

RESPONSE TO COMMENTS

CAH STRATEGIC PLAN 2021 – 2023

AUGUST 2021

Introduction

Throughout the research and development process of the 2021 – 2023 Strategic Plan, consultants David Galligan and Lord Cultural Resources invited and received comments from the public with suggestions and considerations on how to improve and strengthen the plan. Many of the ideas from the public were ultimately incorporated into the final version of the plan, for which the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities is deeply appreciative.

This Response to Comments seeks to explain the rationale for why certain ideas were not included in the strategic plan, and to provide clarification regarding agency operations. In the interest of providing clear and concise responses, we have grouped multiple comments received on a particular topic or theme into common subject areas rather than a response to each individual comment.

Comments and responses begin on the next page.

Concerns expressed over the proposal to reduce the number of commissioners and maintaining ward representation and the diversity of commissioners generally.

Commissioners are appointed by the Mayor with the advice and consent of the Council of the District of Columbia. There is no legal requirement to have a certain number, or any, commissioners from each ward, but rather that the Mayor “shall maintain reasonable representation of all the various geographic areas and neighborhoods within the District of Columbia.”¹

The Mayor’s Office of Talent and Appointments (MOTA) manages the intake and vetting of individuals interested in serving as commissioners for CAH (as well as other boards and commissions throughout the District government). CAH is not a part of, and therefore has no influence on the selection process of new commissioners. CAH forwarded comments on the need for commissioner diversity to MOTA for consideration in future selections.

¹ D.C. Official Code § 39–203.(3)

In 2019 the Mayor's Arts Awards were changed to base most awards on a voting system, essentially reducing it to a popularity contest.

While formerly a program of CAH, since 2019 the annual Mayor's Arts Awards has been solely managed, produced, and presented by the Office of Cable Television, Film, Music, and Entertainment (OCTFME).

CAH only benefits a small insular subset of artists in the District who repeatedly receive grants year after year.

CAH has been, and continues to be, one of the largest funders for arts and culture in the District of Columbia. It is therefore not at all surprising that applicants return year after year.

In the span of five years, CAH saw a 44% increase in the number of annual grant applications, from 683 applications in FY 2015 to 987 applications in FY 2019, and a 96% increase in the number of grant awards in that same period. Each year since FY 2017 has seen 100 or more first-time CAH grantees.²

Applications to CAH grant programs are evaluated and scored by volunteer peer review panelists who are independent of the agency. New panels are constituted for each grant cycle. Funding recommendations are presented to the Board of Commissioners in a blind format. In such a system, for an applicant to repeatedly be awarded funding year over year is likely a function of the quality of the application submission.

CAH limits the number of grant programs that organizations can apply to each fiscal year in order to make more funding opportunities available to a greater number of organizations.

More can certainly be done. As recommended by the new strategic plan, CAH will be increasing marketing and outreach efforts around grant programs, utilizing a variety of communications channels, with the goal of increasing community awareness and connectedness, allowing us to reach and serve more applicants and ultimately, more future grantees.

² CAH publishes total number of applications received, grants awarded, and number of first-time grantees each year in the agency's annual report. m

Grant awards over \$10,000 are a cost reimbursement type grant, which necessitates the organization already have the money in the bank and then be reimbursed by the grant for their project expenditures. This places considerable financial strain on smaller organizations.

For grants under \$10,000, the total amount of funding is disbursed to the grantee in a single payment. Grants over \$10,000 are disbursed in two payments, typically 50% each. However, the payments are not reimbursements of accrued project expenses. A grantee should submit an invoice to request the first payment once the grant agreement is executed and a purchase order established, and invoice for the second and final payment midway through the fiscal year or as instructed by the grant manager.

CAH should assist organizations in their efforts to stay in rapidly gentrifying parts of DC. Assistance might come in the form of a letter or advocacy to the DC Council and DC government officials to utilize vacant buildings or other show of support, recognizing the importance of our cultural place-keeping activities.

The need for arts spaces is an issue that District government agencies like CAH and the Office of Planning have continually analyzed and studied over the past 15+ years. Unfortunately, the research has not yet resulted a solution to the problem. The sight of available space in the District is often a mirage. An empty and seemingly available parcel of land may turn out to be owned by the federal government, are therefore inaccessible in many cases. Similarly, the vacant buildings and empty storefronts would seem ideal spaces for artistic activities, whether permanent or of a more temporary, pop-up nature. In exploring this idea, CAH learned that safety concerns are often a major impediment. A certificate of occupancy would be required for even a temporary use of an empty space. Depending on the condition of the space, the investment required in order to qualify for a certificate of occupancy may be cost-prohibitive.

As a government agency, CAH is prohibited from advocating on behalf of a particular individual, organization, or group as that would be showing preferential treatment. However, CAH does collaborate with a number of DC government agencies to undertake a variety of programs and initiatives, and Goals Two and Four in the new strategic plan are particularly relevant in this area. Additionally, CAH is investigating the possibility of offering a kind of space-related competitive opportunity within approximately the next two years.

What about the DC Cultural Plan that was released in 2019, did it just go away?

Several factors have contributed to the delayed implementation of recommendations from the Cultural Plan, most notably the re-establishment of CAH as an independent agency in the DC government, and the COVID-19 public health emergency, both of which consumed much of the agency's capacity at the time. In spite of that however, the Cultural Plan has not gone away, and Council has expressed to CAH the desire to see the Plan activated. CAH will convene the steering committee that is mandated in the Cultural Plan's legislation, which is an important and significant step in the implementation of the Plan, likely in the first half of FY 2022.

How will the next steps for this strategic plan be made transparent for the DC arts community? Will the subsequent implementation steps and work plans be publicly accessible?

As implementation steps and work plans are developed for this strategic plan over the next three years, they will be presented at a public meeting of the Board of Commissioners and posted on CAH's website, dcarts.dc.gov. Similarly, updates on the implementation status of the various planning elements will be presented at a public board meeting and posted online. This will allow the public to track the agency's progress as well as follow any modifications that may be made to the plan to account for any unforeseen circumstances.

Methodology

Public input for the strategic was gathered in multiple ways. A draft version of the plan with a request for public comment was posted on CAH’s website, dcarts.dc.gov for a 30-day period in late spring 2021, with a total of 17 comments received via email. The consultants conducted 1 on 1 interviews with 55 individuals, including artists, community members, government officials, and agency staff. The consultants also facilitated two town hall-style public meetings with a combined total attendance of 52 individuals. Due to COVID-19, all engagements/interviews were conducted using remote meeting platforms, such as Zoom, Webex, etc.



DC COMMISSION ON THE ARTS & HUMANITIES