

Commission on the Arts and Humanities
Regular Meeting Minutes
Thursday, March 19, 2020 | 4:00pm
Via Teleconference



Commissioners in Attendance

Kay Kendall (Chairperson), Stacie Lee Banks, Cora Masters Barry, Edmund Fleet, Quanice Floyd, Rhona Friedman, Alma H. Gates, Natalie Hopkinson, MaryAnn Miller, Chinedu Osuchukwu, Jr., Josef Palermo, Maria Hall Rooney, Cicie Sattamilasskorn, José Alberto Uclés, Gretchen B. Wharton, Derek Younger

Commissioners Absent

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CAH Staff Present

Heran Sereke-Bhran (Acting Executive Director), Carl Wilson (Interim Deputy Director)
Brian Allende (Resource Allocation Analyst), Jeffrey Scott, (Chief of External Affairs),

The regular monthly meeting of the Commission on the Arts and Humanities (CAH) was held on March 19, 2020 at 4:00 pm via teleconference; Kay Kendall, Chairperson, presiding.

Call to Order

Chair Kendall called the meeting to order at 4:00 pm and determined that a quorum, being one-half of the active members of the Commission, was present with 16 members in attendance and 1 member absent.

Public Comment

Chair Kendall stated that a number of written public statements had been received over the past week, and were emailed to the Commissioners. She asked if Peter Nesbett, Executive Director of Washington Project for the Arts, was on the call and wished to speak as previously requested.

Mr. Nesbett addressed the Commissioners on the impact the COVID-19 pandemic was having on the District's artists, and he asked that during their consideration of emergency relief funds, the Commissioners take into account the individual artists and small arts organizations.

Adoption of the Agenda

The agenda was adopted by unanimous consent

Approval of the February regular meeting minutes

The minutes were approved by unanimous consent

Executive Director's Report

Acting Executive Director Sereke-Bhran reiterated that the agency was on full telework status until March 31, 2020, as directed by Mayor Bowser and the City Administrator. She mentioned that because of the COVID-19 situation, the Mayor's fiscal year 2021 budget presentation to the DC Council would be postponed, meaning that CAH's budget hearing before the Committee of the Whole originally scheduled for April 7, 2020, would also be postponed to a later date to be determined, along with the CAH Executive Director confirmation hearing before the Committee of the Whole.

Chairperson's Report

Chair Kendall read the following statement:

As you know, the majority of the agency's annual budget (which includes our grant programs, contractual services, and personnel costs) is funded through a percentage of the District's sales tax. The agency's budget established for the fiscal year is based on estimated sales tax revenues for the coming year projected by the Office of the Chief Financial Officer - meaning, it is not money already in the bank, so to speak. The OCFO's initial estimate is always a conservative one to prevent over-budgeting. As the year goes on, that number is revised based on the actual sales tax revenues received. A few weeks ago, it looked as though CAH would have additional funds available in the current year because sales tax revenues were higher than what was initially forecasted.

As the COVID-19 pandemic escalated, CAH staff began to look into ways the agency could provide some measure of financial relief to the District's arts and cultural sector. Using the additional sales tax revenues I mentioned before along with remaining funds still in our grants budget, a plan was developed by the staff with input from the grants committee to provide additional funds to our current FY20 grantees, both individuals and organizations. I was very much looking forward to sharing that plan with everyone today and putting into action.

This morning, we received guidance from the OCFO to hold off on our plan to issue any additional funds due to uncertainty with how the coronavirus situation will impact the District's sales tax revenues, and what will be available to the agency in terms of actual funds. I remind everyone that this funding is not just for grants, but to pay for all the agency's needs in order to be functional. And while we are an independent agency, we are not independent of the District government, and as such, are beholden and reliant on the government's systems, policies, and procedures.

To our current FY20 grantees: your grant manager will be in contact with you in the coming days with additional information as we have it. If you have an open purchase order for your grant or have already received a payment for your grant award, your funds are secure for the remainder of the year and will be paid out to you, and we are working to expedite the schedule for second payments so that you can have those funds in hand as soon as possible.

This situation is a global one, affecting every sector. When and if the time comes that we learn we in fact do have additional funds to issue for emergency relief without putting our other financial obligations in danger, we will revisit this subject immediately. To our grantees who are in need of relief, this is the unfortunate reality of the present situation. Going forward, I remind all of us how rapidly this situation can change, and I would strongly advise this Commission not to share internal information prematurely so as not to create undue confusion amongst our community, particularly in this time of uncertainty.

In closing, to our arts and humanities community, let me just say that the thoughts of all of us are with you. We know the difficulties you along with so many others are facing, and we will continue to explore whatever options may exist to be of service to you.

Chair Kendall then opened the floor for discussion by calling on each commissioner in turn to give the opportunity to comment.

Commissioner Gates thanked the staff for all the hard work they did in preparing a proposal for emergency funding, and expressed her disappointment in the funds not being able to be distributed.

Commissioner Younger yielded the floor to the next member.

Commissioner Osuchukwu asked if there were any other options available. Chair Kendall responded that the Mayor was making grant funds available to small businesses, including nonprofits and individuals, such as individual artists.

Commissioner Rooney stated how much the artists in DC were valued, and that their needs were being heard.

Commissioner Friedman asked if a link to artists resources during the COVID-19 health emergency could be posted on the agency's website homepage.

Commissioner Floyd stated she was disappointed but hoped that alternatives could be found to help support the artists in the community.

Commissioner Lee Banks stated that she wanted to echo everyone else's sentiments and thanked the staff for the extra work they had put in.

Commissioner Hopkinson stated that she did not realize the available funding that might go to emergency grants hinged so much on the sales tax, and expressed a desire to review a balance sheet for the agency. Chair Kendall explained that while the agency's budget get allocated into different pots, the majority of the funding comes from sales tax revenues. Acting Director Sereke-Brhan also stated that the entire city's budget is based upon these forecasts for tax revenues that are adjusted periodically throughout the year, meaning the decline in sales tax revenues due to the COVID-19 public health emergency was impacting agency budgets across the District government, not just CAH, prompting the OCFO's advice to pause on taking on any new agency expenses until they had time to get a better sense of what the tax revenues would actually be. Commissioner Hopkinson stated that she understood there were surplus FY19 funds that were available to the agency now in FY20. Acting Director Sereke-Brhan stated that until the OCFO is able to quantify the budget impacts, those funds might be needed to cover the agency's current financial obligations.

Commissioner Miller reiterated Commissioner Friedman's request of including a link for resources for artists and arts organizations.

Commissioner Palmero expressed his shock that as an independent agency they're still being told what they can and can't do with their budget.

Commissioner Barry stated that independent agency or not, it's still taxpayer money, and they had to adhere to the rules of the District government.

Commissioner Ucles expressed his disappointment at not being able to provide relief funding, but stated that the effects of this pandemic are widespread and impacting all sectors.

Commissioner Fleet asked if the agency should issue a press release to talk about the plans for emergency funding, so that the arts community could know CAH was actively trying to help. Acting Director Sereke-Brhan stated that she didn't want to get anyone's hopes up until they had a better understanding with the OCFO as to the agency's financial outlook for the remainder of the fiscal year.

Commissioner Sattarnilasskorn stated a clarification that the emergency relief enacted by the DC Council earlier in the week was not targeted specifically at providing funds to individual artists and arts organizations, but rather small businesses in general, including nonprofits and individual contractors, and wondered if the Commission could lobby the Council to give dedicated relief funding to artists.

Commissioner Wharton thanked everyone who worked to develop a plan to hopefully address the concerns of the community, and stated that while that plan cannot be enacted at present, she asked everyone to be patient as the situation continues to change day to day in real time.

New Business

Chair Kendall asked if there was any new business. Commissioner Hopkinson stated that the impacts of COVID-19 are being felt especially hard in the go-go music community, the members of which traditionally have not been CAH grantees and therefore lack the contributed revenues that other artists and organizations may have. She went on to state that with the closure of live music venues, a lot of musicians are performing online, and there may be some potentially innovative ways for CAH to become involved to support these activities.

Commissioner Barry stated that she intended to personally lobby the Mayor for support of go-go, and that while there are many priorities that need to be addressed during the pandemic, she would focus her attention on the arts and particularly how the arts relate to the city's more marginalized communities.

Commissioner Wharton stated that she felt it was important to address go-go not just in terms of individual artists, but as a movement and artistic genre.

Chair Kendall stated that while they were not able to enact emergency relief funding at this moment, all current CAH grantees should rest assured that they would receive their awarded grant funds for FY20. Acting Director Sereke-Brhan stated that grantees would be receiving updates and additional information from their grant managers in the coming days, and reiterated that the agency is continuing operations with all staff working remotely during the public health emergency.

Adjournment

There being no further business to come before the meeting, Chair Kendall adjourned the meeting at 5:07 pm.

Approval

Minutes approved this 30th day of April, 2020.