

## MEETING MINUTES

### METRO ARTS COMMISSION

November 21, 2024, 12:00 pm – 2:00 pm

MNPS School Board Building

**Present Commissioners:** Chair Campbell West, Vice Chair Tre Hardin, Secretary Heather Lefkowitz, Commissioner Tim Jester, Commissioner Jilah Khalil, Commissioner Janet Kurtz, Commissioner Carole McCoy, Commissioner Jessie Rosenblum, Commissioner Dawana Wade, Commissioner Mayra Yu

**Absent Commissioners:** Commissioner Evan Brown, Commissioner Leah Dupree Love, Commissioner Arlene Nicholas-Phillips, Commissioner Shawn Knight, Commissioner Beverly Watts

**Staff & Others Present:** Dr. Paulette Coleman (Interim Executive Director, ex-officio), Tessa Ortiz-Marsh (Metro Legal), Vivian Foxx (Staff)

The Metro Arts Commission convened its regular meeting with Chair Campbell West presiding. The meeting began with heightened tension, reflecting ongoing challenges around grant funding implementation and compliance with the MHRC conciliation agreement.

PUBLIC COMMENTS revealed deep concerns from key stakeholders:

Reverend Davie Tucker spoke first, providing historical context for the current situation. He emphasized that the conciliation agreement emerged from extensive investigations and fractured relationships within the arts community. Tucker highlighted MHRC's increasing role as a de facto information source for frustrated artists unable to get responses from Metro Arts. He advocated for building upon previous equity work rather than dismissing it, stating "that work can guide you toward the outcome that you're going."

Councilwoman Joy Styles delivered particularly pointed remarks, expressing disappointment with the current situation nearly a year after initial discussions. "We're in the midst of it and I hate it," she stated, adding that "artists would suffer while we played political games behind the scenes." She warned that council colleagues were "coming as vultures to touch the budget" due to lack of swift resolution. Styles indicated she would likely seek deferral of any proposals, noting the December 3rd council meeting timing created additional urgency.

## GRANTS FUNDING DISCUSSION

Dr. Coleman presented the staff recommendation for allocating \$900,000 to Thrive awards for FY25. This decision aimed to maintain the previous year's funding level, which had increased significantly from historical amounts of \$176,000-\$250,000. She emphasized this demonstrated ongoing commitment to addressing equity concerns while acknowledging "we will not rectify decades of inequitable funding in this cycle."

The presentation sparked extensive discussion around proposed changes to the Thrive program, particularly:

### 1. Award Structure Changes:

- Reduction of maximum award from \$20,000 to \$5,000
- New approach to fund all qualified applicants rather than competitive selection
- Staff rationale that this would allow support for more artists

### 2. Process Concerns:

- Commissioner Lefkowitz questioned why the allocation wasn't brought for commission vote before developing implementation plans
- Multiple commissioners expressed concern about lack of clear connection between community feedback and proposed changes
- Questions arose about fiscal agent requirements and implementation details

## TIMELINE AND PROCEDURAL CHALLENGES

Legal Counsel Ortiz-Marsh outlined a complex series of deadlines:

- Finance deadline: December 2
- Legal deadline: December 4
- Council filing deadline: December 6
- MHRC conciliation agreement deadline: January 6, 2025

She emphasized that meeting these deadlines required:

- 48-hour public notice for meetings
- Time for legal review of final documents
- Finance department review and approval
- Metro Council consideration

The timeline discussion revealed significant concerns about feasibility, particularly given:

- Holiday schedule impacts
- Need for multiple levels of review
- Requirements for public engagement per conciliation agreement

- Questions about sufficiency of community engagement to date

## COMMUNICATION ISSUES

The meeting surfaced substantial communication challenges:

- Commissioners received critical materials the night before the meeting
- Questions submitted by commissioners went unanswered or received delayed responses
- MHRC reported limited proactive communication about process changes
- Artists and applicants expressed frustration about lack of updates on pending applications

Commissioner Wade notably spoke to defend staff efforts while acknowledging systemic issues: "None of us have been all that we need to be in this process... We all have some responsibility there."

## NEXT STEPS AND ACTION ITEMS

The commission took several concrete steps to address immediate challenges:

### 1. Scheduled Critical Meetings:

- Grants Committee: Monday, November 25 at 12:30 PM
- Special Commission Meeting: Wednesday, November 27 at 10:00 AM

### 2. Established Information Requirements:

- Staff to provide complete timeline of required actions
- Detailed rationale for funding recommendations needed
- Outstanding commissioner questions to be addressed before grant committee meeting

### 3. Legal Follow-up:

- Continue MHRC discussions regarding potential breach of agreement
- Develop contingency scenarios
- Complete review of criteria documents

The meeting concluded with acknowledgment from Chair Campbell West that while immediate action was necessary, it couldn't come at the expense of quality: "We've got to get through it...without sacrificing the quality that this community deserves and all the work that's gone into it."

Meeting adjourned at approximately 2:35 PM.