

Montgomery County Cultural Plan Task 2.2 Focus Groups Summary Memo

Prepared by Metris Arts Consulting
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To hear directly from members of Montgomery County's cultural sector/creative economy about their needs and concerns, Metris Arts facilitated six focus groups with arts, culture, and humanities stakeholders from across the county. We held these discussions in June and July 2025 with a total of fifty-seven participants across all groups. We held one session in person and conducted the remainder virtually, because the virtual setting increased participation rates significantly. The sessions were:

- Arts, culture, and humanities nonprofits with budgets of \$1M+
- Arts, culture, and humanities nonprofits with budgets under \$1M
- BIPOC-led and/or culturally specific organizations
- Individual artists and creative/cultural practitioners
- Arts educators
- Creative/cultural businesses
- Library branch staff

We will refer to these individuals and entities collectively as the "cultural sector" throughout this memo. See Appendix A for a list of focus groups and participants. See Appendix B for the questions the groups discussed. See Appendix C for a list of the high-level discussion topics from each group. Please note that the direct quotes in this document are unattributed, in accordance with the interview protocols we shared with participants.



Participants in the focus group for BIPOC/culturally specific organizations

Our cultural plan research and community engagement efforts 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

Our focus group discussions with members of the county's cultural sector largely concentrated on the last pillar: cultural sector resilience, but participants also touched on intersectionality and belonging as important themes in their work and among their own priorities.

CULTURAL SECTOR NEEDS AND CONCERNS

We opened the discussion with each of the focus groups by asking about their support systems: the sets of resources and relationships they rely on to sustain their work as artists, arts educators, organizational leaders, or creative/cultural business owners. We asked them to envision what an ideal support system would look like and to compare that ideal vision to the reality of their current support systems. Unsurprisingly, participants saw wide gaps between their ideal visions and reality.

Finances

Grants

Even with the State of Maryland and Montgomery County's relatively robust government funding for arts, culture, and humanities,¹ members of the Montgomery County cultural sector said financial concerns are paramount. They believe the arts are underfunded in comparison to other county priorities, and people and institutions throughout the cultural sector need more money. Although AHCMC has received consistent funding increases year over year, these increases have not kept pace with demand and inflation.

Participants explained that grant funding is difficult to find and highly competitive across the board. One artist said this is particularly true for Montgomery County-based artists. Although they are part of a regional cultural community, they often find they are not eligible to access many local taxpayer-based grant opportunities in the DMV.² They concluded, "it ends up being a lot of time spent and, in a certain sense, wasted, just looking for grants, applying for grants, writing reports."

Navigating Shocks: COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic hit artists and arts-focused nonprofits hard. The cancellation of in-person events, loss of ticket sales, and personal impacts of illness left artists and creative businesses to grapple with the loss of income and the inability to fulfill their missions.

Although the height of the pandemic has passed, groups across the cultural sector continue to feel the effects. Nonprofits are still losing funding and shutting down. Events, including some of the biggest arts festivals in the state, have stopped happening due to lack of the necessary money. The reality of the situation contradicts a public perception that the arts are well-funded, noted one nonprofit leader: "We were flush before the pandemic, and our opportunities have almost all but just been decimated. We were up to 30 performances a year, and last year we had fewer than 10."

¹ Maryland ranks fifth in the nation in per-capita arts funding programs (Source: National Assembly of State Arts Agencies Per Capita Ranking Estimation Tool), and Montgomery County ranks in the 99th percentile in the nation for public arts funding (Source: Arts Vibrancy Map 2024, SMU Data Arts).

² Local Arts Agency funding is typically restricted to recipients residing or working in that jurisdiction.

Artist income

Artists explained they are constantly seeking compensated opportunities to perform or display their work, but these opportunities can be hard to come by. When they do find paid outlets, the compensation often is not enough to constitute a living. “In general, visual artists are not paid anything like a wage when they exhibit,” one artist shared. She went on, “Even with grants, most exhibitions are a cost to the artist.” Another artist, who does immersive installations, noted that she cannot sell her work, so it’s especially important to her to be paid for exhibiting.

“In my dream world we would be getting artist grants that are not necessarily tied to a particular project. That gives you so much more freedom to explore and work on your art.”

Some participants voiced a perception that cultural funding is a zero-sum proposition and that increased priority on organizations with smaller budget sizes and individual artists comes at the expense of organizations with larger budget sizes. At the county level, organizational funding in the highest budget tier has actually increased over time; however, organizations may still feel pinched by both inflation and reduced attendance and contributed income in the post-COVID era.

Nonprofit organizations that hire artists reported they have challenges paying artists for their work. The leader of a large nonprofit shared that it can no longer hire artists at its previous scale. “Now we can hire fewer artists than we used to. Theaters that used to do shows with twenty people now do them with two.” A representative from another large nonprofit agreed, noting that her organization largely uses contracted artists rather than full-time employees, “but we need to be able to pay them. Right now, we can’t pay them a living wage for full-time work.”

Creative Spaces

Performance/display space

Artists and arts organizations across multiple focus groups expressed that Montgomery County does not have enough suitable performance or display space, especially for smaller organizations and individuals. One artist commented, “I don’t think that there are many places to exhibit art in our county, and I’m in an arts and entertainment district.” The space that does exist is largely unaffordable and inaccessible.

One mid-sized nonprofit organization does not have its own brick-and-mortar location. Its members perform in schools and “nontraditional spaces” in the community. They face significant challenges in finding space for their events, which include a free performing arts series. It may sound simple, but there are multiple considerations for an appropriate space. At a minimum, it must have enough room for the performers and the audience, be a space

Navigating Shocks: Federal immigration & DEI changes

Immigration raids in the Washington, DC area have cast a pall on many public events, especially culturally focused events. The annual Salvadoran Festival that takes place at the Montgomery County Fairgrounds was cancelled in 2025 due to fears that attendees would be targeted by immigration authorities. “Unfortunately for some of the other cultures, being anywhere in public is a huge risk to safety. That’s a new issue, and it is affecting our county,” said one focus group participant. Another agreed, saying, “We have had to change what and how we do things in Wheaton for that specific factor: the community feels targeted right now, and it’s a scary time.” As with the pandemic, pivoting to virtual events has pros and cons. It offers a safer way to access programming, but many families do not have computers or iPads or connections to the internet at home.

where families can feel comfortable bringing small children, and be available for a full performance run. The absence of any one of those factors can eliminate many spaces from contention.

Another nonprofit director noted that there was a period of time when he was able to partner with Montgomery College to exhibit his programming in the college's facilities. Because the performances helped the college meet a goal to provide culturally diverse experiences for students and faculty, the organization was able to use the facilities free of charge. With a change in management at the college, however, the partnership ended, and he now works hard to cobble together a series of other venues for his programming.

Montgomery College

Montgomery College came up frequently in the focus groups. Multiple participants noted that partnerships or amenities that used to exist are no longer available, including a makerspace with useful machines and tools, and a display space for visual artists. One nonprofit leader called for more affordable access to Montgomery College performing arts centers, saying, "Those centers, especially the one in Takoma Park/Silver Spring, sit empty for far too much of the year because the rates are not affordable for community arts groups and nonprofits. And so much more could be happening in those spaces that would benefit not only the Montgomery College students, but our local communities."

Although he was not in the same focus group, a representative of Montgomery College's performing arts centers spoke in another session about the use of the spaces, noting that they are rented to community users at fees well below market rate. These groups use the spaces seventy to eighty days per year, and staffing challenges make it difficult to increase that usage.

Studio and classroom space

In addition to performance/display space, artists and cultural organizations need space to create their work. Visual artists need studio space, performance groups need rehearsal space, and artist educators need places to teach their classes and workshops. Even when space is available, rent is expensive, and the commitment can be prohibitive in other ways. Studio members often have to commit to spending a mandated number of days or hours at the studio, which can interfere with their teaching schedules and negatively affect their earnings.

Space is not the only concern. Artists and creatives also need access to specialized equipment and infrastructure in the spaces where they work and perform. Participants said they have trouble finding spaces that have what they need, such as available black box theaters. Another artist was concerned about virtual space and making the arts accessible to more people by developing virtual access to a quality, creative experience that delivers the same kind of experience as a live production.

"I am a small business owner. My home is my office and I usually go from place to place. It would be nice to have a community space for community classes, but it's so expensive I would wash away all of my profits."

Even organizations that have their own space face challenges. One executive director described spending an inordinate amount of time on “space issues.” Funding for capital improvements to nonprofits’ facilities flows directly from the County, rather than through AHCMC, but the organizations fund maintenance from their general operating support. Participants agreed that there is not enough funding for capital projects for facility development/repair. Further, the County’s guidance around its capital funding is difficult to interpret. One focus group participant said it is hard to determine whether her organization is eligible to apply for the capital funding it needs. Difficulty accessing capital improvement funds can lead organizations to devote more of their general operating support to facilities issues or simply defer needed repairs. “We are constantly putting off needs,” said one nonprofit director.

Technical Capacity

Fundraising

Participants across the focus groups spoke of the challenges of keeping up with the “business side” of their work. Both individuals and organizations said they struggle with fundraising, specifically researching and writing grants. Smaller organizations and individuals cannot afford to hire professional grantwriters, but do not have the expertise themselves. Participants agreed they need more support for a range of grant activities, including identifying appropriate opportunities and writing competitive proposals. Broadly speaking, a representative from a mid-sized cultural organization argued that it’s not a level playing field when organizations, independent artists, and small businesses with one or two employees are all competing for the same pots of philanthropic funds. With regard to AHCMC grants, another focus group participant summed up capacity issues succinctly: “The County should always assume that there’s half a person applying.”

Montgomery County has a smaller pool of private grant opportunities than many locations, such as the suburbs of Philadelphia, New York, or Boston. AHCMC does, however, try to help its grantees take advantage of the resources that are available, with a “Grant Opportunity Generator” to help potential applicants navigate AHCMC’s nine funding opportunities as well as group and individual technical assistance for applicants.

Informational and logistical challenges

Individual artists reported not feeling “plugged in” to the cultural life of the county. They feel they do not have adequate information about events and opportunities in the county.³

Multiple focus groups included conversations about the difficulties of navigating the county’s bureaucracy. Participants recounted challenges procuring necessary permits from the County, understanding funding opportunities, and seeking assistance to plan and execute events. One artist noted that the lack of a County office of the arts or similar government representation makes it hard to know where to go for assistance.

³ Metris asked if they were familiar with Culture Spot and shared the link. Several participants had not heard of it, or were concerned it was “pay-to-play.”

Promotion and validation

They also struggle with getting their own work in front of potential audiences. On a broader scale, several artists and nonprofit organizations expressed concern that the County does not do enough to communicate about arts and culture. This applies to both promoting the County's cultural sector specifically and communicating the value of arts, culture, and the humanities broadly. One common point was the importance of respecting creative work as work. Artists spoke of an expectation that they will work for free or to gain "exposure," when it is their livelihood and they need to be paid for their efforts. Others expressed concerns that the County does not understand the value of their sector and take it as seriously as other endeavors like transportation. They view this as both an existential threat and as a practical one: it's harder to sustain their work if it is not prioritized or funded at the same level as other sectors.

Libraries

"Education does not take place only in schools."

Funding

Librarians reported that funding is a major issue. One reported that the County-funded budget for branch library programs is \$16,000 annually for the entire MCPL system. Friends of the Library provides additional program funding, but what Friends can offer still does not meet branches' programming needs. Moreover, some librarians expressed concern that a County agency must rely on a third party for such a big part of its program model.

Libraries also cannot generate revenue by charging even nominal fees for their programs because library programming, by County law, must be free of charge for everyone. Further, branch librarians said they are prohibited from applying for external grants themselves.

Without exception, the branch librarians in the group said they cannot afford to adequately compensate performers for all the arts and cultural programming they want to provide. They typically must find an artist willing to provide programming for free. "The amount available for arts programming is unrealistically meager," one person concluded.

"It's hard being in one of the wealthiest counties in the country and telling people we can't afford to have those kinds of programs."

Per capita library funding in Montgomery County is below average for the state of Maryland. It would take \$17 million more per year just to get to the average, they said, but closer to \$30 million more per year to compete with counties like Howard and Baltimore.

Librarians made a strong case for increased program funding. "We have a desire for arts programming in our system," said one. Another agreed that the library is a logical setting to provide that programming: "We see that this community of one million people is hungry for additional life enrichment activity close to home. It's very rare that there are these community spaces all throughout the community, and there are 20 libraries."

Branch capacity and autonomy

Montgomery County recently disbanded its MCPL Outreach team, a group that included several bilingual staff members and was tasked with representing the library and making connections with community and cultural groups. “Now branch staff are going to be responsible for that on top of all the other duties,” said one participant. “It seems like too much to ask of us as our job exists now if we want to be really creating belonging and making and maintaining partnerships.”

Outreach is important, participants said, describing how the role libraries play in their neighborhoods goes far beyond books. “Libraries are often the first place people come when they are new to the community,” one librarian explained, noting that they spend a lot of time referring people to other agencies and organizations that can help. They continued, “We really need to go to people and meet them where they are, which is sometimes difficult. We have to get permission and go through a lot of hoops to do outreach. Sometimes there is no one in the branch to do that.” Librarians agreed they need more staff, including additional positions focused on specific age groups such as youth, teens, and older adults.

Some described decisions that affect their ability to serve the cultural communities at their branches, in which they have no say. In one such instance, the system removed books in Farsi, Bengali, Russian, and French from shelves without consulting the branches. “It wasn’t about the use of the books, but the knowledge that we had a Farsi collection mattered,” an affected librarian shared.

Librarians in the branch locations have the authority to determine the programming their communities need, but are not guaranteed the ability to provide it. They can plan programs in response to customer requests, but doing so often depends on finding a free option or a “ready, willing, and able volunteer to lead it,” said one participant. While there is a process to request funding programs beyond the branch’s allocation, it can be confusing and onerous. Participants described a multi-step process in which requests go back and forth between branch operations, risk management, and other divisions within the library system, simply to sign a contract with a performer. This cannot be circumvented because branch librarians are not allowed to sign anything themselves.

Librarians also said they do not have standard templates and instructions for forming agreements with performers or processing a community member’s request to provide programming. Without standard tools and templates, branches are left to navigate these processes on their own.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

"I feel like the whole system needs to be disrupted. I feel like this is our time to figure out how to change this model."

Even as they discussed improvements to cultural sector systems, focus group participants were quick to voice appreciation for AHCMC, saying the grant support AHCMC provides is critical and the staff is helpful. Their concerns largely focused on what *more* could be done, rather than a sense that they were not being served.

Innovations in Grants

Purpose

There was almost universal agreement that the pot of grant funds available for arts, culture, and the humanities is not large enough to meet demand. Focus group participants would like to see the County dedicate more funding to grants for the cultural sector. Several artists endorsed the idea of having grants that are not tied to a specific project or program, but simply fund the opportunity to be artists. "If you have a grant, not just to make the art, but to connect with the community and talk about why that art is compelling...then everyone's kind of working together, feeling respected." They described it as having a "bubble of generosity" surrounding the artist, which contributes to a stronger ecosystem. AHCMC's own Artist Residency program currently supports three artists, one in each Regional Service Center in Upcounty, Mid-County, and East County, to connect with the communities through their work.

"It has definitely become much more competitive, but even though it may impact us, it feels like the love is spread more widely, and I think there's more artists being able to have residencies or participate in projects."

Some participants took that notion a step further, calling for stipends amounting to a universal basic income for artists, even if the amount per artist was modest. One proponent explained, "If everybody could take one less freelance gig or one less shift in whatever job people have because they know they've got that steady support that they can count on, I think that would be a more profound and more modern and contemporary, even forward-thinking way to fund the arts." Similar programs have been piloted at the national (Ireland), state (New York), and local (Minnesota municipalities) levels in recent years.

Some nonprofit leaders suggested that their organizations could provide such stipends if they received funding to do so. "Let's try things," said one leader. "Pay artists to be artists, but do it through the larger arts organizations. For example, if you hire artists for a certain amount of time, you receive a subsidy." The important thing, she went on, was to "figure out a way to do it together, not pit artists and small organizations against the larger organizations." Several arts organizations noted that they do not earn enough revenue to balance their outgoing pay for artists and staff. "In a perfect world," said one nonprofit leader, "the county, state, or federal government would close that gap in a significant way."

Another participant surfaced the idea of paying established artists to mentor younger and emerging artists. She noted that there is no place within the county where young artists can learn professional skills like how to write a resume, build a professional website, or connect with other artists in their community. A paid mentorship program would provide an additional revenue-generating opportunity for established artists as they help build a new generation of professional artists.

Process

In keeping with their comments about the difficulty of researching and applying for grants, focus group participants had ideas for how to streamline the process. More than one participant suggested a more in-depth grant workshop for potential applicants, in addition to the current sessions that explain AHCMC's offerings. One nonprofit leader suggested offering a workshop well in advance of the RFP release that would explain the County's goals for grants and the partnerships or impacts they hope to achieve. Another commenter proposed an education session that could help artists understand what grant opportunities (both in the county and beyond) would be suitable for them. In general, participants felt they needed more assistance and more time to put together grant applications: "Give us some more lead time for every funding source that the County offers. I'm looking at ten other funding sources, which are all going to be due at the same time that the County's is."

Funding sources

Finding new funding sources for arts and cultural grants was another key topic during the conversations. Participants pointed out Montgomery County's relative wealth in the country and region, but suggested the county does not have "a culture of people being patrons of the arts." They are interested in seeing a countywide campaign to encourage residents with financial means to invest in the arts. Other speakers wanted to see stronger and "more creative" partnerships with the philanthropic community and corporations located in the county. There is a precedent for both of these suggestions in United Arts Funds; local arts agencies that raise funds from businesses, philanthropy, and individual donors and regrant the money to cultural and arts organizations. United Arts Funds have had varying degrees of success. Policy suggestions included exploring dedicated "cultural infrastructure fees" for the arts from sources such as additional hotel sales tax support or fees included in utility bills.

Create Space for Arts, Culture, and the Humanities

Discussion participants suggested exploring ways to activate unused spaces in the county. One person spoke of a group in Silver Spring activating vacant storefronts with arts uses. He wanted to see how the County could remove barriers to using vacant spaces. The benefits could be two-fold, creating more space for artists and putting vacant spaces to vibrant use. It would also foster intersections between the cultural sector and the County's land use and economic development goals.

Co-working space for artists and writers was also a popular idea. One writer called for subsidized co-working space, noting it did not need to be luxurious and could simply be unused office space. He said, "It's about having a place to be, but it's also about the community you get from being a part of that place."

Build Professional Capacity

Shared resources

Some of the nonprofit organizations in our discussions were interested in exploring how they could share resources and knowledge. For example, could it be possible to centralize some of the “back office” functions like payroll and human resources with a shared provider, instead of each organization having those paid positions on their individual staffs? Could they invest in shared insurance? Could they pool resources for business planning, marketing, and physical plant maintenance? As one organization leader put it, “With the few hands that we all have, we can maximize what we can do.” The participants in the discussion said they hoped AHCMC could help them explore the possibilities for sharing resources.



The focus group for nonprofits with budgets over \$1M drew participants from performing arts, cultural, and community organizations.

Other ideas included: a “tools library” where artists could check out projectors and screens for their installations and use 3D printers and other machines; a directory that groups similar organizations so nonprofits can know and support one another; and more peer-to-peer connection and learning opportunities.

The business of arts, culture, and the humanities

Individual artists in particular felt they needed support to navigate the business side of their creative endeavors. An artist cited the need for training in how to read a contract and how to manage a business, “because what people don’t realize as artists or authors or people that are in the creative scene, we are our own product. We are our own business.”

Information sharing and logistical support

Because arts and culture matters are decentralized within the County government, members of the cultural sector often have difficulty getting help for their work. In addition, most of the communities in Montgomery County are unincorporated, meaning the majority of towns do not have mayors or local offices to help meet people’s needs. An artist in the small UpCounty town of Poolesville has to go all the way to the county agency level with their questions, just as someone in the large suburb of Wheaton does.

Focus group participants wondered how AHCMC might help coordinate and inform their efforts. Suggestions included: interpreting whether an organization is eligible for the County’s capital improvement grants; making connections with government departments that have the procurement authority to make contracts with artists; advising on where to go and whom to ask for things like permits and event support. Participants also cited the need for more information sharing about events and opportunities in the county, resources for nonprofits in the area, and market research that could help artists and organizations identify new audiences.

There were several calls for the County's large cultural institutions, such as the Strathmore and Black Rock, to lend more support to individual artists and smaller cultural organizations. Ideas included hiring and showcasing county residents and providing space for artists to perform.

Focus group participants were also interested in ways to connect more regularly with one another. They shared tips about professional groups such as Teaching Artists of the Mid-Atlantic and offered to explore how they might share spaces. The individual artists and creative/cultural practitioners group has stayed in touch through an email thread since the conversation, sharing information about upcoming events and encouraging each other.

Promote the Cultural Sector

Artists and nonprofit organizations alike said they need more support in marketing their offerings and sharing information with the public. Artists would like support through County parks, recreation, and other government agencies for space to show visual artwork. One artist said that exhibition spaces should be viewed as a public service rather than a privilege for artists. There was also enthusiasm for a county art bank that could acquire artists' work and lend it to government agencies for display.⁴

"I wish we could show what the world would look like without what we do."

Artists said they would like to see the county host arts events in places that could attract impromptu foot traffic, exposing their work to a wider audience. There were suggestions for an art fair, a short film festival, and artist "open studio" events in places where local restaurants and shops could also benefit. One artist said of working to promote open studios in her community, "it's a missed opportunity of something that adds so much value to the county, but nobody knows it's there."

Solutions for Libraries

As reliable providers of cultural programming for communities throughout the county, libraries need more support. They need fully funded program budgets and the flexibility to seek external funding that can meet the unique needs of each branch and its community. Standardized templates and tools that simplify the process of working with artists and community members would also relieve some of the burden from librarians and make it easier for them to bring art and cultural programming to all parts of the county.

⁴ We are aware that this mechanism may already exist. Something similar was referenced in our interview with the General Services Department.

OTHER CULTURAL PLAN PILLARS

Intersectionality

"There can be a sense that people don't want to fund the arts with life and death stuff going on nowadays. We need to fund the arts so people care about the life and death stuff."

The cultural sector's desire for validation of the importance of arts and culture goes beyond a simple wish for more attention. Focus group members believe that the intersections of arts and culture with other facets of the County's work offer benefits to all. Some participants expressed frustration that County elected officials say they understand the value of the arts in lifting up other County priorities, but they do not make funding decisions that reflect that understanding. One artist argued that the government needs to see art as a valuable component of county infrastructure. It should be incorporated into the County's neighborhood and transportation planning. Others mentioned economic arguments for funding the arts. A nonprofit leader noted that several of the most recently built libraries are anchors of the town centers in their communities and that libraries across the county provide critical community services, not just books. Participants suggested that AHCMC can help them communicate the message about how strongly arts and culture intersect with other values important to the County government. One group agreed that an awareness campaign about why the arts matter could be very helpful.

Belonging

"We're here for a reason: To tell the American story. And try, in our own small way, to help secure the American dream."

Many of the artists and organizations participating in the focus groups are members of specific cultural groups or do culturally specific work. Most of the discussions featured themes of belonging, diversity, and accessibility. Montgomery County's rich diversity inspires its cultural sector. Artists and cultural organizations produce varied programming that reflects the county's cultures, such as a performing arts center that books multilingual artists who perform in Amharic, English, Spanish, and French. They create spaces for community members to come together, like the history-based organization that serves as a site for community gatherings in addition to its hands-on programs sharing the legacy of the Underground Railroad.

"I spend a lot more time listening to communities than trying to dictate what they want to see."

An artist from Up County reflected on the stark divide between the highly diverse city of Germantown and the neighboring rural Agricultural Reserve. "There are people living literally half a mile from the edge of the Agricultural Reserve, who don't really know or feel comfortable that that space is for them. It's for you, it's for the county, it's the lungs and food and resources and orchards of the county." Part of her artistic practice is to invite people into the Ag Reserve space and create opportunities for conversation and comfort there. "I think it helps generate a lot more confidence about crossing what I think of as almost a 'membrane' barrier in the county that should be super-permeable," she concluded.

Arts, culture, and humanities organizations also foster belonging by keeping their offerings affordable. A performing arts director spoke of making sure ticket prices are set at points that people can afford, particularly for family programming. An artist found inspiration in a ticket subsidy program Arts Fairfax operates, which distributes free tickets to low-income housing communities, homeless shelters, senior centers, special needs facilities, and other groups that might not otherwise have the opportunity to attend programs.

CONCLUSION

“What does the county want out of its art and humanities programming?”

Although our six focus groups captured a broad swath of Montgomery County’s artists, creatives, and scholars, these focus groups cannot encompass all the needs and views of the cultural sector. This memo reflects the common themes that emerged from our conversations, and attempts to distill them into the actionable priorities our participants called for.

According to the cultural sector representatives we spoke to, the County needs to set and put into practice its priorities for arts, culture, and the humanities. It needs to adopt policies that promote those priorities and assign resources to ensure the policies are carried out. At a minimum, arts and culture should be included as a consideration in making decisions about the use of county resources and spaces. It should be part of the planning and development of County projects and programs.

Focus group participants agreed with one speaker who called for County government policies to create “accountability for ensuring the arts are included at the planning phase of any and all projects.” There is no mechanism at present to ensure arts and culture are considered, and when they are included in a county project, they are often cut when the budget is tight.

Concurrently, there must also be clear information on where to go to get creative projects accomplished. What is the right point of contact for planning, permitting, the use of spaces, or collaborating with others? This requires not only designating the person or department responsible, but committing the resources to make sure this works in practical terms: full-time employees, clear communication to the public, and professional development within county government so all employees know their roles and have the information they need to supply.

APPENDIX A: LIST OF FOCUS GROUPS

Cultural nonprofits with budgets over \$1M (June 9, 2025)

Ari Brooks - Friends of Montgomery County Library
Alison Weiss - Sandy Spring Museum
Dina Goldman - Olney Theater Center
Nikki Kaplan - Imagination Stage

Arts educators (June 23, 2025)

Carien Quiroga
Marcie Wolf-Hubbard
Khaleshia Thorpe-Price
Praneetha Akula

Creative/cultural businesses (June 23, 2025)

Jason Bruffy - MC Live Arts & Cultural Arts Center, Montgomery College/Parilla Performing Arts Center
Note: Metris conducted this session as an interview because there was only one participant. We asked the same questions we asked of the attendees of the other focus groups.

BIPOC-led and culturally specific organizations (June 23, 2025)

Anthony Cohen - Menare Foundation
Manoj Singh - DC South Asian Arts Council, Inc.
Zulema Tijero - El Tiempo Latino

Cultural nonprofits with budgets under \$1M (July 11, 2025)

After School Dance Fund
Agatha Wright - Art Stream
Ali Oliver-Krueger - InterAct Story Theatre
Alka Khanna - Kalaniti Dance
Anila Kumari - Sutradhar Institute of Dance & Related Arts
Barbara Valentino - Docs in Progress
Bill Rogers- Victorian Lyric Opera Company
Busy Graham and Diane Dowling - Carpe Diem Arts
Cara Schaefer - Cantata Chamber Singers
Chris Barclay - Arts on the Block
Clayton Evans - CREATE Arts Center
Dance Sidra- Nilimma Devi
Eric Madison - National Capital Trolley Museum
Isabel Dawson - The Puppet Co.
Jackie Vinick - Arts for the Aging

Joe Bucherer - Photoworks at Glen Echo Park
Jon Rubin - Theater Consortium of Silver Spring
Lisa Martin - Silver Spring Town Center
Lynn Hughes - Action Youth Media
Mari Takeda - Boulanger Initiative
Mary Sheehan - Chevy Chase Historical Society
Matthew Logan and Brenna Ryan - Montgomery History
Nancy Pickard - Peerless Rockville
Sophie Cameron and Meg Lebow - Lumina Studio Theatre
Stephen Clapp - Dance Exchange

Individual artists and creative/cultural practitioners (July 28, 2025)

Barbara Ziselberger
Beverly Ress
Bill Rogers
Caroline Block
David Reed
Gwydion Suilebhan
Jackie Hoysted
Jacqui Crocetta
Jasmine Adams
John Becker
Laura Sturza
Liliane Blom
Lisa Swenton-Eppard
Margaret Rifkin
Margot de Messieres
Natalie Jean
Paige Friedeman
Rachel Weissman
Sharon Minor

Library branch staff (December 11, 2025)

Alan Hecht
Emma Whitty
Erika Walston
Nathan Chadwick
Valarie Hoover
Witt Salley

APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Opening activity:

Spend three minutes sketching what an *ideal* support system looks like or feels like to you as an artist/arts, culture, or humanities nonprofit/creative business.

- This can be literal - e.g., a map of connections or an org chart
- Or metaphorical - a symbolic concept, idea, image
- Artistry is not important! Use stick figures, circles, and text

Now switch and spend three minutes sketching what your *current* creative sector support system looks like. Again, it can be literal or symbolic.

Discussion:

Now everyone has a chance to share and describe their sketches. What parts of that support system are working best for you? What are the gaps in the support system?

Now let's zoom out and 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: What are the greatest opportunities the County's arts and culture community faces right now? The greatest challenges?

Can you share an anecdote or statistic that helps convey how the pandemic continues to impact your organization's work?

Looking ahead, how do you anticipate the current economic instability and/or government policies will affect you? What role do you need your support system to play?

How do you see your work contributing to the inclusion of diverse communities in the cultural life of Montgomery County?

How do you see your work addressing County priorities such as health and wellbeing, economic access, equity and inclusion, and other needs?

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?

APPENDIX C: SUMMARY OF MAIN DISCUSSION TOPICS BY GROUP

Organizations with budgets over \$1M

- Potential for facilitated sharing of back office services such as bookkeeping, marketing
- Institutionalized peer support/networking
- Paying artists/contractors vs. full-time employees, and a perceived push-pull between funding individual artists and large organizations
- Promoting the value of the cultural sector and what it brings amid crisis-level prioritizing
- Loss or potential loss of federal funding

Organizations with budgets under \$1M

- Audience drop off and slow post-pandemic recovery
- Space needs for performance/rehearsal, upkeep of existing space
- More money, broader pool of grant funds beyond AHCMC, e.g., philanthropy, individual donors, businesses, municipal fees
- Staff/board/volunteer capacity
- Targeted market that can stand out in the countywide pool of events

BIPOC-led and culturally specific organizations

- Serving diverse communities in the current political climate: concerns about safety, morale
- Declining attendance and revenues
- Partnerships with nonprofits and businesses for space, promotion, and other benefits
- Mutually reinforcing connections to peers and peer organizations

Individual artists and creative/cultural practitioners

- More affordable and accessible performance/display space, as well as studio/rehearsal space for creation
- Income challenges: look at stipends/guaranteed income
- Professional development for fundraising and running the business side of art
- Connections to other artists and information about the sector
- Value and visibility of the cultural sector: Both promotion/marketing and sending the message that art/culture is important and should be supported

Arts educators

- Space to conduct classes and workshops: affordability, scarcity, and attendance requirements
- Validation/visibility of what they do and the importance of it as work. Educating the public that teaching artists are artists, but also small businesses
- Connecting to others and networking, especially in Mid- and Up County
- Challenging for independent teaching artists to find partnership opportunities outside of AHCMC – e.g., school residencies
- Grant competition – more demand and the pot is not growing at the same rate
- Intersection: working with older adults, immigrants, addressing healthcare and housing

Creative/cultural businesses

- Dual mission of serving the community and students. Access is paramount, both affordability and range of offerings
- Community use of space cannot currently expand, given staffing constraints
- Intentional community investment is needed for some art forms (e.g., dance), as performance revenue generally does not support companies
- Marketing is difficult and needs to become more targeted/sophisticated. E.g., Cincinnati Arts Wave app that tailors events to user preferences
- Partnerships with other businesses (e.g., a theater and restaurant) can make both more successful
- Some barriers are perceived: people need to be convinced that nontraditional spaces can be used for display/performance, or that organizations can make money with a “pay what you can” model

Libraries

- Libraries are a logical place for more cultural and arts programming. There is an appetite for it, and they are in many communities
- Program funding is nowhere near sufficient to meet needs
- Programming must be free, so libraries generally cannot pay artists
- Community members can suggest programs, but often have to have a volunteer to lead them.
- Red tape/lack of autonomy makes it difficult to execute agreements with community members/artists who want to do programming
- Libraries need more staffing, especially for specific age groups
- Libraries are often the first place people come when they are new to a community or just looking for help/services. Librarians are proud to be able to help them and refer them where they need to go. But requires hours not devoted to the rest of their jobs.