REGIONAL ARTS COMMISSION
OF ST. LOUIS

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Regional Arts Commission
Grants & Programs Committee Minutes
May 22, 2026
10:00 a.m.
CIC, 4220 Duncan, STL (Winter Solstice)

Call to Order & Committee Members in Attendance
Chair Fiorello called the May 22, 2026, Grants & Programs Committee meeting to order at 12:05 p.m. and asked Sutherlin t o conduct the Committee roll call.

Committee Members in Attendance
Sam Fiorello, chair, Rhonda Carter-Adams, Tino Ochoa, ex-officio, *Matt Coble (**Non-Voting Committee Member*)

Yea – Fiorello, Carter-Adams, Tino Ochoa, ex-officio [1:10p] (Coble acknowledged)
Nay – none
Abstain – none

Committee Members Absent
Gerad Ewing
Rudy Nickens

Others in Attendance
Mont Levy, Commissioner

Staff Attendees
Vanessa Cooksey, Charlie Bosco, Ann Haubrich, Chloe Higgins, Leigh Winter, Lea Sutherlin

Approval of Minutes
Chair Fiorello called for a motion to approve the March 5, 2026 Grants & Programs Committee minutes.

Motion made by Carter-Adams, seconded by Ochoa and unanimously carried to approve the March 5, 2026 Grants & Prog rams Committee minutes. Votes were as follows:

Yea – Fiorello, Carter-Adams, Tino Ochoa, ex-officio [1:10p] (Coble acknowledged)
Nay – none
Abstain - none

Haubrich introduced Sue Greenberg, former executive director and facilitator for this special session of the Grants & Programs Committee.

Greenberg then called upon the following presenters, during which committee members asked questions and engaged in discussions regarding each presentation.

Presentation - A National Perspective on Local Arts Agency Arts Grantmaking

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Dr. Jen Benoit-Bryan, Director of SMU DataArts, joined the meeting via Zoom, and gave a high level presentation on a National Perspective on Local Arts Agency Arts Grantmaking which included the following: (1) importance of Local Arts Agencies (LAAs); (2) financial trends and challenges; (3) impact of investment patterns; (4) sector and genre variability; (5) community and economic benefits; (6) strategies and recommendations including – but not limited to [a] cities should focus on consistent messaging about the value of arts investment, [b] supporting individual artists and ensuring long-term organizational sustainability are vital, and [c] learning from successful models can inform a city's grantmaking strategies; (7) future research and data - ongoing analysis of city-specific data can help refine understanding of local strengths and areas for growth; and (8) SMU DataArts Cultural Vibrancy reports and rankings reveal significant trends in the arts and cultural sector drawn from data provided by thousands of arts organizations of varying budget size, geographic location, and artistic discipline.

SMU DataArts Learnings-to-Date

Sadiq also participated via Zoom and presented on the following: (1) challenges and insights related to gathering and analyzing arts and culture data in Saint Louis; (2) current data sets 2024 vs. 2025 have limited usefulness for immediate analysis, especially for national comparisons; (3) focus should be on understanding the local arts scene better; (4) emphasized the importance of public funding for arts and its positive impact on the local economy, citing historical studies like the Arts Economic Prosperity (AEP) series that demonstrate a significant relationship between arts spending and regional GDP; (5) recent analysis of data from 2018 to 2023 found a strong, statistically significant correlation between arts organization expenditures and Saint Louis's regional GDP; (6) explained that the relationship appears more correlational - when the regional economy performs well, arts spending tends to increase - rather than arts spending directly causing economic growth; (7) underscored the importance of further granular data – and working with SMU DataArts can provide an understanding of the nuances of the data; and (8) in summary, analysis supports the idea that arts and culture are integral to the economic health of Saint Louis, with current data indicating a strong positive relationship, but more detailed and accurate data collection is needed for deeper understanding.

Discussion & Purpose + Context

Haubrich shared the goal of the special meeting: to propose organizational grant models for 2027 -2030, based on learnings from RAC's grantees, research conducted by the grants team, and insights gained from SMU DataArts. The focus was solely on discussing organizational grant models, with discussion of program support to come at the retreat; and recommendations for artist support to come later this summer. Haubrich posed rhetorical questions to consider as discussion commenced during the course of the meeting: How important is it for our STL arts ecosystem to reflect a multiplicity of traditions, art forms, and identities?; How important is it for smaller and mid-sized arts organizations to gain enough support to operate AND to take on programmatic risk or coordinate larger initiatives?; and Do we think RAC, as a local arts agency, has a role in ensuring arts organizations of all sized (budgets and audiences) have access to the resources they need to survive and thrive?
The session included the following presentations from the Grants & Programs (G&P) staff.

Overview of RAC Grant Funding 2022 - 2025 and 2026

Higgins presented an overview on RAC grant funding for 2022-2025 and 2026 as follows: (1) Grant Support Types and Changes [a] General Operating Support - unrestricted funding for overall organizational sustainability, previously provided multi-year funding to large arts nonprofits; [b] Organizational Support - expanded and renamed from general operating support, now open to all arts organizations, offering flexible operational funding; [c] Program Support - designated for specific arts programming, historically larger but reduced in 2024 when eligibility narrowed; and [d] COVID Influence - funding changes driven by pandemic-related financial constraints, prioritizing multi-year commitments and unrestricted funding to aid sector survival; (2) Year-by-Year Trends [a] 2022 - continued support to 40 organizations from 2019, funded program and artist

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support grants, with ongoing communication and partial payments; [b] 2023 - maintained the same cohort, increased number of programs funded, and continued engagement with grantees to understand sector needs; [c] 2024 - opened support to 96 organizations, with a focus on unrestricted, flexible funding; program support grants slightly decreased, reflecting a strategic shift; [d] 2025 - funded 122 organizations with total support around $4.7 million, including program and artist grants, benefitting from higher-than-expected revenue and savings; [e] 2026 - planning to carry over the 2025 cohort, with projected funding around $2.6 million for organizations and $352,969 for artists, based on due diligence meetings and evaluations.

Higgins further noted: (1) emphasis on trust-based philanthropy, removing barriers like matching requirements; (2) support for arts programs within non-arts organizations; (3) the review process involves both internal checks and outside reviewers, ensuring all programs are arts-based; (4) the importance of the funding approach to remain inclusive and responsive to the sector's evolving needs, especially post-pandemic, with a focus on supporting a broad range of arts organizations and programs.

Due Diligence Grantee Meeting Takeaways

Winter presented on 'due diligence' grantee meeting takeaways as follows: (1) G&P team met in-person with 80 of the 122 organizations from the 2025 organizational grantee cohort; (2) Purpose - to deepen understanding of grantee's work, priorities, and support needs; (3) Key Takeaways from Discussions – [a] Advantages of Funding: most organizations highlighted the value of general operating support, emphasizing its flexibility, capacity building, and ability to help with planning and adaptation; [b] Application Process - appreciated for its consistency and the validation it provides for applying to other grants; [c] Limitations & Suggestions - would benefit from multi-year funding and clearer feedback on review scores; [d] Summer Programs - noted challenges with timing of 4th quarter grant disbursement; [e] Post-Pandemic Challenges - Rising venue costs led some to narrow programming focus; funding decreases and loss of federal support (like NEA rescissions) have impacted stability; [f] Funding Diversification & Capacity - smaller groups struggle to diversify funding and build reserves, hesitant to expand capacity due to funding stability concerns; [g] Staffing & Governance - organizations want to retain full-time staff, transition founders to new roles, and recruit board members with expertise in finance, fundraising, and marketing—also seeking younger, more diverse members; [h] Board Engagement - difficulties in engaging boards in fundraising and onboarding new members; efforts ongoing to transition from working to governance boards; and [i] Artist Support & Development - artists are valued as collaborators with autonomy; organizations prioritize paying fair wages, offering professional development, and exposing artists to new audiences and opportunities for growth.

Local Arts Agencies (LAA) Research

Bosco presented on LAA research as follows: (1) Research & Context - the grants team has been conducting research on how other LAAs fund organizations and structure their grantmaking, participating in the Urban Arts Coalition grantmaking network,; and (2) key investigation focused on overall grantmaking trends, how LAAs allocate funding based on organization size, and whether LAAs guarantee funding to specific organizations to ensure stability, especially for large institutions.

Current RAC Funding Model

Bosco provided an overview of the current RAC funding model as follows: (1) in 2025, most funded organizations (92 out of 122) were in the smallest budget category; (2) funding requests are capped based on a set maximum per organization, varying by budget tiers; (3) many small organizations receive a high percentage of their revenue from RAC (up to 66%), which is significantly higher than typical caps (20-30%) in other LAAs; and (4) this high reliance raises concerns about long-term sustainability and whether funding structures should be adjusted to prevent overdependence.

Proposed Recommendations

The following proposed recommendations were discussed: (1) Budget Percentage Limit - cap RAC funding at 30-50% of an organization's prior year revenue to promote sustainability; (2) Restructuring Budget Tiers - introduce additional tiers to better

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reflect where organizations fall within their revenue and funding needs; (3) Redefine how budget size is determined - shift from current annual operating budgets (which can be inaccurate or outdated) to prior year revenue or expenses, verified through audited financial statements when available..

Propose Model(s) & Discussion
The grants team highlighted the proposed models: (1) Competitive Model - similar to current practices, requiring annual reapplication with new budget tiers that limit grant amounts based on organization size; (2) The Anchor Institution Model - provides steady funding to four large organizations based on their proven capacity, reach, and sustainability, eliminating the need for annual applications but requiring ongoing reporting; and (3) Expanded Anchor Model - extends guaranteed funding to 15 top organizations with budgets over $1.5 million, supporting their stability and impact.

Additional discussion with the committee touched on (1) Goals and Rationale [a] reduce over-reliance on RAC funding; [b] promote sustainability and growth for small to mid-sized organizations; [c] recognize the economic and cultural importance of larger organizations; and [d] encourage sector consolidation/mergers, potentially with incentive grants, to strengthen the arts community long-term; (2) budget tier adjustments; (3) limit maximum request amounts and reduce the percentage of total revenue that grants can represent; (4) potential for phased transitions with gradual reduction of maximum percentages, allowing organizations time to diversify revenue streams; (5) explore the use of shared services, merger incentives, and revenue-based "investment awards" to promote sector consolidation and growth; and (6) recognize smaller organizations may need more time, support, and capacity-building to adapt to new grantmaking approaches; (7) the importance of careful planning for sector health; (8) acknowledgment of current political and financial challenges; (9) suggestions for leveraging AI and partnerships to increase efficiency and capacity; and (10) overall vision for transition to a sustainable, equitable arts funding model combining guaranteed support for key institutions with competitive grants for mid-sized and smaller groups, implemented gradually to allow adaptation and strengthen the sector long-term.

Next Steps: Annual Board + Staff Retreat, June 26, 2026
The meeting concluded with plans to communicate upcoming decisions and preparations for the full Commission meeting scheduled for June 11th and Annual Board + Staff Retreat scheduled for June 26. The committee supported the recommendation discussed, with plans to revisit details during the retreat to ensure clarity on processes and decision-making. The June 4th grants and programs meeting was canceled, with the chairman using Sam's proxy to approve the March 5th minutes and adjourn the meeting. The minutes were approved, and the meeting was adjourned at 3:05 PM. Attendees expressed appreciation for their participation, emphasizing the importance of the retreat as a key moment to review and solidify plans moving forward.

Roll Call & Adjournment
Chair Fiorello left the meeting at 3p (approved his proxy for adjournment), and on his behalf, Ochoa thanked everyone for their great work. He then called for a motion to adjourn.

Motion made by Carter-Adams, seconded by Ochoa, and unanimously approved to adjourn the May 22, 2026 Grants & Programs Committee meeting at 3:20 p.m. Votes were as follows:

Yea – Fiorello (proxy), Carter-Adams, Ochoa (Coble, acknowledged)
Nay – none
Abstain - none

Submitted by,
L. Sutherlin, Exec. Asst. & Commission Administrator