

Montgomery County Cultural Plan Task 2.1 Interview Summary Memo

Prepared by Metris Arts Consulting
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Metris Arts interviewed 17 representatives from 13 county agencies between February and November 2025. In consultation with AHCMC, we selected the departments that intersect most with arts and culture: the Maryland–National Capital Park and Planning Commission (both Montgomery Planning and Montgomery Parks); Environmental Protection; Recreation; Montgomery College; General Services; the Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation; Health and Human Services; Transportation; the Office of Grants Management; the Office of the County Executive; Montgomery County Public Libraries, and Montgomery County Public Schools.

We also conducted interviews with representatives of high-influence stakeholder groups that help shape policy, implement initiatives, or fund priorities in the county: the Morris & Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation, the Urban Land Institute, the Maryland State Senate, the Montgomery County Council, Rockville Economic Development, Inc., and the independent jurisdiction of Takoma Park.

See Appendix A for a list of interviewees. Please note that the direct quotations in this document are unattributed, in accordance with the interview protocols we shared with participants.

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 interviews with representatives of County agencies and departments largely concentrated on intersectionality; however, the conversations also touched on belonging and cultural sector resilience as important themes.

COUNTY AGENCY INVOLVEMENT WITH ARTS AND CULTURE

We found two distinct levels of agency involvement with art and culture. One tier of agencies is directly involved in providing cultural resources and services. These include:

- **Montgomery County Recreation (MCR):** Its mission is to “provide high quality, diverse, and accessible programs, services and facilities that enhance the quality of life for all ages, cultures and abilities”
- **Maryland-National Capital Parks and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC):** Encompassing both Montgomery Planning and Montgomery Parks, its mission is to “manage physical growth and plan communities; protect and steward natural, cultural, and historic resources; and provide leisure and recreational experiences”
- **Montgomery County Public Libraries (MCPL):** Its mission is to “provide equitable access to information, ideas, and experiences that spark imagination and expand possibilities for all”
- **Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS):** Its mission is to “unleash potential”
- **Montgomery College:** Its mission is to be a place “where students discover their passions and unlock their potential to transform lives, enrich the community, and change the world”

A second tier of agencies does not have missions directly tied to cultural resources and services but engages with arts and cultural resources to fulfill their broader missions. These include the following:

- **Department of Transportation (DOT):** Its mission is to “move people and connect places with the best transportation choices and services”
- **Department of Health and Human Services (HHS):** Its mission is to “promote and ensure the health and safety of the residents of Montgomery County and to build individual and family strength and self-sufficiency”
- **Department of Environmental Protection (DEP):** Its mission is to “enhance the quality of life in our community by protecting and improving Montgomery County’s air, water, and land in a sustainable, innovative, inclusive, and industry-leading way while fostering smart growth, a thriving, more sustainable economy, and healthy communities”

Other departments we spoke to, including the **Department of General Services (DGS)** and **Office of Grants Management (OGM)**, do not set arts- and culture-related agendas of their own, but they assist with such efforts across county agencies. They do so by implementing capital projects and supporting grant acquisition and allocation, respectively. **Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation (MCEDC)**, which is not a government agency but serves as the official economic development entity for the county, does not focus on art and culture in its business attraction and retention work. However, it markets the vibrant creative community in the county as an asset when promoting the county to businesses in its targeted industries.

Overall, we found a distinct lack of connection or coordination in agencies' use of arts and culture. There is no government-wide culture of valuing arts integration, no directive from leadership for agencies to leverage art and culture, nor any guidance on how they could do so.

COUNTY AGENCY ATTITUDES REGARDING ARTS AND CULTURE

"We build social capital."

Interviewees from Montgomery County's government agencies shared the belief that arts and culture are essential to maintaining and enhancing the quality of life. While their opinions of its relevance to their own work varied, we were heartened that we did not encounter skepticism, even among agency employees in highly technical and seemingly unrelated disciplines. Instead, interviewees expressed support and enthusiasm for the new cultural plan.

To differing extents, agency representatives believe art and culture are useful in carrying out the County's day-to-day work. Some agencies use art in relatively simple ways, whereas others are more sophisticated; they intentionally embed artistic practices into how they do their work. The individuals we spoke with view arts and cultural activities as helpful means to: communicate the work they do on behalf of county residents; foster social engagement, especially in post-COVID society; create a sense of belonging for all; and cultivate an aesthetically pleasing built environment.

The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC) points to the Thrive 2050 plan as the foundation of the County's development and evolution over the next 30 years. Equity, economy, and environmental resilience serve as the pillars of the plan, and one chapter focuses specifically on design, arts, and culture, including the development of streets, public spaces, and parks.

AGENCY APPROACHES TO USING ARTS AND CULTURE

"Having rich experiences with the arts [and] culture contributes to leading lives of value and understanding our shared humanity... much of that comes from engagement with visual arts or performing arts."

Our research and engagement efforts examine the intersection in two ways. First, we are interested in how County agencies' work and missions intersect with arts and culture. Second, we seek to understand how agencies might intersect with one another in ways that further the use of and access to arts and culture for residents. The County agencies we interviewed share a commitment to cultural sensitivity and inclusion, with a particular awareness that immigrant communities may need additional care and cultivation at this time. This drives them to engage

specific cultural communities in very intentional ways, including holding events in multiple languages. Some agencies use the arts primarily as a tool for public relations and awareness, while others have integrated the arts into their core programming. For example, the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) uses creative modes of engagement to build awareness of its Climate Action Plan with festivals, contests, and community gatherings throughout the year. Meanwhile, Montgomery County Recreation (MCR) sees itself as a significant provider of arts access in the County, offering imaginative classes and workshops in recreation centers for residents of all ages, abilities, and income levels. Montgomery Parks' (Parks) Parks, Recreation, & Open Space Plan includes social connectivity as a key priority that is achieved by making parks the "civic green" where people come together, and by providing cultural resources such as museums that tell the story of the county and events that bring people together around shared cultural activities. Montgomery College and Montgomery County Public Schools also play important roles in bringing art and culture to the County, through both their academic curricula and the use of their spaces for display and performance of creative work.

With few exceptions, there is little collaboration across County government to ensure arts access or use creative methods for broader purposes. While the agencies may conceptually understand the value of intersecting their work with arts and culture, there is—unsurprisingly—little precedent for intersecting with one another using arts and culture. This may not be unusual in municipal governments; local agencies typically do not have a mandate to collaborate around arts and culture. However, we believe such collaboration could enhance the work they do. For example, in a rare joint effort, clients of a Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) crisis center created an artistic project expressing their feelings on climate resilience, a priority DEP topic.

How agencies use arts and culture

Communications

Several agencies use creative strategies to communicate with the public. Typically, they design enticing graphics to catch residents' attention, but a few go further. The Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), for example, incorporates community-created art into its messaging. DEP hosts an annual *Storm Drain Art Contest* and paints the winning designs on local Storm Drain covers and features the art on banners, posters, coloring books, educational materials, and social media.

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) also uses the arts for communications, including social media projects that support youth mental health initiatives. DHHS launched several competitions focused on building health education programs and promoting mental health awareness with community video submissions. The agency is in the process of hiring a Public Information Officer to further support social media engagement.

Community engagement

The Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and other County agencies use art and culture to engage communities around important issues. DEP holds informational events for specific cultural communities and conducts outreach in multiple languages.

Montgomery County Public Libraries (MCPL) also engages local communities by expanding its reach beyond traditional books and programming, positioning libraries as inclusive meeting and gathering spaces for all. For example, libraries work with both County agencies and nonprofit organizations to provide education on food resilience through food giveaways, demonstrations, and other ways to bring people in to learn and feel comfortable in the library space. MCPL is considering partnering with other County agencies and departments, such as Public Safety and DHHS, to offer additional benefits for community members, like fire safety education and mental health services.

Built environment

The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC) incentivizes the creation of public art in private developments by including it as one of several potential proffers that a developer can provide in exchange for permission to build at a greater density than current zoning allows. Public art is an option when the developments are located in designated areas. The County Art Review Panel reviews the proposed artworks and makes recommendations to the Planning Board, which has approval authority. These public artworks are privately owned and maintained.

The County also creates public art using taxpayer-supported funds through the Public Arts Trust. Operated by the Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County (AHCMC), the Public Arts Trust commissions and maintains artwork installed on County-owned property. Representatives from several County departments and agencies serve on the Trust's steering committee, including MCR, DOT, DGS, Montgomery College, and M-NCPPC.

The County boasts 415 public parks, many of which look alike at first glance, according to the Parks department. Placing distinctive works of public art in parks is one way to contribute to community identity. Montgomery Parks strives to incorporate public art into its parks, often soliciting community feedback to ensure the works are culturally relevant to the communities in which they are located.

The Department of General Services (DGS) and Department of Transportation (DOT) both incorporate public art in the built environment and infrastructure when they are able, but note that artistic elements are the first to be cut from their projects when there are budget concerns or constraints. This is not for lack of interest, they note, but because there is no legislation and budget empowering their departments to include art. DGS project managers work on capital projects for other County agencies. While they cannot initiate art projects, they often look for ways to include art in the design process for County buildings. For example, based on feedback from community meetings, they may incorporate an arts use as part of the *purpose* of a project, allowing them to include a gallery or performance space in a new building, such as a library.

DOT has added mosaic artwork to bus shelters for the County's Ride On transit system and sponsored a student artwork contest to celebrate the system's 50th anniversary. Student apprentices from Arts on the Block in Silver Spring created 36 mosaics, and DOT installed them in 17 locations around the County. DOT staff is also interested in exploring ways to enliven parking lots and garages with placemaking activities.

Overall, however, there is a lack of coordination or consistent standards among departments about what art gets displayed, where, and how those decisions are made.

Well-being

DHHS employs art therapists to work with children and adolescents in therapeutic settings, helping them express their feelings through art, identify issues they're facing, and resolve them.

M-NCPPC believes its work to ensure the County has appropriate and attractive spaces for people to spend time outdoors contributes to the well-being of county residents.

In addition to its social connection goal, the Montgomery Parks plan includes goals for encouraging physical activity and environmental stewardship, both of which have strong ties to well-being. Parks aims to "make it irresistible to get off the couch into parks and be active."

Community building and social cohesion

Through its recreation programming, MCR brings people together through art creation and cultural experiences. Department leadership believes this can transform how people see themselves and their community.

DEP also focuses strongly on social equity and environmental and climate justice. Staff members work with immigrant communities, seeking feedback from community members on needs in their neighborhoods and helping them come together to take climate action.

Access to arts and culture

Montgomery College offers arts programming and education embedded in its curriculum. It offers degree programs in the visual and performing arts and the humanities. It also offers community arts classes and workshops, both online and in-person, that are available to both students in degree programs and community members seeking enrichment. Its gallery and performance spaces offer students, residents, and visitors opportunities to see and experience the arts.

MCR also plays a significant role in how residents experience and access the arts, offering instruction through classes, camps, and leisure activities. MCR sees its impact as nothing short of life-changing, noting that exposure to the arts at an early age could guide someone to a future artistic career.

Beyond MCPL's core mission of connecting people with literature and information, libraries in the county also serve as multipurpose community centers. For example, the recently built Wheaton Community Recreation Center is co-located with the Wheaton Library. MCPL displays artworks from the County's collection in its facilities and would like to feature local artists' work as well. Library leadership is thinking about how to partner with organizations in the cultural sector to provide more spaces for artists and organizations to host events such as rehearsals and performances.

Montgomery County Public Schools provides arts education to students in grades PreK-12. At the elementary level, schools are required to provide students access to courses and content in the fine arts, including visual art, dance, music, and theater. MCPS high school students must have one fine arts credit in order to graduate. Schools' budgets for staffing and instructional materials are driven by student enrollment. For example, the district funds one full-time arts teacher for every 25-28 classes. In high school, the availability of certain speciality arts classes can fluctuate depending on whether enough students are interested in enrolling.

There is a county-wide program focused on the arts, the Visual Art Center at Einstein High School. Any 8th grader in the county can apply, but seats are limited; around 32 students are selected to be part of that program annually. Students who are accepted are required to transfer from their home school to Einstein. If they are not already zoned for Einstein, they must provide their own transportation to school each day. That has limited participation from students in the rest of the county. MCPS is in the beginning stages of designing a Regional Program Model, which would divide the county into six regions and provide speciality concentration programs like the arts in each of the regions, along with transportation for accepted students. The goal is to increase students' access to county-wide programs.

The school system does not have a formal strategy for arts integration - using artistic subject matter, approaches, and techniques to teach unrelated subjects - though individual teachers can use these strategies in their classrooms. Staff in the curriculum development team see the benefit in a system-wide approach to arts integration, but acknowledge it would require additional resources and professional development.

Creative practices in agency operations

In addition to exploring the use of art and culture for their externally facing work, we also asked agency representatives if they integrate any creative practices into the ways their agencies function. The City of Oakland's *Cultural Strategist-in-Residence* initiative served as the inspiration for this question. Municipalities such as Oakland have embedded artists and artistic practices into seemingly unrelated government departments, generating creative thinking and problem-solving about how they do their work. This shift in perspective can foster new approaches that can be as valuable as artistic output.

The interviews we conducted with County agency representatives yielded little evidence of the existing integration of creative practices into internal operations. One exception was the Office of Grants Management (OGM) incorporation of some creative methods into its support for County grantmaking. OGM has begun supporting agencies to accept video grant applications, rather than the traditional written format. This creative practice is one way to make the grants process more accessible to potential applicants.

Intersectionality - Conceptual understanding & a cautious approach

"The intersection of the arts is crucial for imagining, understanding, engaging, empowering, and transforming our built environment and transportation systems."

Interviewees understood the value of the arts as a tool for advancing their agencies' missions more effectively. Their comments typically focused on expanding their communication efforts and reach. Most departments recognize that the arts are a key way to draw residents from their homes so they can more meaningfully engage with the agencies' primary agendas. We believe the agencies are willing to explore the intersections of art and culture with their work, but might need support in coming up with ideas beyond communications and additional resources to aid in making the efforts a priority. As we previously noted, the agencies tend to use arts and culture in their own silos. They would need more intensive support to see how art and creativity might help facilitate intersections with one another that could benefit their joint constituencies, like the DHHS and DEP climate resilience project described above.

DEP, in particular, leverages the arts to promote environmental awareness, a top priority in the County's *Climate Action Plan*. DEP hosts a variety of arts-inspired programs and events throughout the year, including contests, movie nights, and GreenFest, a regional eco-festival that incorporates art, music, and dance. Partnering with 60 different nonprofits, vendors, government agencies, and businesses (AHC MC is not a partner, per the 2025 website), DEP has held GreenFest for nearly a decade. DEP also plans to hire a staff member to focus on environmental justice and community co-creation. Interviewees said the agency's community conversations have been fruitful thus far. DEP has supported multi-ethnic communities to alert authorities about neighborhood environmental safety concerns, placed additional trash cans on highly trafficked corners and streetscapes, and built new programs for climate awareness. DEP interviewees discussed how they might shift the department's budget to facilitate more such engagements.

In addition to art therapists on its staff, DHHS uses arts and culture to carry out core services like routine patient care. The department runs culturally specific health programs for some of the larger populations in the county, including Latino, African American, and Asian American health initiatives. DHHS also has contracts with arts providers in the county, such as Imagination Stage, as part of its efforts to serve young people.

Both M-NCPPC and DOT expressed interest in placemaking: a practice that combines different disciplines like economic development, infrastructure, and arts and culture to help define how people move through and use public space. Broadly defined, placemaking and placekeeping in defined communities also incorporate elements of belonging for residents. Although M-NCPPC does not have a large placemaking budget, it is interested in exploring how to do more of this work and activate spaces in a creative way. According to our conversations, possibilities include enlivening spaces such as unused or underused parking lots with creative activities and art;

expanding the definition of “public art” under the county’s public art program to include new mediums of creative expression like placemaking and performance; and incentivizing the provision of cultural activities such as farmers markets, concerts, and celebrations. DOT interviewees said they would like to make streets and parking lots more pedestrian-friendly so they can attract more users and add liveliness to places around the county.

Several agencies shared that they plan to add resources that could expand their intersectional engagements with the arts, which could lead to opportunities for deeper relationships and partnerships with AHCMC. DHHS, DOT, MCR, and DEP all discussed either working with local schools and nonprofits or seeking ways to expand their staffing to increase community engagement practices. DOT interviewees also would like to work with creatives to develop better data visualization, an improved website, and other online media for conveying critical ideas to the public.

Belonging - An important priority in serving diverse communities

"A sense of belonging manifests itself in what we do. We have a more diverse group of offerings than we have ever had. We want community members to see themselves."

Interviewees often described the arts as an accessible and affordable tool for building community, whether by welcoming newcomers or sustaining livability for current residents. For instance, DEP, DHHC, and others emphasized an array of programs focused on multicultural outreach to immigrant populations or to youth.

DEP hosts *Latino Conservation Week* at the AFI Silver Theater and Cultural Center and offers *Movies in the Park* during Hispanic Heritage Month. The agency trains climate ambassadors, most of whom are Spanish speakers, and showcases their stories. For example, immigrants from the Caribbean may speak about how hurricanes have affected them. These events create ways for people to connect with their native homes, give voice to global concerns, and elicit ideas for solutions.

MCR prides itself on creating accessible and affordable opportunities to build community through its low-cost or free workshops, classes, and experiences. Department interviewees described the arts as a public good, inseparable from the definition of high-quality public recreation offerings. The Fashion Boot Camp program is one example of MCR’s efforts to foster belonging through arts-integrated programming. Fashion Boot Camp teaches youth critical life skills through art and self-determination. Participants learn about choreography, dance, and modeling. Each cohort completes the experience in a student-coordinated fashion show. The most recent Fashion Boot Camp included older adults as models in the students’ show.

Montgomery Parks’ work includes local museums and events that help residents and visitors connect with the County’s past, present, and future. Art and culture play a strong role in the fulfillment of this mission. Johnson’s Local Park in Gaithersburg is one example. The park is on the site of the historic African American community of Emory Grove, a vibrant hub that was displaced by urban renewal in the 1960s. For a new installation at the park, the department recorded the voices of people performing the kinds of songs sung during religious camp meetings in Emory Grove. Visitors can use audio stations in the park to hear those songs and the oral history about the area.

MCPL is staffing its libraries with employees who have proficiency in multiple languages and is ordering books in more languages than ever before. A library representative said:

"We are creating spaces where people can request books in their own language but not feel 'less than' and maintain their dignity and respect. This is how we are adjusting to the changes and migration, and these changes are a part of everything we do. The challenge is to be everything to everybody in one space."

Montgomery College interviewees also discussed building a sense of belonging by providing affordable access to high-quality arts experiences. Professors weave student attendance at performances into class curricula, and administrators ensure student tickets are either free or at highly attractive price points. For example, one interviewee mentioned tickets are sometimes \$5 for students. Montgomery College works intentionally to eliminate barriers to participation and provide diverse programs that reflect the community:

"We are dealing with the decline in public engagement with the arts. People aren't going to theaters as much as they were; people aren't seeing movies; people aren't gathering publicly as much. So we really are committed to having our art centers be gathering places. We're trying to provide programming in which county residents can see themselves, and they can see their experiences reflected on stage or in media, and in art."

Interviewees also shared intentional methods of fostering belonging by incorporating community feedback into the design of their projects and programs. For example, the Department of General Services (DGS) uses design teams to engage with the surrounding community, hosting expansive community engagement sessions in diverse and multi-lingual neighborhoods to inform the design of projects like libraries and community centers. DGS is committed to making sure "everyone has a seat at the table," according to the interviewees. Communities are typically very engaged. In fact, the public outreach activities for a recent project lasted longer than the pen-to-paper design process. DGS is now hiring more staff to focus specifically on community engagement in Montgomery County's increasingly diverse neighborhoods. However, interviewees did note that sometimes the specific groups they engage for the project may not always vocalize the need for beautification or a design element at the onset. This sometimes results in minimizing project aesthetics, especially in light of reduced implementation budgets.

Resilience - A limited role with resource constraints

"Somehow, we have to bring the arts community together in a more cohesive way in the county. The county is very dispersed, not an integrated community where people in the arts or culture or entertainment world are all of the same mind. We have to do a better job of convening."

County agency interviewees focused mostly on intersectionality and belonging, but there were several comments related to resilience in the creative sector.

Agencies like MCR routinely hire artists to fulfill their program needs. MCR is committed to ensuring that the classes and programs they offer are as high-quality as the experiences that private organizations provide. They do not want county programs and the people using them to be viewed as “less than” because they are not high-priced. However, they are concerned about their ability to attract high-quality artists. MCR believes in compensating artists fairly for their work, but has difficulty doing so with a limited public agency budget.

In another resilience-focused conversation, M-NCPPC suggested that artist housing could be included as a potential developer proffer for density bonuses. This could prove a valuable addition to their toolkit as the cost of housing in the area continues to rise.

MCPS's proposed Regional Pathways Model would build the cultural sector by preparing students for careers in the arts. Students would work alongside community partners in the cultural sector to learn about different aspects of careers related to the art media they are interested in, such as dance, visual art, or graphic design. Students would learn about career opportunities and necessary skills, and meet people working in their chosen field. Strathmore and Glenstone have served as community partners for art students in the past. MCPS also plans to teach students about apprenticeships, university tracks, and other career paths.

AGENCY NEEDS

"If the budget is established, the program is established. If art is within its own budget, then we can implement it. If art is not there with its own budget, it is very hard to carve money out of other things."

There is not yet a cohesive approach to fostering the arts across County agencies. None of the County interviewees mentioned collaborating with the AHCMC, even though they described recurring issues that AHCMC would be well-suited to address. This underscores the need for enhanced collaboration. Some commonly mentioned opportunity areas include shared information resources such as artist-creative vendor lists, directories of upcoming arts activities suitable for County agency partnership, and standardized contract templates and guidelines for implementing public art projects. Other needs include arts advocacy, funding, and support for intersectional facility development.

Funding

Unsurprisingly, funding is a significant need. Agencies all struggle to incorporate arts, culture, and the humanities into their work in the absence of a mandate or a budget to do so. Interviewees talked about this in two respects: standalone art or design projects and ongoing programs.

In projects, arts are often seen as “optional” and the first thing to be cut when budgets are tight:

“It’s a major struggle, and part of the challenge is anytime we get to the point of budgets, and you have a new project, and you have to value engineer it, the first thing to go is in any kind of good design. You go from a beautiful bridge design, for instance, and now it’s just a concrete slab.”

This occurs in the context of building design as well as in public art projects where art is ostensibly the sole purpose.

The second challenge is the lack of longer-term and reliable funding for arts programs run by departments like MCR and Montgomery College. One interviewee noted: “Artists should be compensated for their work, and it’s been challenging for us, at least for me, to justify that. It would be an amazing thing to include in the cultural plan,” one interviewee noted. She continued, “An artist’s skillset has a value that we are not always able to fund within our existing budget.” Several interviewees said the county needs greater public understanding of why the arts are important and the need to adequately fund art and cultural activities. There seems to be an appetite for joint advocacy and messaging about public funding for arts, culture, and the humanities. Messaging should address both capital projects/public art and arts programming, as well as funding for artists and their work. County agencies need more funding to pay high-quality artists and instructors for both programs and individual projects.

MCPS identified a need for professional development support for teachers serving students with learning differences. Teachers may have experience in arts and cultural disciplines, but lack experience working with students who have special needs. MCPS has created an adapted art access guide that covers learning and physical challenges and how teachers can adapt their curriculum to meet students’ developmental needs and make art education accessible. Additional resources could support the needed training to better serve students with different needs.

Arts Partner Registry

Artist and art organization registries are critical for expanding partnerships between professional practitioners and county agencies. Multiple interviewees said they could use help to understand what is already available in the community. They believe they could save significant time if they had access to a registry of artists that their agencies could hire to implement projects. DHHS interviewees shared that they could use help to identify arts events taking place within the community and build partnerships with local arts organizations.

Standard Operating Procedures

In addition to support on *whom* to hire, agencies could use information on *how* to engage. These professionals are well-informed in their own fields, but not experts in the arts. Standard forms, templates, and guidance on where and how to work with artists is a key resource area that AHCMC is well-suited to support. Each agency partners with arts nonprofits and artists in unique ways. The Recreation Department interviewees shared that the organization hires many artists, but struggles to attract, retain, and fund professionals. Meanwhile, DEP also hires artists for public festivals and events, but did not present similar challenges in finding quality providers. Another agency mentioned that it struggles with knowing how to evaluate potential arts contractors and set up an

engagement appropriately. Clarifying ideal methodologies for working with creatives – including wage or salary guidance – could be beneficial across the County.

In addition, “right-sized” approval policies would be helpful in moving art and cultural efforts forward without red tape and delay. For example, a small piece of art in a park may not need the same level of permitting and community engagement that a large-scale project does.

Public Art Support and Opportunity Identification

Expanding the window of opportunity for adding public art to capital projects would help support creating more placemaking and aesthetically pleasing spaces across the County. As mentioned in the *Belonging* section, if the community does not specifically request public art at the beginning of the design phase, it is unlikely to be incorporated later. Language also matters for determining whether or not public art can be incorporated into a project. For instance, Transportation and General Department interviewees mentioned that projects will often include a mural or similar aesthetic, but given that the term *public art* is not used in the paperwork, there is no project budget to accommodate commissioning local artists or fulfilling the public art process.

Expanding Intersectional Facility Development

Collaboration between County agencies could address the need for affordable and accessible space that we heard about from sources during other engagement modes, such as the cultural sector focus groups. County agencies that partner with nonprofits or other government organizations may have an advantage over those that do not partner. For instance, interviewees shared that the MCR constructed the Good Hope Community Center in partnership with Strathmore. This space was intentionally designed to provide much-needed space for live performance. The facility includes both a gym and an arts facility, the latter operated in partnership with Strathmore. County agencies and organizations could collectively gain more usable space if they identify shared interests in facility development in partnership with AHCMC and one another.

HIGH-INFLUENCE STAKEHOLDER VIEWS

In addition to interviewing representatives from county government agencies and departments, we also spoke to several representatives of institutions that exert influence in the county, including elected officials, policy experts, and funders. We sought their views on how the county advances arts and culture, and how art and culture benefit the county.

How arts and culture benefit the county

A representative of the Montgomery County Council Economic Development Committee (ECON) said arts and culture are a significant part of the County’s economy. In addition to supporting the economy, she went on to say that focusing on art and culture also creates a welcoming space for all kinds of residents. “People want to live in vibrant spaces, and there’s a sense of community through arts and public spaces and places. Enhancing public

spaces attracts diverse residents and makes them feel welcome,” she said. Elected officials on the ECON committee noted strong potential for the government to collaborate with artists to boost county communications and messaging about essential issues, bring vibrancy to housing, and create a sense of place in community hubs. An interviewee from the Rockville Economic Development, Inc. echoed the importance of arts and culture in creating communities where people want to live, saying “having a very vibrant arts community and cultural community to plug into is really, really important” for the county to be “a place of choice” for people and their families.

As a funder, the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation (Cafritz) has a view of art and culture efforts across the region. Our interviewee from Cafritz described several nonprofits doing inspiring intersectional work in Montgomery County, using art and culture to pursue key priorities. These include Arts for the Aging, which conducts arts workshops in long-term care facilities; Arts on the Block, which provides workforce development training, teaching kids how to be artists and entrepreneurs and working with them on real projects in the community, such as DOT’s mosaic murals; and BlackRock, which pivoted during the pandemic to focus on strengthening the social safety net and “evolving what an arts institution can mean to the community,” she said. She noted BlackRock “has become more of a community center and not just an arts center.”

How County institutions support art and culture

A councilmember from the ECON committee referred to the county’s 7.5 billion dollar budget as a “moral document.” She said the county believes its investment in funding art and culture, specifically by funding AHCMC, generates significant returns for the community, citing benefits such as art programs available in schools, libraries, parks, and recreation centers.

Cafritz supports a broad arts portfolio in the county, funding grants across artistic disciplines and supporting organizations ranging from large anchors to small grassroots nonprofits. Cafritz largely provides general operating support “to be as flexible as possible and be responsive to needs in the moment,” noted their interviewee. The foundation looks for a range of grantees that offer breadth and depth of programming as well as consistent, deep engagement with the communities they serve.

The City of Takoma Park is an independent jurisdiction located within Montgomery County and has its own cultural plan. According to Mayor Talisha Searcy, the City is intentional about placing art everywhere and using it to foster belonging. She described examples, including the City’s Earth Day Festival: “It can include arts and music, but the binding component is about community and how we bring people together in a way that’s fun and build that culture and sharing.” The city engages the community along the way, both in planning and executing public art and cultural events, and has received positive support and feedback.

The interviewee from Rockville Economic Development, which serves the incorporated City of Rockville, described Montgomery County as having an educated workforce that participates in the arts. “People are going to productions, they are buying tickets, they’re getting babysitters, they’re going out to eat, and, all of that’s really

important for a healthy economy.” In addition, county residents want opportunities to participate in creative pursuits themselves, something this interviewee felt was unique among jurisdictions they had worked, perhaps because Montgomery County’s workforce includes many workers in innovative industries like biotech.

Concerns and challenges

County elected officials noted there is a limited amount of money the county can devote to arts and culture. Some interviewees noted that people see arts and culture funding as competition for other basic needs. “Art is seen as a ‘nice to have,’ not a ‘must have,’” said one stakeholder. While intersectionality has many benefits, in times of budget scarcity, County agencies are not positioned to lead the way on incorporating art and culture into their work. “They are seen by many people like voters, activists, etc., as frills and not the best use of taxpayer money,” she said. She concluded that the arts is solely AHCRC’s purview at this time.

Lack of affordable and accessible space for the cultural sector was also a concern for high-influence stakeholders. “What we have to do is build the infrastructure - the arts infrastructure, such as creating venues, studio spaces, rehearsal spaces,” said one. Another noted a lack of affordable studio space in neighborhoods where people want to live, located within walking distance to restaurants and other amenities.

Interviewees identified several challenges around residents’ access to art and culture, with one saying, “the County is very rich in cultural resources, but not everyone has access to them.” Another stakeholder said the county’s venues may be multicultural, but the audiences often are not. She noted that “arts organizations have to be multicultural or they will not survive.” Some of the equity conversation focused on financial concerns, but location was also a factor. One interviewee noted that a lack of transportation is a barrier for many residents, while another cited the county’s large geography and said “there feels like a real dearth of arts organizations further Upcounty.” Several of the high-influence stakeholders also cited concerns that there is a knowledge gap about art and culture events and opportunities. “The word is not widespread about what’s going on in the County,” said one.

Based on Takoma Park’s experience, independent municipalities do not depend on the county government as a resource for their art and culture efforts. They do not receive grant funds or staff support from the county government to do arts-related projects or programs, and they encounter bureaucracy on issues like permitting or securing permission to use county parks located in their jurisdictions for local government-sponsored activities. Takoma Park and Rockville leaders urged that the county should consider the role of independent municipalities in providing arts and culture access, noting that it is important to ensure municipalities are at the table because arts and culture have no boundaries.

Suggestions

The high-influence stakeholders we spoke to had several suggestions to improve the access to and impact of arts and culture in the county.

Several interviewees wanted to see more energy and organizational capacity devoted to promoting the work and partnerships already taking place in the cultural sector. Information about events, sites, and programs should be widespread and easy to find. One person suggested a curated website or portal with a highly detailed search function that would allow users to search for events by artistic discipline, date, and distance from their home. Another interview noted that both the arts and cultural programming itself and the marketing of the programming and marketing must be culturally diverse, “so it’s not the same people going to the same things. This helps everyone feel like they belong.”

Interviewees also suggested identifying more spaces for cultural sector use and ensuring they are well-distributed throughout the county. They discussed the potential for creative use of nontraditional venues including, public spaces, local businesses, and restaurants. This idea could ease space concerns for the cultural sector and enliven spaces in the county’s communities.

Stakeholders urged us to consider transportation infrastructure in the cultural plan as well, in terms of how people around the county access arts and culture, and in terms of how to take advantage of as well as mitigate the impacts of Purple Line metro construction. One interviewee noted that the County has made its bus transportation fare-free as an example of how County infrastructure is expanding and accommodating the growing population.

SUMMARY

This county is extraordinary at legislating its values and objectives. If we want to see affordable housing, we legislate it. If we want to see green buildings, we legislate it...The entire arena of culture doesn't have any legislation behind it."

Overall, Montgomery County agencies communicated an interest in fostering intersectionality and belonging through the arts - whether through programs or the built environment. They also communicated a sensitivity to using the arts to bolster community engagement and awareness, or deeply embedding the arts into day-to-day core programs. In the current social, political, and economic climate, spaces and programs that foster belonging are more critical than ever and the County has a large part to play in creating and maintaining those opportunities.

However, given that the agencies do not seem to collaborate, the County suffers from reduced capacity. Without coordination and communication, agencies may be unnecessarily duplicating efforts, missing opportunities, and perpetuating knowledge gaps. Across the field, interviewees seemed to lack a convening force and appropriate support to strategically connect with local artists and arts organizations to achieve mutual goals and related objectives.

All interviews point to an opportunity to increase available resources for arts and culture in Montgomery County by convening County agencies more strategically with AHCMC and each other. In establishing shared resources,

processes, and legislation, County agencies could foster productive intersections with arts and culture and with one another. These intersections could contribute to a more resilient cultural sector, creating opportunities for local artists and arts organizations and resulting in more available facility space. MCEDC, which is now creating its next economic development plan, presents an immediate opportunity. As that organization assesses next steps, AHCMC could consider partnering with MCDEC to ensure the economic development plan includes arts and culture as a priority.

The interviews provided rich context for the upcoming cultural plan, including needs and opportunities around collaboration, information exchange, and creating greater support for arts, culture, and the humanities throughout Montgomery County government.

APPENDIX A: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

County Departments and Agencies

Department of General Services (February 27, 2025)

Greg Ossont - Deputy Director, Department of General Services

Hamid Omidvar - Chief, Division of Building Design & Construction, Department of General Services

Kara Olsen Salazar - Planning Specialist, Office of Planning and Development

Department of Health and Human Services (February 27, 2025)

Mark Hodge - Chief Operating Officer, Department of Health and Human Services

Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission - Planning Division (February 27, 2025)

Atul Sharma - Urban Planner, Montgomery Planning

Montgomery County Recreation (February 27, 2025)

Adriane Clutter - Acting Director, Montgomery County Recreation

Department of Transportation (February 28, 2025)

Chris Van Alstyne - Senior Planning Specialist, Department of Transportation

Department of Environmental Protection (March 12, 2025)

Douglas Weisburger - Senior Planning Specialist, Sustainability Programs, Department of Environmental Protection

Ana Arriaza - Partnership and Engagement Program Manager, Department of Environmental Protection

Office of the County Executive (March 12, 2025)

Sarah Kogel-Smucker - Climate Change Officer

Montgomery College (March 13, 2025)

Dr. Sarah Campbell - Vice President of Liberal Arts and Education, Montgomery College

Frank Trezza - Dean of Visual, Performing, and Media Arts, Montgomery College

Montgomery County Economic Development Corp. (private, County-chartered nonprofit organization) (May 8, 2025)

Bill Tompkins - Executive Director, Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation

Office of Grants Management (July 16, 2025)

Rafael Murphy - Director, Office of Grants Management

Montgomery County Public Libraries (August 20, 2025)

Darcell Graham - Director, Montgomery County Public Libraries

Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission - Parks Division (November 13, 2025)

Darren Flusche - Deputy Director, Montgomery Parks

Montgomery County Public Schools (December 5, 2025)

Anjali Wells - PreK-12 Visual Art and Dance Content Specialist, Division of Teaching and Learning

High-Influence Stakeholders

Montgomery County Council Economic Development Committee (June 4, 2025)

Laurie-Anne Sayles - At-Large

Marilyn Balcombe - District 2

City of Takoma Park (June 5, 2025)

Talisha Searcy - Mayor

Brendan Smith - Arts Manager

Devin McNally - Deputy Director of Housing & Community Development

The Morris & Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation (August 8, 2025)

Jessica Plocher - Senior Program Officer

Maryland State Senate (August 13, 2025)

Cheryl C. Kagan - State Senator, District 17

Urban Land Institute (August 14, 2025)

Juanita Hardy - Senior Visiting Fellow for Creative Placemaking

Aileen Horn - Technical Assistance Panel Co-Chair

Rockville Economic Development, Inc. (January 21, 2025)

Cindy Rivard e- Chief Executive Officer