

**Minutes**  
**Special Council Meeting**  
**June 4, 2026**  
**9:00 a.m.**  
**Virtual Meeting**

**COUNCIL MEMBERS PRESENT VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS:** Chair Cohen, Vice Chair Alaquiva, Mr. Astorino, Senator Bartolotta, Representative Ciresi, Ms. Goldberg, Judge Morgan, Mr. Parks, Ms. Vilayphonh, Mr. Warfield

**COUNCIL MEMBERS NOT PRESENT:** Senator Cappelletti, Ms. Gunderson, Representative Labs, Mr. Stull

**STAFF MEMBERS PRESENT:** Karl Blischke, Executive Director; Heather Doughty, Chief of Creative Sector Policy and Research Christopher Duerr, Program Manager, Grant Reimbursements & Events; Jamie Dunlap, Chief Strategy Officer; Amy Gabriele, Chief Financial Officer; Norah Johnson, Chief of Staff; Laura Kline, Executive Assistant; Amanda Lovell, Senior Director, Workforce and Business Development; Sarah Merritt, Senior Director, Community Development; Seth Poppy, Senior Director, Innovation and Visibility; and Ian Rosario, Senior Director, Asset Development

**GUESTS PRESENT:** Amber Sizemore, Chief Counsel, Ashe Prawl, Deputy Legislative Director, Senator Cappelletti's Office, Catherine Richmond Cullen, and Carissa Neary.

**ITEM 1: CALL TO ORDER:** Karl Blischke welcomed those in attendance and informed them that the meeting would be recorded for the administrative purpose of minute taking. Mr. Blischke then turned the meeting over to Chair Cohen.

**ROLL CALL:**

*Karl Blischke, Executive Director*

Mr. Blischke called the roll. A quorum was established.

**CONFLICTS OF INTEREST:** Chair Cohen reminded the Council of the PCA's Conflict of Interest Policy.

**ITEM 2: APPROVAL OF MINUTES:**

Chair Cohen asked Council for a motion to approve the March 26, 2026, Council meeting minutes.

Ms. Goldberg made a motion to approve the minutes. Mr. Parks seconded the motion.

**Ayes:** Alaquiva, Astorino, Bartolotta, Ciresi, Cohen, Goldberg, Morgan, Parks, Vilayphonh, Warfield

Motion carried, none abstained or opposed.

**ITEM 3: Grants Highlights**

*Karl Blischke, Executive Director*

Mr. Blischke noted that this informational item is to highlight recently approved Creative Catalyst grants, which empower Pennsylvania creatives.

While the presenters were joining the meeting, Ms. Dunlap updated the Council from the Americans for the Arts conference, where she is representing Pennsylvania's creative industries among 1,200 national attendees. Dunlap shared that the opening plenary focused on the future of public arts funding. She stated that the session explored whether the future of the arts will be art-sector focused (prioritizing sector sustainability) or cross-sector focused.

Ms. Dunlap introduced Catherine Richmond Cullen, who reported on her Creative Catalyst project, ImagineX. Ms. Richmond Cullen explained that this project was funded by the Council and was matched by a regional foundation and added that the initiative hosted an interactive, career-ready conference for 350 middle school students and educators across nine northeastern Pennsylvania counties. The event featured interactive marketing elements, a dedicated website, and eight diverse creative speakers, including software engineers, fashion designers, and sound engineers, to inspire youth toward creative careers. Data evaluation is currently underway.

Ms. Dunlap then introduced Carissa Neary, Director of the New Castle Public Library, who presented on the Mud Maker series, a partnership with the Penn Ohio Clay Guild, which was funded by a Creative Catalyst grant. Ms. Neary explained that the program serves a four-county region (Lawrence, Butler, Mercer, and Armstrong) and stated that the series re-imagines libraries as community hubs through historical presentations and hands-on clay workshops. Neary reported that following a successful May kickoff, upcoming events include a July 11th feature at Butler County's First Art Program and a newly launched "Mug Club" pairing local coffee with artist showcases to drive workforce and community development.

Chair Cohen thanked both presenters for their reports.

#### **ITEMS 4: Recommendation for Program for Smaller Organizations and Programs**

*Amy Gabriele, Chief Financial Officer*

Ms. Gabriele presented the recommendation to approve guidelines for the Spotlight Program.

Ms. Gabriele stated that this program is for organizations and programs with annual arts revenue between \$10,000 and \$100,000. She explained that the proposed program will launch in August 2026 for the 2027 grant year and will provide reimbursement-based grants of up to \$5,000 per organization. Gabriele reported that the following types of organizations are eligible for this program: Pennsylvania nonprofit organizations, tax-exempt entities, local governments, and fiscally sponsored organizations whose activities align with the Council's strategic priorities. Ms. Gabriele noted that colleges and universities, Pre-K-12 schools, and auxiliary fundraising organizations would be ineligible.

Ms. Gabriele stated that the program is intended to ensure continued operating support and explained that the program will have a reimbursement-based structure to ensure taxpayer accountability. Ms. Gabriele indicated that the program would fill funding gaps for past Creative Sector Flex Fund recipients to prevent lapses in state operating support.

Ms. Gabriele reported that the program will be administered directly by staff to reduce overhead costs. She indicated that this central infrastructure would utilize the existing state grant system and internal controls. Gabriele indicated that technical assistance will also be provided via Keystone login help desks, other state agency help desks, and specialized agency staff members.

#### **Public Comment and Responses:**

1. Jonathan Stein, thINKingDANCE.net and Philadelphia Dance Projects: Mr. Stein applauded the Council for reconsidering and reversing the October decision to eliminate small arts programming support. Mr. Stein criticized the decision to centralize administration in Harrisburg rather than using the regional partnership system and noted that the regional system historically provided localized outreach, vital technical application help for low-staff groups, and local community review panels.

Ms. Gabriele responded to the public comment with data supporting the shift to centralized management. She stated that regional partners returned \$450,000 in grant and residency funds over the past two years due to a lack of applications. One area returned 70% of residency funds; another county received zero grants in six years.

Gabriele explained that capacity challenges occurred regionally, with over a 70% turnover rate in key partner staff positions during the last five years. Gabriele confirmed that statewide coverage remains a priority and stated that agency staff is actively conducting nine grant workshops this month (including hybrid and virtual options) and performs ongoing geographical data analysis to ensure geographic distribution. She added that each year, Council reviews funding parameters and may consider factors such as geographic and county distribution.

2. Susannah Faulkner, Erie Arts in Culture: Ms. Faulkner stressed the partners' role in ongoing support and capacity building, noting that over the past three years, Erie Arts & Culture met with applicants at least two times on average through the Creative Sector Flex Fund. Faulkner stated that support extended beyond technical assistance to include significant guidance and capacity building. She raised concerns about the future role of trusted community organizations that no longer administer the grant but continue to assist and promote opportunities to applicants. She noted that these partners have demonstrated strong stewardship of public funds, rarely returned grant dollars, and emphasized that many eligible organizations are volunteer-run and rely on local partners for support. Ms. Faulkner suggested that experienced partners should continue to have a meaningful role in the network, even if they do not directly administer funds.

Ms. Dunlap responded that partnerships are subject to a competitive bidding process every five years, meaning no partner is guaranteed long-term status. She added that the current system is designed to ensure fairness and openness, as all partnerships were put on an open call.

Ms. Dunlap indicated that a service provider network is currently in mid-stage development across the Commonwealth. She stated that the network will support regional and local promotion of opportunities, grant workshops, and technical assistance. Dunlap added that requirements for service providers will include delivering these support services.

Ms. Dunlap stated that a network will be developed in collaboration with the Department of Community and Economic Development and the Pennsylvania Department of Education. She reported that guidelines are being finalized and will undergo internal review and Council approval before being posted and added that interested parties can expect webinars and direct calls for more information once the program is approved.

3. Mitch Swain, Creative PA: Mr. Swain made his comment as a board member of Creative Pennsylvania on behalf of Board Chair Kelley Gibson. Swain thanked Council for the opportunity to speak and for tabling the previous grant proposal for smaller organizations. He expressed appreciation for staff's work to address initial concerns with the Spotlight Program and for the opportunity to collaborate with PCI staff, noting that this type of collaboration will be important moving forward.

Mr. Swain supported the concerns of Ms. Faulkner and Mr. Stein, emphasizing that the current partnership program's local support is irreplaceable. He warned PCI may underestimate the assistance required and stressed the need for local communication. He clarified his critique was programmatic, not personal toward PCI staff, and expressed concern over the disparity between two-minute limits for public commenters and unlimited speaking time for staff.

4. Patrick Fisher, Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council: Mr. Fisher thanked PCA leadership for reconsidering the small organization grant proposal and affirmed partners' desire to collaborate. Addressing field concerns, he suggested reviewing why returned PCA funds are frequently linked to a lack of eligible applications rather than application volume, emphasizing the importance of technical assistance. He also noted his organization's intent to end its partnership role due to administrative burdens exceeding the fee, advising PCA to build stronger internal staff capacity for program support.
5. Stephanie Lerner, Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance: Ms. Lerner thanked meeting participants for their feedback and contributions to the grant development process. She acknowledged the inclusion of fiscal sponsorship and arts programs as positive steps.
6. Jane Altman, River Art Works: Ms. Altman expressed appreciation for current efforts but highlighted two main issues: a financial disparity in grant distribution favoring large organizations, and overly complex, burdensome application forms that discourage individual artists and smaller groups. She suggested simplifying forms to improve response rates and noted her organization is compiling artist lists to enhance outreach.
7. Terry Fox, Philadelphia Dance Projects: Ms. Fox expressed gratitude to the Council as a past and current Flex Fund recipient and urged the following grant program updates: Grant Expansion: Allow fiscal sponsorship and include general operating support alongside project-specific funds; Regional Focus: Prioritize regional partnerships, as local communities best understand their own impact; and, Public Comment: Extend the public comment period beyond two minutes, noting no state rule mandates this limit.

Ms. Gabriele addressed the comment about the application itself in relation to small arts organizations, because small arts organizations can and do have the capacity to be accountable.

8. Eric César Morales, Movimiento de Organizadores de Arte in Pennsylvania: Mr. Morales commended recent grant program improvements, including fiscal sponsorship and the \$5,000 funding cap, but raised concerns regarding transparency, financial strain on organizations, reduced technical assistance, and declining participation among rural and underserved groups. He requested detailed technical

assistance data, equitable participation tracking, and adaptive early detection mechanisms.

Ms. Gabriele stated that the reimbursement process is simple and is supported by experienced staff members. Chair Cohen added that reimbursements can be submitted on a rolling basis throughout the year, allowing partial payments.

9. Dennis Creedon: Philadelphia Arts & Education Fellowship: Mr. Creedon thanked the Council for its support and advocated for continued arts and education funding, sharing how such programs were pivotal to his own educational success with dyslexia. He highlighted the administrative challenge of last-minute grant matching withdrawals and urged the Council to maintain its partnership.
10. Rita Whitney, Cultural Alliance of York County: Ms. Whitney highlighted the Cultural Alliance of York County's progress in fund distribution, noting full allocation by year three despite initial county-level challenges. She explained that equitable distribution requires trust-based relationship-building over forms, which helped double BIPOC applicants using direct outreach and one-on-one connections.
11. Justin Ayala, Cultural Alliance of York County: Mr. Ayala cited high turnover in grant roles due to flat funding, uncompetitive pay, and expanded duties. He cautioned that the Council lacks capacity to re-centralize grant administration and warned that doing so risks losing established regional partnerships.

Chair Cohen noted that three regional partners have already withdrawn this year.

12. Patricia Wilson Aden, Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance (GPCA): Ms. Aden noted that the GPCA represents over 400 artists and organizations and welcomed funding progress for groups with budgets under \$100,000. She emphasized the pent-up grant demand in southeastern Pennsylvania and cautioned against centralizing administration at the expense of regional, personalized support. Aden also offered to partner with agency staff on Philadelphia-area informational workshops and advocated for preserving regional partners.
13. Sisi Wright, Directors Gathering: Ms. Wright provided written comment and acknowledged that the proposed Spotlight Program responds to public feedback by restoring eligibility for fiscally sponsored projects and continuing support for organizations previously served by the Creative Sector Flex Fund. She raised concerns that the program creates new barriers for small-budget organizations, including reimbursement-based funding, financial risk, reduced grant amounts, increased administrative requirements, and unclear details about the proposed Service Provider Network. She also questioned the use of "financial stability" as an evaluation criterion for organizations still developing infrastructure. Ms. Wright encouraged Council to reconsider the approach and expressed hope for continued collaboration to ensure the program effectively serves Pennsylvania's small organizations and communities.

Chair Cohen asked Council if there were any questions. Hearing none, Chair Cohen asked for a motion to approve the recommendation as presented in the Council meeting materials.

Judge Morgan made a motion to approve the recommendations. Mr. Warfield seconded the motion.

**Ayes:** Alaquiva, Astorino, Bartolotta, Ciresi, Cohen, Goldberg, Morgan, Parks, Vilayphonh, Warfield  
Motion carried, none abstained or opposed.

Parks requested to speak after the motion and Chair Cohen granted this request.

Mr. Parks expressed appreciation for the contributions of speakers and their organizations in advancing the arts and raising awareness of Council programs. He said that these concerns are acknowledged, but noted that they may be misdirected, as the Council is a state agency funded by the Legislature. Mr. Parks noted that arts funding has remained stationary at \$9 million since it was reduced from \$15 million in 2007–2008, with no increases since then. Parks noted that the Council has implemented strategies to leverage limited funds and maximize benefits for artists and arts communities across the Commonwealth. Parks indicated that structural changes, such as phasing out regional agencies established in the 1990s, were necessary due to technological advances and budget constraints. Mr. Parks added that the number of arts organizations in Pennsylvania has more than doubled in the last 20 years, while funding has not kept pace. He stated that legislators face competing priorities across healthcare, senior and youth services, and economic development. Parks encouraged the public to contact their legislators during budget discussions to advocate for increased arts funding.

Chair Cohen thanked Mr. Parks for his comments.

Chair Cohen reported that workshops will be held across the Commonwealth from June 8th to July 8<sup>th</sup> and added that details are available on the Council's website or by calling the agency. Chair Cohen recognized and thanked Council and staff for their hard work and dedication in serving urban, suburban, and rural areas despite limited resources.

### **Public Comments:**

1. Veronica Castilla Perez, Movimiento Administradores de Arte (MAP) Pennsylvania: Ms. Perez thanked Chair Cohen, Council members, and staff for the opportunity to speak and for efforts to support smaller organizations. She stated that MAP was founded to help Latino communities and small arts groups access PCA funding and requested clarification on the status of Strategies for Success. She also urged Council to reconsider eliminating Preserving Diverse Cultures as an important outreach channel for Latino communities.
2. Jonathan Stein, thINKingDANCE.net and Philadelphia Dance Projects: Mr. Stein raised concerns that major programs, including Arts in Education, Preserving Diverse Cultures, and Folk and Traditional Arts, were eliminated without Council approval or vote. He stated that these actions bypassed governance protocols and urged Council to restore the programs to avoid legislative intervention. He also referenced Patrick Fisher's arts blog criticizing the planning process and requested that copies be shared with Council.

Emailed Additional Comments: Mr. Stein also asked Council to explain why five vacancies remain on the 15 non-legislative member roster established by the General Assembly and why the Council is not enforcing the statutory two-term limit. He stated that councils and boards have a responsibility to comply with these requirements rather than passively awaiting appointments or replacements.

Mr. Blischke replied that the planning process occurred over many months and was discussed transparently during public Council meetings, with minutes available on the PA Creative Industries website. He said the new programs were developed through an inclusive process to provide flexible support, technical assistance, and networking for a broad range of communities and organizations.

3. Patrick Fisher, Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council: Mr. Fisher stated that PCA should take the findings of its 2024 listening process seriously. He said respondents prioritized cross-cultural collaboration, diversity, rural access, community cultural planning, training, and networking, indicating a need for capacity-building and local infrastructure rather than funding alone. He expressed concern that recent program eliminations do not align with those priorities, while new initiatives focused on innovation and creative industry growth ranked lower among respondents.
4. Patricia Wilson Aden, Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance: Ms. Aden stated that increasing arts funding remains a statewide priority and that advocacy with elected officials is ongoing. She noted that Pennsylvania trails neighboring states in arts funding and emphasized that new initiatives should not come at the expense of established programs. She supported the proposed \$5 million increase to expand funding, impact, and programming.
5. Susannah Faulkner, Erie Art & Culture: Ms. Faulkner expressed concern about the impact of PCA program changes and noted that many comments reflected broader statewide concerns. She emphasized the need for PCA and the arts community to move forward together, repair relationships, and address divisions caused by the transition. She noted particular concern for artists and organizations in Erie Arts & Culture's six-county region that may be affected by the end of the Regional Partnership Program model.

Chair Cohen stated that staff are working hard to address these needs as quickly as possible. She acknowledged the concerns raised and indicated that staff are moving forward with urgency.

6. Justin Ayala, Cultural Alliance of York County: Mr. Ayala stated that the Arts in Education program has supported PCA's goals related to culture, education, economic vitality, equitable access, and lifelong learning. He expressed concern that eliminating the program would reduce student access to teaching artists and arts-related career pathways. He also questioned how prior investments in Creative Aging and Academy for Creative Aging training will be used if related opportunities are reduced.
7. Stephanie Lerner, Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance: Mr. Lerner echoed concerns about the abrupt ending of partnerships and said defensiveness, poor communication, and limited information sharing have caused stress in the arts sector. She called for a cross-sector approach to repair harm, strengthen collaboration, and advocate for increased statewide arts funding. She also noted that some partners were not included in the regional information workshop.
8. Jeremy Waak, Artist: Mr. Waak spoke in support of the Arts in Education program, stating that it gave working artists valuable opportunities to engage students and show that arts careers are possible. He acknowledged the challenge of distributing limited funds but said recent decisions have harmed the arts community. He encouraged Council to recognize

that relationships, collaboration, networking, and partnerships are central to the arts ecosystem.

9. Mitch Swain, Creative Pennsylvania: Mr. Swain emphasized the need to clearly explain how increased arts funding would be allocated. He described a proposed \$14.59 million PCA budget, including a \$5 million increase, to support both traditional grants and partnerships and new creative enterprise initiatives. He noted continued advocacy with legislative leadership and appropriations committees and expressed hope for an increase in the state arts grant line item.

Ms. Dunlap clarified that arts education is supported through multiple funding streams, including operational support grants and other mechanisms beyond a single partnership program. She stated that arts education occurs widely across Pennsylvania through both in-school and out-of-school programs. She also cited strong statewide arts and music education offerings and continued collaboration with the Department of Education.

10. Dennis Creedon, Philadelphia Art & Education Partnership: Mr. Creedon expressed concern about instability among partner organizations following the announcement that the Arts and Education Partnership would end. He emphasized the need to review survey data from multiple perspectives and consider how findings are interpreted and implemented. He also stated that returning unused or non-viable project funds reflects responsible fiscal stewardship and highlighted the Philadelphia partnership's 23-year contribution.
11. Eric Cesar Morales, Movimiento Administradores de Arte (MAP) Pennsylvania: Mr. Morales raised concerns about equity, inclusion, and transparency in the process, stating that members of his community feel underrepresented and invisible. He questioned whether the survey was accessible in Spanish and whether outreach to diverse communities was adequate. He also criticized reimbursement-based funding models as burdensome and emphasized that diversity strengthens decision-making.
12. Terry Fox, Philadelphia Dance Projects: Ms. Fox shared appreciation for colleagues' comments and encouraged continued collaboration to ensure effective and smooth implementation of programs.
13. Sisi Wright, Directors Gathering: Ms. Wright echoed concerns about the abrupt ending of partnerships and the stress caused by poor communication, defensiveness, and limited information sharing. She emphasized the need for a cross-sector approach to heal damage, rebuild trust, and pursue increased statewide arts funding. She also stated that the strategic planning process was not fully inclusive.

## **ITEM 17: Adjournment**

Chair Cohen thanked Council members, staff, and public speakers for their participation and engagement throughout the meeting. An update was shared that progress is moving forward on the Small Spotlight Grants program, which is expected to launch soon.

The Chair noted that public comments are part of the official record and expressed appreciation for ongoing participation from the creative community. It was reiterated that Council meetings are open to the public and are conducted in accordance with open meeting requirements, with information available on the Council's website.

Chair Cohen asked for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Representative Ciresi made the motion to adjourn. Vice Chair Alaquiva seconded the motion.