

Montgomery County Cultural Plan

Task 2.7 Community Conversations Summary Memo

Prepared by Metris Arts Consulting

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The Montgomery County Cultural Plan process is committed to reaching grassroots and underrepresented communities to ensure their needs and concerns are reflected in the research findings and in the plan's recommended strategies. To accomplish this, the consulting team followed a number of strategies. One of them was to organize small-group community conversations throughout the County, led by hosts who were connected to specific community groups and specially trained for this role.

This activity was intentionally designed to capture the voices of groups that are not always at the table in formal planning processes, but are likely to be affected by the recommendations in the cultural plan. We identified these groups, which we refer to as "high-interest/low-influence" stakeholders, with the help of cultural plan advisors from County agencies and the community during the stakeholder mapping process in the DESIGN Phase of our work. The County Executive and Councilmembers identified additional groups in conversations with Metris. The community conversation groups represented different racial and ethnic communities, immigrant, religious, disability, and older adult communities. Examples include Upcounty residents, Ethiopian residents, Ethiopian artists, and the Jewish community. See Appendix A for a full list of community conversations.

We recruited hosts who have connections and relationships within the priority stakeholder groups. These included both formal and informal leaders. The latter may not hold any official title or position, but are well-connected and respected in their communities. We provided facilitation training, written guidance, and a list of discussion questions, and hosts assembled their discussion groups in homes, coffee shops, and virtual spaces across the county. We offered stipends to hosts and participants to value their time and reduce barriers to participation.

Hosts held a total of 19 conversations during June through September, with participants ranging from three to 14 people. Although we are concluding the engagement phase of the cultural plan and moving into the analysis phase, there are still communities we hope to learn from, so we continue to provide a few additional host facilitation opportunities to reach those groups.

Our cultural plan research and community engagement efforts—and therefore the community conversation questions—are focused on three central pillars derived from priorities identified through in-depth community research:

- **Belonging:** Creating a community where everyone belongs and can lead culturally rich lives
- **Intersectionality:** Using arts, culture, heritage, and creative expression to help solve community challenges
- **Cultural sector resilience:** Helping our artists and our cultural communities thrive

Community conversation guidance included a focus on discussing the pillars of belonging and intersectionality. For conversation groups including artists, hosts had the option to include an additional discussion on cultural sector resilience. See Appendix B for a full list of discussion questions.

MEETING FACILITATION

Hosts typically were not professional facilitators, and this was by design. It was important that these conversations be comfortable and trustworthy spaces for participants. We urged hosts to keep the arrangements less formal and to remain neutral during the discussions. As a deliberate community power-sharing tactic, representatives from Metris or the Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County (AHCMC) did not attend these events. We wanted to allow candid conversations unconstrained by the presence of an outsider or “authority figure” in the planning process.

Our preparation for conversation hosts included a written toolkit and a training video that provided step-by-step guidance on how to set up the room, welcome participants, facilitate conversations, answer questions, document the discussion, and create an inclusive experience. Cultural plan community engagement coordinator May Amoyaw was available to hosts to provide one-on-one guidance and answer questions.

Within the discussion groups, we asked hosts to encourage one-on-one conversations between participants about the reflection questions, followed by a share-out with the larger group. Each group held three conversations focused on belonging, intersectionality, and the future. We invited artist groups to have a fourth, optional conversation on cultural sector resilience. After the conversations, each host shared their notes with us, as well as a recording of their discussion. This analysis is based on those notes and recordings.

BELONGING

Across the conversations, the theme of belonging emerged as a core aspiration and a frequent challenge. Participants consistently spoke about wanting to feel welcome, represented, and connected through arts, culture, and creative expression. For many, belonging was tied to finding or creating environments where they could be their authentic selves, see

“Community is somewhere where you can... let your guards down and... open up the possibilities for growth... that’s where the magic takes place.”

- Ethiopian community conversation participant

their cultures reflected, or build new friend groups. Just as often, however, participants described barriers—structural, cultural, or financial—that kept them from feeling fully included. Belonging showed up both as a deeply personal experience and as a structural issue requiring intentional investment from the County and community institutions.

Creating connections

Several comments reflected a perception that people are generally lonelier than they have been in the past. Participants said they recognized a need for more community in their lives and appreciated when shared artistic practice and relationships could create connections. Participants described how workshops, classes, and critique groups offered pathways to lasting connections that nurtured both creativity and personal identity. A few participants spoke of meeting people in classes who became lifelong friends. These experiences were sometimes described as life-changing. However, many conversations revealed a significant gap between participation in cultural activities, such as classes, and the development of ongoing community ties, with participants expressing frustration that connections often don't deepen into sustained relationships.

Cultural events and spaces

Seeing their cultures represented through art and language in public spaces fostered a strong sense of belonging for people. Participants identified outdoor festivals, murals, libraries, and community-driven events as central to creating belonging because they provide safe, culturally relevant platforms for expression and cross-cultural encounter. However, there was a clear distinction made between cultural programming co-created with the community versus programming designed by outsiders. One resident from the El Salvadoran community said, “I feel welcomed in the spaces like the Long Branch Community Center and CASA [a community-based organization serving immigrant families], where cultural programming is built with us, not for us.”

In some areas of the county, participants felt the physical surroundings did not convey a sense of place or belonging for any specific culture. One participant in the East County conversation said, “I’m talking about White Oak, Briggs-Cheney, Spencerville, just all of those areas. There’s primarily roads, maybe some shopping centers with a few aesthetics. There isn’t that much of expression that is there and nothing that really reflects our residents and the people that are there.”

Access and barriers

The discussions addressed the participants’ perceptions of the ease or difficulty of accessing arts, culture, and humanities resources. The factors they discussed included cost, transportation, scheduling, geographic proximity, physical accessibility, language barriers, and cultural familiarity.

Participants across conversations identified structural obstacles that discourage or prevent arts and cultural groups from organizing or taking part in events, such as unresponsive venues and prohibitive insurance

requirements. They also identified barriers to individual attendance and participation at events, such as language barriers and limited marketing in non-English languages.

Many also noted geographic disparities, with Upcounty residents expressing difficulty in accessing cultural opportunities because offerings in their area are more sparse. Even in close-in areas like Bethesda, participation can be an issue, with one artist participant sharing that they felt events such as art festivals there are more focused on showcasing established businesses and less welcoming to small businesses.

Population diversity and growth

Participants reflected on Montgomery County's demographic changes and their implications for arts, culture, and humanities. They felt cultivating belonging is increasingly important in light of the county's growing diversity and multicultural character. However, many also noted that diversity alone doesn't automatically create belonging without intentional efforts to build connections across cultural communities.

"I love walking through our schools and markets—you see every culture here. That's what makes me feel like I belong."
- Upcounty community conversation participant

County role

Discussion participants shared their ideas for how the County government and AHCMC can strengthen belonging. Their ideas spanned policy, funding, infrastructure, and direct support for artists and cultural communities. They are looking for leadership on a variety of topics: creating equitable access to cultural resources across all geographic areas, offering practical support like insurance programs and subsidized spaces, and ensuring that underserved communities receive the same level of cultural investment as more affluent areas. They felt County support could be instrumental in kickstarting dialogue about the need to address issues of access and equity, providing technical assistance, and fostering leadership development across different sectors to strengthen cultural engagement and inclusivity.

Equity and inclusion

Many of the conversations addressed what people perceive as systemic inequity, exclusion, and the need for deliberate inclusion efforts to ensure artists and communities of color have equitable access to resources, representation, and decision-making roles in the cultural sector. Some participants described how belonging was deeply tied to seeing people of color visibly included in local events. They contrasted experiences in different parts of the county, with some areas feeling more welcoming than others. Inclusion is important in other ways as well. One participant spoke of the impact of VisArts, which provides accessible art classes for people in the disability community, saying, "VisArts is a place where they feel like they belong."

INTERSECTIONALITY

Participants expressed a strong interest in exploring how arts, culture, and humanities can serve as tools to address broader community priorities, beyond cultural expression alone. Across all 19 conversations, participants consistently viewed creative expression not as an isolated activity but as a way to strengthen education systems, improve health outcomes, revitalize neighborhoods, support economic development, and enhance daily life experiences. They frequently noted how arts-based approaches could strengthen community cohesion, reduce inequities, and make everyday life more vibrant and inclusive.

Education

Arts education was often identified as a key entry point for creating equity and opportunity, especially for young people. Participants emphasized the importance of systematic arts integration in schools and community spaces, highlighting the transformative effects of arts access on youth who might not otherwise have creative outlets. They saw potential in the intersections of arts and culture with education, despite the reality of continuous cuts to arts education in public schools. An Upcounty resident described how fiber arts can benefit students across educational disciplines: "Some children struggle with hand-eye coordination. Some struggle with math. Knitting, crochet, and quilting can help address these challenges. It could also help some adults. Quilting is a great way to teach geometry." Another participant noted that the intersection of arts and education can also support the theme of belonging: "Imagine students reading a novel from Iran or Egypt alongside an American novel in school. That kind of cross-cultural exchange changes perceptions."

Health and well-being

Participants repeatedly described the arts, in general, as tools for healing, wellness, and social connection. Many participants connected artistic practice to coping with stress, trauma, racism, and social isolation and called for more formal integration of arts into health systems. Art was valued for its ability to strengthen community bonds in ways that prevent crises. For example, a participant in the LGBTQIA+ conversation suggested that art therapy could help gather people to work through the isolation and trauma of immigration or queer community struggles and help them creatively process their emotions.

"It actually healed something within me as I was assisting these children... A lot of them really needed an outlet to express themselves."

- Bethesda community conversation participant

Housing and neighborhoods

Participants envisioned stronger connections between creative life and neighborhood identity, including live/work spaces, accessible studios, and cultural hubs. Affordable housing tied to arts infrastructure was framed as essential for keeping artists in the County and sustaining cultural vibrancy. Several people noted that suburban and rural areas lacked accessible spaces for creativity, while recalling the importance of recreation centers and neighborhood hubs in the past.

Economic resilience

Participants said they believed art and culture are essential to local economic vitality, both through creative businesses and as a driver of tourism and neighborhood growth. In a conversation with ties to the cultural sector resilience theme, they also pointed out that current funding models—heavily project-based—make it difficult for artists to sustain careers. One artist commented, “If you don’t quite conform to what they want, it becomes hard to find opportunities. Most grants are project-based, not sustainable for artists.” Individual participants suggested operational funding, County-sponsored incubators, and fair compensation so that the arts can contribute fully to the County’s economy.

Everyday life integration

Participants stressed that arts, culture, and the humanities should be woven into daily life—workplaces, medical offices, libraries, and community centers—rather than being siloed. They called for art to be part of ordinary living, helping to make neighborhoods vibrant. In many ways, everyday integration of the arts was seen as the foundation for building long-term belonging and equity.

CULTURAL SECTOR RESILIENCE

Across the conversations, the theme of cultural sector resilience showed how participants felt that Montgomery County’s cultural sector can better withstand and thrive through ongoing challenges. Participants consistently described both the vulnerabilities they experienced during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and the adaptive strategies that helped cultural organizations and artists survive. Their insights revealed that resilience requires both grassroots community support and systemic institutional changes. Many participants called for Montgomery County to play a more active role in building the infrastructure needed for long-term cultural sector stability, such as space for studios and performance.

Capacity Building

Capacity building focuses on strengthening skills, leadership, infrastructure, and organizational development within the cultural sector. Participants emphasized that resilient communities require intentional programming, mentorship structures, and face-to-face networks that can support both individual artists and collective growth during challenging times. South Asian artists talked about how they are mentoring a lot of younger artists. While they enjoy the work, they wish there were something to support such mentorship programs.

Funding

Across the conversations, there were several calls for more stable and diverse funding sources, with participants recognizing that access to appropriate resources could sustain businesses and cultural enterprises through hardship. Many emphasized the need for emergency support systems and better resource navigation. One artist explained that variable grant funding is not a particularly sustainable way to make a living and called for a

universal basic income for artists. Another participant suggested creating emergency funds for artists experiencing homelessness, or health or economic challenges.

Structural gaps

Participants discussed systemic inequalities in how arts organizations are supported. They perceive that larger and more established organizations receive more attention and resources. Likewise, they felt that success for individual artists depends more on "who you know" than on an artist's level of talent. Many noted that success often depends heavily on personal networks rather than accessible support systems. They spoke of a lack of networks for people to turn to when they have questions or are struggling. Individual artists seem to feel this most keenly, with some perceiving that the County is focused on building organizations rather than supporting individuals.

By contrast, grassroots networks, mutual aid systems, and community-driven survival strategies helped sustain cultural workers and organizations during crisis periods. Participants described how community solidarity often provided essential support when formal systems were absent. One example described how an Ethiopian market was able to stay in business because the Ethiopian community continued to support it during the pandemic.

Pandemic impacts

COVID-related challenges and adaptation strategies within the creative sector were a common theme, with participants describing how the pandemic completely disrupted traditional business models while forcing immediate pivots to digital platforms and modified service delivery. Cultural sector members commented on the opportunities as well as the challenges associated with the digital delivery of their work.

County support

Several discussions featured ways Montgomery County can help the arts sector thrive through public-private partnerships, coordinated government involvement, and technical assistance. Participants emphasized the need for the County to facilitate cultural projects by connecting artists or nonprofits with project opportunities and providing ongoing support for community organizations. One participant suggested exploring "a public-private partnership model where County seed money could leverage nonprofit efforts to generate public support and ensure sustainable funding for art projects." Another participant proposed hiring a coordinator at the county level to match artists with empty storefronts and other spaces, creating opportunities to hold short-term events.

"County support could be instrumental in kick starting dialogue, providing technical assistance, and fostering leadership development to strengthen cultural engagement and empowering artists to champion their community."
- Ethiopian Artists community conversation participant

LOOKING AHEAD

Across the conversations, participants spoke of the future and how arts, culture, and creative expression should evolve in Montgomery County over the next decade. Participants consistently emphasized that meaningful cultural change must be intentional, strategic, and centered on the next generation. Their visions ranged from preserving important cultural traditions to transforming how arts are integrated into daily community life. Many saw the future as requiring both bold innovation and careful stewardship of existing cultural assets.

Youth and the next generation

Participants shared the strong conviction that meaningful cultural change must begin with investing in children and young people's creative development. Across conversations, participants emphasized that youth are both the carriers of cultural traditions and the innovators who will shape Montgomery County's cultural identity. Participants spoke of the importance of providing art and cultural education/experiences in schools.

Growth and expansion

This theme captures participants' aspirations for new programs, venues, and strategic development of arts infrastructure, particularly in underserved areas. Participants envisioned a comprehensive approach to the expansion of arts and culture in the county. They advocated for strategies (expanded programming, new venues, and scaling of already successful initiatives) that would expand access to broader and more diverse audiences across all county districts. Participants also envision more visible public art and performance spaces rooted in neighborhoods, with increased funding and infrastructure to reach broader audiences. "Arts and performance spaces need to be in the community and not in walled-off/closed-off spaces," said one.

Simultaneously, their vision includes creating new opportunities for diverse artistic expression and cross-cultural programming. A representative comment is the suggestion to convert vacant or underutilized public buildings into community art hubs with workshops and exhibition spaces. One conversation group called for coordinated growth that brings together multiple art forms to create comprehensive cultural venues and programming, and increased visibility. Participants want to enable creative businesses to thrive as part of the local economy, making Montgomery County a destination for cultural experiences.

Investment priorities

Community conversation participants focused on strategic funding and resource allocation that they believe would create long-term impact for Montgomery County's cultural ecosystem. Participants identified specific areas where county investment could leverage community resources while providing sustainable support for artists and cultural programming. These include a universal basic income for artists, tying AHCMC's budget proportionally to the County budget so that funding for art and culture grows with the county budget, and an art fund supported by both government and community.

Innovation and change

Conversations touched on novel approaches, reforms, and transformative shifts that participants hope to see in Montgomery County's cultural landscape. They proposed creative solutions ranging from new collaborative models to technology integration and fundamental changes in how arts are accessed and experienced. Ideas included holding more performances in public spaces, transitioning from culturally specific arts festivals to events that feature and unite different cultures, and the potential for providing shelter for the unhoused in cultural spaces. In discussing technology, participants saw both opportunity and threat. One person suggested co-locating maker space and gallery space so that people using maker space technologies had an immediate opportunity to display their work. Others spoke of grappling with the presence of AI in the creative realm and pivoting to digital display and performance modes, both during the pandemic and after.

"Art is our common language. If we can keep creating opportunities to share it—through festivals, exhibitions, and digital platforms—we will have a stronger, more inclusive community in Montgomery County."
- Middle Eastern community conversation participant

Vision statements

Participants shared explicit long-term hopes and aspirations for how they want Montgomery County's cultural landscape to function in 10+ years. These statements often emphasized cross-cultural solidarity, community integration, and arts at the center of daily life. One participant in the Muslim and Middle Eastern conversation said, "In 10 years, I hope our communities will not only showcase their culture, but also support each other. If there's a Persian festival, I want to see Turkish, Arab, and American neighbors there—and vice versa. That's how solidarity grows." An artist shared the hope that artists' work would be valued appropriately, saying they hoped no one would be asking artists to work for free.

Continuity

Continuity reflects participants' desire to preserve important cultural traditions, venues, practices, and knowledge systems for future generations while adapting them for contemporary relevance. Continuity emphasizes intergenerational transmission and maintaining strong community ties. Participants spoke of multiple generations of the same families participating in the same art form, and supporting culturally specific businesses so they will survive.

APPENDIX A: LIST OF COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Conversation	Host	Date	Participants
Bethesda	Charlei Hebron	June 14, 2025	4
Francophone Black diaspora	Charlei Hebron	June 26, 2025	4
Mid-County	Sabria Allen	June 27, 2025	3
Disability communities	Katherine DuBois	June 29, 2025	5
BIPOC artists	Gia Harewood	June 30, 2025	6
Ethiopian community	Bruke Fasil	July 2, 2025	4
Silver Spring	Elizabeth Gallaresi	July 10, 2025	14
Older adults	Tadella Demeke	July 11, 2025	5
LGBTQIA+ artists and community	Daniel Singh	July 16, 2025	3
Indian, Pakistani, Nepali, Sri Lankan community	Daniel Singh	July 20, 2025	10
Artists	Liliane Blom	July 28, 2025	8
Upcounty	Cynthia Johnson	August 19, 2025	6
Middle Eastern community	Shahzad Nakhostin	August 21, 2025	7
Spanish speaking community	Nicole Lainez	August 22, 2025	6
El Salvadoran community	Michelle Lainez	August 22, 2025	6
Ethiopian artists	Dereje Weldegeorgis, Nomad Zone	August 23, 2025	11
Chinese, Cambodian, South Asian, Korean, Filipino, Taiwanese, Indonesian community	Hudson Tang, Aryani Ong	August 22 & 24, 2025	14
Jewish community	Aimee Segal	September 7, 2025	5
East County	Akufuna Ngonda	December 3 & 23, 2025	6

APPENDIX B: COMMUNITY CONVERSATION QUESTIONS

Conversation 1: Creating a community where everyone belongs and can lead culturally rich lives

Reflection Questions:

- What does belonging in your community feel like to you?
- How have arts, culture, heritage, and creative expression helped you to build connections in your own life?
- Where have you experienced a strong sense of belonging through arts, culture, heritage, or creative expression? Are there places where you feel like you don't belong? What is the place/activity that makes you feel most like you belong to a group or a community?

Conversation 2: Using arts, culture, heritage, and creative expression to help solve community challenges

Reflection Questions:

- What problems in your community have you seen solved or helped by art, culture, heritage, or creative expression?
- How could arts, culture, heritage, and creative expression be better used to solve community challenges in the future?

Conversation 3: Envisioning the future of arts, culture, heritage, and creative expression in Montgomery County

Reflection Questions:

- In ten years, how would you want arts, culture, and heritage to be part of everyday life in your neighborhood?
- Where do you see opportunities for more art and creativity to improve everyday life in Montgomery County?
- What would your community look like if arts, culture, heritage, and creative expression were fully valued and supported everywhere in Montgomery County?

Conversation 4 (Optional for groups including artists): Helping our artists and our cultural communities thrive

Reflection Questions:

- First: think about all the different parts of Montgomery County's cultural sector (for instance: independent artists; arts, culture, and humanities non-profits; creative businesses; supporting businesses, etc.) and how they add up to a larger whole.
- Think about a local artist, cultural group/organization, or creative business you care about. How have they managed during tough times like the pandemic? What helped them survive?
- What support or resources have made the biggest difference for you or others you know who work in the cultural sector/creative economy?

- When was a time you felt proud of how your community's local artists, cultural groups/organizations, or creative businesses adapted to a challenge? What did they do that impressed you?
- If you could change one thing to help local artists, cultural groups/organizations, or creative businesses in Montgomery County succeed over the long term, what would it be and how would it help you or people you know?