



**REGIONAL ARTS
COMMISSION**
OF ST. LOUIS

314.863.5811
info@racstl.org
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**Regional Arts Commission
Special Full Commission Board Minutes
May 29, 2025, 2 p.m. (via Zoom)**

Commissioners Present

Commission: Jerry Gennaria, chair, yea; Constantino Ochoa, vice chair, yea; John Russell, treasurer; yea; Robert Arbuthnot, yea; Rhonda Carter-Adams, yea; Gerad Ewing, yea; Anita Hagerman, yea; Roz Johnson, yea; Rudy Nickens, yea; Andréa Purnell, yea; Cheryl Walker, yea; David Wilson, yea

Commissioners Absent

Mont Levy
Sam Fiorello
Beverly Isom – (*Note: experienced technical difficulties logging in*)

Staff Attendees

Vanessa Cooksey, Savannah Babington, Charlie Bosco, Gregory Harris, Ann Haubrich, Tracey Morgan, Angie Peters, Jay Scherder, Jason Schipkowski, Chloe Smith, MK Sadiq, Leigh Winter, Lea Sutherlin

Others in Attendance

KEB - Rick Gratz

Public Guests (Gennaria)

Chair Gennaria welcomed everyone to the meeting and called for acknowledgement of public guests – none in attendance.

Approval of March 13, 2025 Minutes

Chair Gennaria called for a motion to approve the March 13, 2025 minutes. Motion made by Russell, seconded by Purnell, and unanimously carried to approve the March 13, 2025 minutes. Votes were as follows:

Yea – Gennaria, Ochoa, Russell, Arbuthnot, Carter-Adams, Ewing, Hagerman, Johnson, Nickens, Purnell, Walker, Wilson

Nay – none

Abstain - none

Prior to his report, Chair Gennaria welcomed new commissioner Anita Hagerman to her first full board meeting and asked if she'd like to share brief remarks.

Hagerman shared that she is 'delighted' to serve.





Chair Gennaria then extended the Commission's sympathy and support for those affected by the recent tornadoes, and expressed concern for the injured, fatalities, and those who lost property of personal significance. Gennaria emphasized the purpose of this meeting, the Commission's role in assisting its community of artists and organizations, and asked Cooksey to share staff recommendations on how the Commission could help those impacted.

Special FY 2025 Budget Recommendation (Cooksey)

Cooksey presented the staff's strategic recommendation as follows: (1) for RAC to utilize \$2 MM of its \$4 MM unrestricted cash reserves/rollover to bolster its capacity to respond to disasters and current challenges impacting the arts sector with NEA rescissions as an example; (2) creating a Disaster Response Fund - envisioned as the "2085 Fund," aligning with RAC's 40th anniversary [by 2085, RAC will be 100 years old], initially seeded with \$1 million, to provide small grants to artists and organizations affected by events like natural disasters or disruptions, especially within the crucial first 30 days; and (3) proposal to allocate \$800,000 to increase FY 2025 Hotel/Motel funded grant budget and \$200,000 to support the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, emphasizing strengthening sector resilience and visibility.

Cooksey then highlighted the following: (1) the importance of financial stewardship, noting recent efforts to diversify revenue streams, build savings, and maintain a lean staff; (2) potential financial risks, assumptions about future Hotel/Motel Tax Revenue, and measures to manage cash flow deficits in July and October of FY 2026, including utilizing ARPA interest funds and adjusting expenses; and (3) overall goal to ensure the sector's stability and growth, with careful consideration of financial impacts and strategic partnerships.

Cooksey stated that overall, during this meeting, staff was seeking advice, and approval to use the \$2MM as outlined in the recommendation. Cooksey added that she had met with Gratza and Russell to review impact on cash flow.

Arbuthnot asked if there are options to use unrestricted funds to hedge against a potential forecasted deficit, rather than granting funds to cover the shortfall.

Cooksey noted the following: (1) it is not the intention to exhaust the fund all at once; and (2) the Board Finance Committee and/or Executive Committee could be the authority to allocate funds promptly in the event of a disaster or urgent need.

Walker noted the following: (1) concerned about support for individual artists, particularly in the context of the tornado's impact, noting that populations less likely to have insurance might be underserved; (2) questioned whether the current distribution of funds split between NEA-impacted and tornado-impacted communities would be responsive to these needs; and (3) acknowledged efforts to disburse funds quickly and suggested that Purnell and Levy, who were involved during COVID-19, might have valuable insights into how effectively funds were distributed to individual artists during the pandemic.

Purnell thanked Cooksey and the staff for putting together a thoughtful recommendation and discussed the following: (1) the response to COVID-19, highlighting a successful fundraising effort that raised over \$400,000



through Arts United, initiated in May 2020; (2) emphasized the importance of making aid processes less cumbersome and differentiated between the impacts of a natural disaster (tornado) and the revocation of NEA funds, and expressed concern about how affected individual artists and organizations, including those who lost homes and spaces, will access support; (3) suggested that responses should be tailored specifically to those impacted by the tornado, rather than lumping them together with other issues; (4) shared observations from conversations with artists, noting challenges such as the loss of physical spaces for community gathering, the ongoing emotional toll of the disaster, and the potential role of community art initiatives (like CAT) in beautifying and healing affected areas; and (5) called for thoughtful consideration of how funding can support both immediate recovery and long-term community resilience.

Cooksey noted the following: (1) the importance of distinguishing between tornado response efforts and other initiatives, emphasizing the need for a dedicated disaster relief fund for artists and arts organizations impacted by the tornado; (2) highlighted ongoing communication with stakeholders, including artists and partners, about policies allowing grantees to repurpose funds (e.g., using FY24 grants for tornado response); (3) goal is to facilitate quick assistance to existing grantees, leveraging vetted contacts and known organizations for disaster application support; (4) described the use of the Foundry as a safe space for artists and arts organizations affected by the tornado, noting community engagement and the need for better communication about available resources and events; (5) mentioned the organic activation of communication channels and the importance of staff capacity, as the team is managing ongoing grant processes with limited personnel; and (6) overall, framed this as the beginning of a broader conversation about how RAC can respond effectively to this and future disasters.

Haubrich explained that she and Smith have been researching organizations whose NEA grants were rescinded - 19 in total, and assessed the actual dollar amounts and timeframes involved. Haubrich then shared award amounts being considered to each of these organizations, which could help about 18 of them.

Cooksey noted that RAC wants to be helpful when impact is most intense, and asked Smith to comment on the pandemic response.

Smith shared the following: (1) RAC handled the application processing and fund distribution for the Artist Relief Fund, enabling a quick, transactional grant process to support artists in need; (2) highlighted that through interactions with grantees, RAC has shifted towards building stronger relationships and prioritizing the well-being of artists and organizations; (3) emphasized that initiatives like informal gatherings and support spaces have been beneficial; and (4) her belief that similar rapid-response efforts could be used to provide small grants to individual artists and organizations, demonstrating RAC's capability and commitment to supporting the community swiftly and effectively.

Cooksey then asked Mk Sadiq to share valuable insights he discussed at a recent staff meeting, and relevant for Commissioners.

Sadiq highlighted the following: (1) that funds allocated to supporting artists and arts organizations circulate back into the local economy in meaningful ways; (2) stressed that investing \$2 MM into the arts demonstrates a belief in the sector's resilience and potential for economic impact; and (3) supporting the arts is not just about spending



money; it's a symbolic act of trust and confidence in the sector's ability to generate positive economic and community benefits.

Cooksey concurred and reemphasized that using \$2MM right now, does not put RAC at risk, but is an investment in the sector that will eventually return to RAC.

Sadiq agreed.

Cooksey emphasized the importance of addressing all questions from Commissioners and requested approval for the \$2 MM staff recommendation.

Ewing expressed (1) pride in being part of a team dedicated to harnessing RAC's impact; (2) trust in Cooksey and her team to responsibly oversee opportunities that foster meaningful change; and (3) emphasized collaboration, appreciation, and a commitment to thorough and thoughtful decision-making.

Discussion held as follows: (1) question as whether to split the funding motions related to the arts organizations, particularly STL Symphony; (2) proposal to split into three separate motions - one for \$1M for an emergency fund, another for \$800,000 for grants, and a third to 'hold' the symphony funding until the next full Commission meeting on June 12; (3) the importance of timely action on the emergency fund, especially given recent needs, while also recognizing the need for more dialogue about the Symphony support, citing the necessity of thorough deliberation and the sensitive nature of the funding; and (4) consensus was to proceed with the urgent motions while postponing the STL Symphony funding discussion to ensure adequate consideration.

Walker left the meeting and placed her proxy vote(s) in the chat.

Disaster Response

Chair Gennaria called for a motion to 'begin the work' by allocating the \$1 million emergency response fund - establishing a "2085 Fund" through the grantmaking team, aimed at providing support to those already in RAC's system and impacted by the recent tornado.

Motion made by Nickens, seconded by Russell, and unanimously carried. Votes were as follows:

Yea – Gennaria, Ochoa, Russell, Arbuthnot, Carter-Adams, Ewing, Hagerman, Johnson, Nickens, Purnell, Walker, Wilson

Nay – none

Abstain – none



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FY 2025 Organization Grants Budget

Chair Gennaria called for a motion to allocate \$800,000 to the FY 2025 Organization Grants Budget, aimed at funding additional highly rated grant applications.

Motion made by Johnson, seconded by Wilson, and unanimously carried. Votes were as follows:

Yea – Gennaria, Ochoa, Russell, Arbuthnot, Carter-Adams, Ewing, Hagerman, Johnson, Nickens, Purnell, Walker, Wilson

Nay – none

Abstain – none

SLSO Special Grant

Gennaria asked Sutherlin to poll Commissioners regarding discussions surrounding the recommended STL Symphony special grant based on 'wait' or 'sooner'. The poll was unanimous to 'wait' and revisit the SLSO special grant until the next full Commission meeting on June 12.

Roll Call & Adjournment

Chair Gennaria called for a motion to adjourn the May 29, 2025 Special Full Commission meeting.

Motion made by Hagerman, seconded by Russell, and unanimously approved to adjourn the May 29, 2025 Special Full Commission meeting at 3:06 p.m. Votes were as follows:

Yea – Gennaria, Ochoa, Russell, Arbuthnot, Carter-Adams, Ewing, Hagerman, Johnson, Nickens, Purnell, Wilson

Nay – none

Abstain - none

Submitted by

L. Sutherlin, Exec. Asst. & Commission Administrator

ATTACHMENTS

- Full Commission Meeting Minutes, 3/13/25

