



February 23, 2024

TO: Members of the Senate Committee on Government Operations

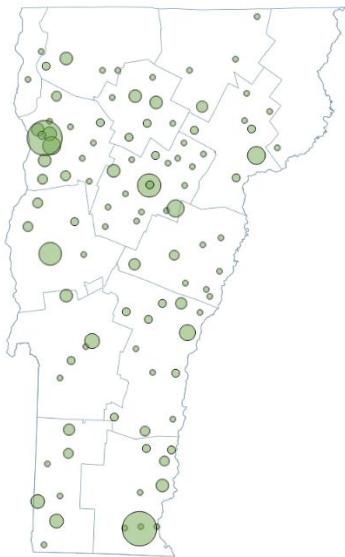
FROM: Susan Evans McClure, Executive Director, Vermont Arts Council

RE: Vermont Arts Council and Public Art

The Vermont Arts Council board and staff are grateful for the strong support that Vermont's arts and culture sector has received from the legislature, as we work together to build a creative, inclusive, vibrant Vermont for everyone. As the new Executive Director of the Vermont Arts Council, I look forward to meeting with the Committee to discuss our work.

Organization Background

The Vermont Arts Council has been the state's primary provider of arts funding, advocacy, and information since 1965. Our work is based on the understanding that the arts transform individual lives, connect people more deeply to each other, energize the economy, and sustain the vibrant cultural landscape that makes Vermont a great place to visit and live. The Council invests in artists and the creative process, arts-integrated learning in K-12 classrooms, and cultural organizations that engage audiences and creatives across the region in outstanding arts experiences and opportunities. The Council is supported by private and public funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and the State of Vermont. A total of \$8,009,602 in Arts Council funding was distributed in FY23, which included unprecedented support through the Vermont Creative Futures pandemic relief program (a part of [Act 183](#))



All FY23 grantees

In FY23, Grants were awarded to 85 individual artists, 201 organizations in every county, and 100 towns across Vermont in FY23. Some of our key programs include:

- [Creation grants](#) that support outstanding Vermont artists with time and resources to imagine new work.
- [Artist Development grants](#) which foster individual artists' professional development.
- [Arts Operating](#) grants which provide critical operating support to build the capacity of arts nonprofits to affect change to 30 arts organizations.
- [Arts Impact grants](#) that fund nonprofit organizations, municipalities, and schools in their efforts to add vibrancy to Vermont communities through projects that provide equal and abundant access to the arts.

- [Animating Infrastructure](#) grants that support unique community projects that integrate public art into infrastructure improvements.
- Teaching artist residencies that engage students from [pre-K through high school](#) and in [Head Start Arts Partnership](#) programs in active, arts-integrated learning.
- The [Creative Aging Initiative](#) which provides older Vermonters with meaningful arts learning experiences that provide rich opportunities for social engagement and community building.

Other highlights from the past fiscal year (FY23) may be found in our [Annual Report](#).

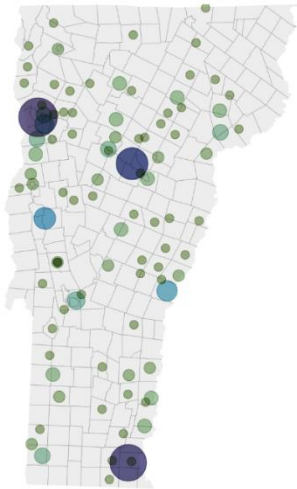
Grant-making with an Equity Lens

It is more important than ever to ensure we are effectively delivering funds to those who are most in need or typically underserved by state resources. The Arts Council's vision statement describes a Vermont where "everyone has access to the arts and creativity in their lives, education, and communities." Our board and staff have continued to assess our grant programs, partnerships, and operations through an equity lens, to assess how we allocate our resources and whose voices and perspectives we are recognizing through our work. (Please see our [IDEA page](#) for details.)

We apply an equity lens to our funding priorities. For example, to prioritize aid to historically marginalized groups, we made direct grants to the Clemmons Family Farm and the Vermont Abenaki Artists Association immediately following 2023's flooding. These funds were deployed to aid artists in the Abenaki and African Diaspora communities who do not typically access state resources but were in great need after the disaster.

In order to eliminate barriers to access, we provide multiple avenues for outreach and support to potential applicants. For the Creative Futures program for example, we hosted multiple grantseeker workshops via zoom, have a dedicated email address for inquiries, and provided applicants with an online calendar system to easily book a one-on-one meeting with a grant manager. In addition, we contracted with the Vermont Professionals of Color Network for focused outreach and technical assistance for applicants who are BIPOC. In many of our grant programs, applicants may use alternate formats (audio, video, etc.) to submit their applications. Panelists consider applicants' geographic diversity, budget size, and representation of under-resourced communities. We also regularly track the number of first-time applicants and first-time grantees who benefit from all of the Council's grant programs. There continues to be a significant increase in new applicants, reflecting both the unmet need and the impact of the Council's wider outreach and communications to the field.

Vermont Creative Futures Grants and Pandemic Recovery



VT Creative Futures grants

The Covid-19 pandemic profoundly jeopardized the viability of Vermont’s artists and cultural organizations, large and small. Hundreds of museums, theaters, galleries, and community arts centers were among the first to close to protect public health and the last to re-open.

In recent years, the Council asserted itself as a vital resource by assisting the cultural community in navigating the disruptions of the pandemic. The Council has successfully administered unprecedented amounts of relief to Vermont artists and cultural organizations. Thanks to collaborations with Vermont Humanities, the Vermont Community Foundation, the Agency of Commerce &

Community Development, and the generosity of individual donors, we have overseen delivery of \$14,055,239 in urgently needed aid to artists and cultural organizations since the pandemic hit in March 2020. See our [Covid-19 relief page](#) for details.

Thanks to an unprecedented allocation of \$9 million of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to the Vermont Arts Council for grants to creative sector entities that have sustained economic harm due to the pandemic (a part of [Act 183](#)), the Council was able to successfully distribute pandemic relief funds to 233 creative sector nonprofits and businesses in 96 towns and all counties across the state. The final grants of the [Creative Futures grant program](#) were announced in September of 2023. Awards funded Vermont-based creative economy nonprofits and for-profit businesses that demonstrated economic harm caused by or exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Funding amounts are based on 2019 (pre-pandemic) operating revenue. These funds are for regular operating expenses, including but not limited to payroll and benefits, utilities, rent, and insurance.

While we know that recovery from the pandemic continues to be ongoing, state, and federal funding to Vermont’s creative sector has been a lifeline, successfully supporting vital institutions and companies that are the backbone of our creative state.

Flood Impact, Relief, and Resiliency

Coming right on the heels of the Covid-19 pandemic, 2023’s flooding and extreme weather had a devastating impact on many of Vermont’s cultural organizations and artists. Artists and cultural organizations had collections destroyed, buildings damaged, studio spaces filled with sludge. Tourism, which the arts sector both drives and relies on, dramatically decreased during the summer season. The ongoing extreme weather, from wildfire smoke to flooding to intense lightning storms, made Vermont’s short summer season for outdoor programming even shorter. But the flooding also showed the resilience and commitment of Vermont’s creative

sector to supporting our communities. Arts organizations quickly pivoted to serving as relief centers, benefit concerts sprung up around the state, and Vermont proved once again that our arts and culture organizations are the backbones of our community.

The Arts Council worked with other funders, including Vermont Humanities and the Vermont Community Foundation, to quickly administer relief support to organizations. And the Council launched its own emergency grant program, using privately raised funds, for artists, awarding over \$67,000 directly to artists to support emergency relief.

In 2019, the Vermont Arts Council, the Vermont State Archives and Records Administration, and Vermont Emergency Management Association established the [Vermont Arts and Culture Disaster and Resiliency Network](#) (VACDaRN). Artists and cultural organizations work together to share expertise and resources, mobilize response for mutual assistance during emergencies, and engage collectively with first responders and government emergency management agencies. After this summer's historic flooding, the [VACDaRN steering team](#) activated to deploy assistance to artists and cultural organizations, providing immediate expertise for conservation needs, supporting with the FEMA process, and connecting the creative sector with Vermont's emergency management response.

The Vermont Arts Council's offices at 136 State Street were severely damaged, and we are not able to return to the building. BGS has been a tremendous partner in this recovery, and we are grateful for their quick response to this disaster. Currently, Vermont Humanities is giving us an office in their building, and our staff continue to work from home.

In FY25, the Council will be focused on building resilience and preparedness for the arts and culture sector, offering trainings on [planning for climate change](#) and supporting organizations in developing emergency preparedness plans. The role of arts and culture in community healing and recovery will be a significant priority for our work, as Vermont works to both recover and prepare for an uncertain future.

Federal and State Funding to Support the Arts in Vermont

The Council is the state affiliate for the National Endowment for the Arts. And while we were created in state statute, we are the only state arts agency in the country that operates as an independent nonprofit. The majority of our revenue (80-85%) comes from two sources: the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the state of Vermont. The NEA requires that state governments match the federal dollars allocated to state arts agencies dollar for dollar with general funds. Our General Fund allocation, therefore, enables the Arts Council to secure substantial federal funds each year that are distributed to organizations, schools, and communities in all 14 counties. In recent years, that notification has come in the spring as the State budget is nearing completion. This year, despite the ongoing lack of a federal budget in

Washington, the NEA has unofficially let us know that we should be prepared for a stable NEA allocation of approximately the same as FY24 at \$986,940. We are currently in the FY24 Executive Budget at \$923,848, leaving a shortfall of approximately \$45,092. We are requesting that our full required match amount be part of our base budget in FY25. Providing this match will ensure that Vermont is not leaving federal funding for the arts on the table, and that even more Vermonters have access to experience, create, and enjoy the arts and creativity everywhere in our state.

Why Public Art?

Supporting the creation of new public art throughout the state is vital to the Arts Council’s mission of cultivating and advancing the arts and creativity throughout Vermont. Public art is any art that is in a public space. That could be sculptures, murals, paintings on the walls in public buildings, the building itself, or even live performances in public spaces that are temporary or ephemeral. Public art has documented positive economic benefits, and it enhances social cohesion, cultural understanding, public health, and belonging.

In Vermont, it builds our communities and, as Karen Nevin of Revitalizing Waterbury says, “it makes a space, a place.” From the torchlight parade in Waterbury to the silos in Cambridge, to the art in the windows in Montpelier after the floods to the whales’ tails on Rt 89, and so, so much more, public art makes our state the special place that it is.

The Vermont Arts Council supports public art through the Art in State Buildings program and our Arts Projects and Animating Infrastructure grant program. Animating Infrastructure Grants support community projects that integrate art with infrastructure improvements, demonstrating the positive impact that public art has in creating community cohesion and economic development. Recent projects have included a mural at the Johnson Elementary School created by Juniper Creative Arts and designed by students. Students engaged in conversations about belonging, representation, and community, and expressed that through co-created public art that reflects their experiences.



Juniper Creative Arts mural at Johnson Elementary School

At the Howard Center, the Council funded the Howard Center Arts Collective, all artists who have experience with mental health or substance use challenges, to create an installation of mailboxes and mosaic art, inviting visitors to the garden to reflect on the benefits of old-fashioned mail delivery and consider whether mailboxes have become relics of the past.



Howard Center Arts Collective installation at the Howard Center, Burlington

The Art in State Buildings program is a unique and important program to support and promote the work of Vermont artists and improve the quality and character of state buildings. The Council administers the program, which is funded through the Capital Bill, in partnership with the Department of Buildings and General Services (BGS). Since 1988, the program has commissioned artwork from over 60 artists to appear in 35 state-owned buildings and public spaces across Vermont.

The two most recently completed projects include a granite trout sculpture by Sean Williams at the Roxbury Fish Culture Station, and the installation photos by Carol Langstaff and a mural by Kathryn Wiegiers at the newly built River Valley Therapeutic Residence in Essex.



The Origin of the River by Sean Williams at the Roxbury Fish Culture Station (left)
Mural by Kathryn Wiegiers, VT Dept. of Mental Health's River Valley Therapeutic Residence, Essex (right)

Conclusion

Public art in public buildings, like the art you see here in the statehouse, and even the statehouse itself, goes beyond placemaking and helps us understand our own place in the history and future of our state.

On signing the legislation that created the NEA in 1965, President Lyndon Johnson said, “Art is a nation's most precious heritage. For it is in our works of art that we reveal ourselves, and to others, the inner vision which guides us as a nation. And where there is no vision, the people perish.”

Before coming to the Arts Council, my professional and academic background was in how people learn America’s history through the arts. And what I have seen over several years of working at publicly funded institutions, including 7.5 years at the Smithsonian, is that people need to see themselves in history to understand that they too are history makers. When people connect to the fact that history was made up of individuals making choices and decisions, they see that they too can make the choices and decisions that will shape the future. The arts, and specifically public art in public spaces, creates the opportunity for all people to connect with the past and be inspired to shape the future. It may seem like just a painting or just a sculpture, but it is actually a tremendous opportunity for us to empower Vermonters to build a stronger society and future for all of us. So not only does our economy, our communities, and our spirits need public art, but our democracy needs public art too.



The creative sector is a powerful catalyst for growth and change, particularly in rural places and in times of crisis and recovery. The arts will continue to be the economic anchor and the heartbeat of Vermont’s communities. We look forward to working with the legislature, the administration, and our many public and private partners to support and strengthen the arts and culture sector.

“Phoenix of Transmutation,” mural at Stowe Middle School, created by Juniper Creative Arts and co-created by students