

Minutes

Metro Arts Commission

Grants + Funding Committee

Date: October 20, 2025

Time: 1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Location: Metro Southeast Building, Antioch Conference Room
1417 Murfreesboro Pike, Nashville, TN 37217



Committee Members Present: Heather Lefkowitz (Chair), Tim Jester, Shawn Knight, Dawana Wade, Jilah Kalil, and Ashley Bachelder, Interim Executive Director (*ex-officio*)

Metro Arts Staff Present: Vivian Foxx & Capri Harston

A. Call to Order, Roll Call & Welcome

Chair Heather Lefkowitz called the meeting to order at 1:02 p.m. and read the standard Metro legal statement regarding appeals under the provisions of §2.68.030 of the Metropolitan Code of Laws. Vivian Foxx conducted roll call.

B. Public Comment

No public comment was received. The Chair reminded attendees that future comments may be submitted using the Metro Arts online public comment form.

C. Approval of Minutes: September 22, 2025

A motion was made to approve minutes from September 22, 2025, by Commissioner Wade and seconded by Commissioner Jester.

D. Discussion Items

1) FY26 Grant Cycle Updates – Staff Report

Interim Executive Director Ashley Bachelder presented a detailed update on the FY26 grant cycle progress from the last commission meeting:

- **Award Notifications:** All notifications were sent on September 26, 2025, via Submittable for both Operating and Thrive programs. Fiscal sponsors were notified by email.
- **Grantee Requirements:** Grant recipients are required to submit an acceptance form and budget by October 10. As of the report date, all but two operating grantees and all but two Thrive grantees had completed submissions.
- **Contract Routing:** Contracts are being electronically routed by Metro Legal, which started on October 14. As of the meeting, three contracts had completed all signatures. Ashley projected that the contracting process will likely take several weeks to fully execute all 165 contracts, based on past experience.
- **Payment Process:** Once a contract is fully executed, Metro Arts can submit a payment request. Ashley and Capri Harston will be working with grantees to ensure proper vendor set up.
- **Other updates:** The annual grants report was submitted to Metro Council on October 9. Metro Arts staff are holding a number of public drop in sessions and report back presentations and community meetings.

- Upcoming/ongoing priorities: Ashley named several staff priorities, including a focus on prompt payments, finalizing final reporting and closeout requirements, updating SOPs, onboarding new staff members, and planning for FY27.

2) FY26 Grant Cycle Debrief – Staff Report & Discussion

Ashley led an in-depth debrief on the FY26 grants cycle process, policies, and outcomes. She presented information as categorized below, followed by discussion and questions for each.

Technical Review Process

- Each application underwent a standardized technical eligibility review by assigned staff, using a standardized review checklist and process. Any tech denied application was discussed by the review team and all denials were approved by the director.
- Ashley provided a summary of the tech denied applications for Operating applicants (13 denials) and Thrive applicants (57 denials). Reasons for denial included:
 - Operating: Non-arts organizations, incomplete applications, or ineligible entities such as those whose primary mission is to support a Metro/MNPS agencies.
 - Thrive: Applicant eligibility (i.e., not meeting the residency requirement), non-allowable expenses (i.e., capital improvements, general operations, religious intent), fiscal sponsor ineligibility, multiple applications, or projects outside the eligible timeline.

Discussion and questions:

- Ashley shared two likely recommendations she will bring for FY27: Reinstate an optional pre-application review period for applicants to submit early drafts, and require applicants to attend a mandatory information session (virtual or in-person options).
- Commissioner Wade asked if there is a way that grants can cover activities that span across the fiscal year, noting summer activities that may take place in June and July of a given year as an example of why this would help grantees. Committee members requested that options be explored to accommodate these timeline scenarios.

Panel Review Process

- Ashley provided handouts about the panel process in FY23 and FY26 to note the differences in policy and process. She noted two major changes, first, that all FY26 panelists (and FY25 and FY24) were local community members, replacing the prior model using out-of-state adjudicators for all organizations over \$100,000. Payment for panelists the last three years have been as follows: \$500 in FY24, \$350 in FY25, and \$595 in FY26. Second, she noted the current pass/fail scoring method and funding formula based on budget size, changed from the method used previously that determined award sizes based on ranking the top scoring application and calculating award amounts for other applications in relation to the highest scoring one.
- Ashley provided an overview of the distribution of Thrive and Operating scores by each panel. There were 4 Thrive panels and 2 Operating panels. Ashley noted that there were not any apparent discrepancies or unusual or unexpected observations for the Thrive distributions. For Operating panels, she noted observations that there was greater variance in scores on the micro/small/medium panel, and less dispersion for the medium/midsize/large though it potentially has some outliers. Across both Operating panels, scores were lower than they were in FY25.
- Overall, Thrive panelists provided more comments during the review process than Operating panelists.

Discussion and questions:

- Ashley answered a question about panelist selection criteria, noting that specific disciplinary expertise was not a panel requirement. She described the various ways that panelists' backgrounds and experiences were balanced in creating panel assignments.
- Panels were not open for the grantee to attend to observe or answer questions, with the main reason being due to the volume of applications and schedule. When sharing panelist feedback with applicants that were not funded, some applicants noted that had they been able to attend the panels, they would have been able to address the panelists' questions or concerns. Discussion among committee members highlighted several points and ideas, including considering new application questions that could address common panelist questions, incorporating a staff pre-application submission deadline for applicants to get staff feedback before the final deadline, and that open panels may be more appropriate for small organizations but not large organizations.
- Commissioner Knight noted changes in Operating panel scores from FY25 to FY26, noting that FY26 operating panel scores were notable lower. A suggestion was made to look at previous scores for returning applications to determine if similar applications receive significantly different scores. Conversation included the need for a holistic review of the application questions, rubrics, and panelist requirements with structured guidance for providing feedback.
- Ashley noted that the contract with Submittable limits the number of panelist seats available to Metro Arts, which may require a contract amendment to obtain more user seats (at a cost). Panelists across panels noted the time-consuming process of reviewing the number of assigned applications.
- Ashley concluded the discussion by showing graphic representation of the total Metro Arts grants budget from FY22 to FY26, showing the 5-year trend across the grant categories (Thrive and Operating by micro, small, medium, midsize, large). The data show the multi-year reduction in grants to large and midsize organization and the increase to Thrive.

Considerations for the next meeting

- Committee members requested a “parking lot” of all the grant related topics that have been identified in the last year that may need further discussion. Some things may be short term, and others may be longer term changes or possibilities.
- Discussion was had about finding a balance of refining the process to bring greater clarity and improvements versus overhauling the process, noting that multiple cycles using the same guidelines is important for evaluation purposes.
- New grants manager is anticipated to be hired by the start of 2026.

3) FY26 Community Arts Leaders of Nashville – Staff Update

Josiah Golson provided an update about the FY26 cycle of the Community Arts Leaders of Nashville program. The internship period will run from January through May 2026. Host site applications have closed, and conditional acceptances notices have been shared with selected host sites. Applications are currently open for undergraduate students and mentors, with the deadline to apply November 3, 2025. Metro Arts will facilitate a matching process in November. Host sites will be brought to Committee and Commission for approval at the next meeting.

E. New Business

Commissioner Lefkowitz asked for a report on unclaimed funds at the next meeting. Commissioners should send parking lot topics to Ashley before the next meeting. Metro Arts is hosting a number of community report back meetings over the next several days.

Ashley reported that committee meetings are no longer recorded by the Metro Nashville Network team due to limited capacity from the ITS team; Metro Arts did not request that meetings not be recorded. She noted that it is unusual for committee meetings of any board or commission to be recorded. Metro Arts staff record all meetings and will share with anyone who requests them, while they explore options for posting recordings on an alternative platform.

F. Adjournment

Chair Lefkowitz adjourned the meeting at 3:00 p.m.