

Report for the Bloomington Arts Commission (BAC)
Process Assessment of the Arts Project Grant Program

Prepared by: **Joanna Woronkowicz, Ph.D. (with assistance from Levon Williams)**
January 2018

Introduction

In August of 2017, Sean Starowitz, Assistant Director of the Arts for the City of Bloomington, contracted with Joanna Woronkowicz, Ph.D. to conduct a process assessment of the BAC's Arts Project Grant program. The goal of the assessment is to assess the current effectiveness of the program in meeting its objectives, and provide recommendations for changes to the program. Current goals of the program align with the BAC's strategic plan, such that the program is designed to help "stimulate and encourage arts and cultural activities in Bloomington." The program seeks to support specific projects at local Bloomington arts organizations. Specifically, the program is meant to help foster economic development through the arts. This includes introducing innovation in the Bloomington arts economy, while also fostering and preserving equity among applicants and awardees.

The following is a report detailing the methods and findings from a process assessment of the Arts Project Grant program. The report concludes with providing recommendations for changes to the program and possible methods of implementation.

Methodology

The process assessment was comprised of three phases. Phase 1 involved fielding a web-based survey of the City of Bloomington arts community members. The questionnaire was distributed to approximately 170 individual email addresses compiled from various list serves maintained by the City of Bloomington Department of Economic and Sustainable Development. These list serves included the BEAD Advisory list and a list of all 2017 applicants for the Arts Project Grant Program. Individuals with valid email addresses received an introductory email from Sean Starowitz inviting them to participate in the survey. One week after the initial email, individuals were contacted to remind them to complete the questionnaire. The survey link was also made available through the BEAD newsletters (1500 subscribers), the BEAD Facebook page (2910 followers), and the BEAD Twitter account (3060 followers). The questionnaire was available to respondents for a total of two weeks from October 30th to November 10th. We received a total of 54 responses. The questionnaire took approximately 5 minutes to complete for each respondent and included questions about whether or not respondents have applied/considered applying to the program, how respondents heard about the program, motivations for applying, feedback on the process of applying for an Arts Project Grant, whether or not respondents have received a grant in the past.¹

The second phase of the process assessment involved meeting with key stakeholders involved with the Bloomington Arts Commission.² We reached out to all 11 commissioners, and met with a total of 8. These meetings occurred individually or in groups and were all audio-recorded.³ We

¹ A copy of the introductory email and the questionnaire is located in the Appendix.

² Interviewees names are provided in the Appendix.

³ Audio files available upon request.

implemented an open-ended questioning technique, touching on similar themes throughout the interviews. Example themes included a process assessment of the Arts Project Grant program, composition of the BAC, systems for applicant feedback, and needs and desires for the program and the commission as a whole. We also interviewed one City Council member. Interview topics here included the Council's relationship with the BAC, the mission and purpose of BAC programs, and the process of appointing BAC commissioners.

Phase 3 involved supplementing the information we received from the survey and the interviews with various other types of information provided by Sean Starowitz. We reviewed the following documents: BAC Strategic Plan for 2017-2019, application materials including grant criteria, guidelines, and sample applications, final grant reports, impact reporting, and press releases.

Findings

Survey

The following summarizes results from the web-based survey phase of the process assessment. Approximately 53.7% of respondents indicated having applied to the Arts Project Grants program at one time or another. Approximately 75.9% of respondents had received a grant at one time or another. Respondents that did not apply stated that either their organization did not have a specific project in mind or did not considering their project to be sufficient for grant funding. Several respondents also indicated that the difficulty of the grant application process deterred their organization from applying, especially for the amount of grants funds that is awarded. This sentiment was echoed in the open-ended comment section of the questionnaire. The majority of respondents heard about the grant program via word of mouth, or through the BEAD E-Newsletter. Only 8.3% of respondents had never heard of the program. Many respondents also heard about the program on the BAC's website or another website sponsored by the City of Bloomington. Further, the majority of respondents applied to the program to support a new program or project for their organization, or to support an existing program or project. Several respondents also indicated using the grant funding to build capacity within their organization. Overall, respondents who applied for the program did not find the application process to be overwhelmingly difficult. Many respondents left comments pertaining to the overall process of applying to the program and had useful advice for improving the program application process. First, respondents expressed their appreciation for the information session hosted by the BAC prior to the application deadline; however, respondents asked to be given more specific guidance during this meeting in order to know how to align with the commission's goals for the program. Second, respondents indicated being frustrated at how the public scoring meeting took place:

“I was very frustrated while attending the scoring meeting. The questions I was asked at the review session were CLEARLY NOT the questions the committee had while scoring our application. I was not allowed to speak during the scoring session and feel that I could have cleared up any misconceptions that were at hand, if THOSE questions had been raised during our comment session. All in all, my feeling was that the people who had our application were grossly unfamiliar with our genre, and other committee members were better suited to assess our grant app. All in all a very frustrating meeting for us. We make every attempt to describe our event and art form very clearly, and from the comments made during the scoring session, I felt the application was barely read Our scores were actually pretty good, and still am confused as to why we did not receive funding.”

Third, respondents asked for more samples of previous applications and budgets, and more clarification on final reporting requirements to use as models. Fourth, respondents suggested making more funding available for smaller organizations and individual artists, possibly funding that does not require financial matches.

Audio Interviews

Commissioners discussed several of the same themes in conversations about how to improve the process of applying to the Arts Project Grant program. Commissioners agreed that increasing the level of program funding would contribute to greater program effectiveness, and that the amount of funding that is distributed to individual organizations is a deterrent given the burden of applying for the program and reporting on outcomes. Specifically, commissioners cited the need for funding more start-up organizations through the program. Relatedly, commissioners admitted that current program guidelines did not make clear whether individual artists are eligible to apply. Some commissioners noted that not all members of the BAC reviewed all applications thoroughly prior to ranking applicants. Commissioners also stated that communication between commissioners and applicants regarding program goals could be clearer, which could be achieved by improving the information session for applicants and providing more time between the session and the application deadline. A few commissioners noted good “genre” diversity in terms of the composition of the BAC, but little diversity in terms of age and racial/ethnic composition. Diverse representation in terms of race/ethnicity for program applicants was not noted as an area of focus.

The City Council representative was hesitant to discuss program or BAC goals, given that the BAC operates as a citizens’ advisory council separate from the rules and regulations concerning local government bodies. The representative only noted that all citizens’ advisory councils are permitted to request more government support primarily through presenting evidence of program outcomes in an annual report to the Council.

Recommendations

Based on the result from conducting a process assessment for the BAC’s Arts Program Grant program, we provide the following recommendations for changes to the program.

Recommendation #1

Utilize a rotating panel review committee with approximately five members, including one lay person from the Bloomington community.

Assessment findings noted that not all commissioners seem to have full knowledge of applicants’ materials at the review process, which might contribute to some applicants not receiving full consideration. Currently, all commissioners should review all applications; however, in practice some commissioners review some applications more thoroughly than others. By moving to a rotating panel review process that includes a subset of commissioners that changes with each round of applications, the burden of application review for individual commissioners would be greatly reduced. Further, rotating panel composition would allow for greater diversity among awardees given that panel members’ substantive focus would also change with each round of applications. Introducing a lay person from the Bloomington community could help ensure that

the review process focused on the stated goals of the BAC and the Arts Project Grant program as it aligns with community needs and desires.

Recommendation #2

Eliminate the public scoring session and instead provide applicant feedback in written form. Applicants and commissioners both noted that the current format of providing applicant feedback and asking questions was insufficient. Applicants stated that feedback provided was vague, questions were repetitive, and not applicants have the opportunity to provide clarification on projects. Commissioners noted that it was sometimes not possible to thoroughly discuss each application in the meeting given the public aspect of the session, and the short period between the application deadline and when the meeting takes place. By eliminating the public scoring session, and moving to a private session, commissioners can have greater opportunity to discuss the details of each project. Private sessions can be transcribed and written feedback can be provided to each applicant upon request. This way, applicants can receive better feedback that can be used to improve applications for future deadlines.

Recommendation #3

Continue offering an information session for applicants; however, offer this session at least two months before the application deadline and train session staff to provide detailed information on program criteria and review guidelines.

Many applicants noted the usefulness of the information session provided before the application deadline; however, both applicants and commissioners noted that the time between the session and the application deadline was too short in order to be able to effectively implement the guidance provided at the session. Providing more time for applicants to be able to implement guidance on applications would allow for stronger, and possibly more applications to the program. Training staff on the specific criteria commissioners look for in applications would also allow for better applications.

Recommendation #4

Lobby City Council for additional funds to support new and emerging arts programs and/or individual artists.

Currently, the lack of funding for the program limits the amount of funding that can be designated specifically for new and emerging arts programs and/or individual artists. Further, not all commissioners noted that providing funding for individual artists is an objective for the program. Program guidelines should state specifically whether individual artists are eligible to apply. Annual reports to the City Council that include program outcome statistics can be an effective mechanism for lobbying for more City support of the BAC, including a separate stream of funding for new and emerging arts programs and/or individual artists. Commissioner appointees with experience in program evaluation or external consultants can be useful in helping the BAC communicate its outcomes.

Recommendation #5

Increase racial/ethnic and age diversity among BAC commissioners with new appointees. Commissioners noted that the current composition of the BAC was rich in genre and gender diversity; however, the BAC lacks representation from underserved racial/ethnic minorities and young people. Current trends in the arts sector nationally suggest that organizations and funders

are increasingly focused on diversity among staff and board as well as audiences. In particular, funders look for measures of diversity as explicit outcomes in awarding grants. By expanding the diversity of its commissioners with new appointees, the BAC can appeal to regional and national funding bodies in effect growing the Bloomington arts community. Private funding sources can be used to achieve the goals of the BAC, which might include awarding more funds to new and emerging organizations and individual artists.

Conclusion

Moving forward, the BAC in partnership with staff from the Department of Economic and Sustainable Development (DESD) must decide the extent to which it will implement changes to the Arts Project Grant program, if at all. Moreover, the BAC with DESD must determine how to implement changes to the program such that the Arts Project Grant program continues to fulfill the mission of the BAC. Given the timing of the release of this report with respect to the next grant application deadline, the BAC might consider adopting changes to the program for FY 2019, unless the BAC determines there are specific changes that can be adopted without interrupting program continuity in FY2018.

A possible method of implementation of the report's recommendations include creating a subcommittee or task force on the BAC responsible for reviewing recommendations, communicating with commissioners, and designing an implementation plan. DESD staff should participate on the task force in order to ensure changes to the program are made are in alignment with the capabilities of DESD.

Appendix

List of Interviewees

Alain Barker
Martina Celerin
Gabe Coleman
Sally Gaskill
Abby Perfetti
Angelo Pizzo
Lynn Schwartzberg
Michael Wilkerson
Susan Sandberg

Subject: BAC Arts Project Grants Survey

Date: Monday, October 30, 2017 at 10:19:20 AM Eastern Daylight Time

From: Sean Starowitz

To: Sean Starowitz

Dear Bloomington Arts Community Member,

The City of Bloomington is conducting a survey in an effort to understand how the Bloomington Arts Commission (BAC) can serve our arts community better through its Arts Project Grants program. The program supports the tradition of assisting artists and arts organizations in pursuit of ambitious projects that propel the vitality and diversity of arts experiences available to the Bloomington community.

As a member of the Bloomington arts community, we're requesting information on your experience with the BAC Arts Project Grants program. The survey should take no more than 5 minutes to complete. Your response will remain confidential and only grouped data will be reported. The deadline for participating is **November 10th, 2017**.

[Survey Link Here](#)

If you have any questions about this survey, please contact Sean Starowitz, Assistant Director for the Arts, Economic & Sustainable Development Department at starowis@bloomington.in.gov or 812-349-3534.

Thank you for your participation!

All the best,

Sean M. Starowitz
Assistant Director for the Arts,

City of Bloomington
Economic & Sustainable Development Department (ESD)
401 N. Morton St., Suite 150 PO Box 100
Bloomington, Indiana 47402
V: 812-349-3534
F: [812-349-3535](tel:812-349-3535)

BAC Arts Project Grants Survey

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If you have any questions about this survey, please contact Sean Starowitz, Assistant Director for the Arts, Economic & Sustainable Development Department at starowis@bloomington.in.gov or 812-349-3534.

Thank you for your participation!

* Required

1. Have you ever applied for an Arts Project Grant? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes *Skip to question 2.*
- No *Skip to question 9.*

2. How did you hear about the Arts Project Grant program?

Check all that apply.

- Through a friend or relative
- From the BAC's website
- From the City of Bloomington website
- BEAD E-Newsletter
- BEAD Advisory Meeting
- BAC Grant Workshop
- BEAD's Social Media (Facebook/Twitter)
- Other: _____

3. If you selected other please explain?

4. What was the primary reason you applied for the Arts Project grant program?

Check all that apply.

- To support a new program or project by my organization
- To support an ongoing project or program by my organization
- To build greater capacity within the organization
- To leverage public funding for private funds
- To add to my organization's revenue
- To reach new audiences
- To adapt existing programming to better serve our community
- To gain prestige associated with receiving a grant from the BAC
- Other: _____

5. If you selected other please explain?

6. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is very difficult and 5 and very easy, please rate the ease of applying to the Arts Project Grant program.

Mark only one oval.

1	2	3	4	5	
Very Difficult	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Easy

7. What did you find most difficult about the process of applying to the Arts Project Grant program?

8. Have you received an Arts Project Grant in the past?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes *Skip to question 12.*
- No *Skip to question 12.*

Skip to question 12.

9. Have you ever heard of the Arts Project Grant program through the BAC?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No *After the last question in this section, skip to "Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. If you have questions, please contact Sean Starowitz at starowis@bloomington.in.gov or call 812-349-3534.."*

10. Have you ever considered applying for an Arts Project Grant?

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

11. What kept you from applying for an Arts Project Grant?

12. Please share any other thoughts you have on the process of applying for the Arts Project Grants program.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. If you have questions, please contact Sean Starowitz at starowis@bloomington.in.gov or call 812-349-3534.

