and feedback, saying she always enjoys those meetings and values hearing Committee Members' perspectives. She began with the Gaming Mitigation Fund recommendations, noting that the memo in the materials is short because the program is currently in the second year of a two-year commitment.

The discussion then moved to Grants for Creative Individuals. Jen introduced Dan Blask, Program Manager for Artists and Youth, who described the FY26 awards: 464 unrestricted grants to artists and creative practitioners. He noted that the memo in the meeting materials includes the key details and program facts. Dan and his colleague Summer Confuorto had prepared a short slide

presentation to give the Council a sense of the range of artists supported by the program (copies of which are available upon request). Dan explained that they organized the presentation by discipline categories selected by applicants. Dan and Summer shared slides highlighting a sampling of artists and creative work supported by the program.

Marc commented that seeing the artwork is one of the best parts of being on the Council. He noted the extraordinary diversity of artists and disciplines represented and acknowledged the enormous effort involved in selecting grantees. Jo-Ann agreed and thanked the team for sharing the work. Dan expressed deep appreciation for the Council's support of individual artists. Dave added that the Council has clearly communicated how much they value seeing tangible evidence of the cultural sector's work, and he said the Agency will continue to incorporate artistic examples into future meetings. There were no further comments or questions for Jen. The Chair asked for a motion and a second to approve the recommended grants. Diane Asadorian Masters moved to approve the grant recommendations; Donna Haghghat seconded the motion. By roll call vote and noting that Petrina Martin, David Kong, and Iván Espinoza-Madrigal were absent it was unanimously

RESOLVED: To approve the Gaming Mitigation Program grants as presented at the Meeting.

RESOLVED: To approve the Grants for Creative Individuals, as presented at the Meeting.

Marc concluded the meeting by thanking Massachusetts Gaming Commission Chair Jordan Maynard again and reminding everyone about the upcoming Creative Sector Day at the State House. He also thanked Emily Ruddock from MassCreative for attending the meeting, and said he looked forward to seeing many people at the State House soon. He adjourned the meeting at 11:46 a.m.