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Arts & Culture



Other cities are thinking bigger than Philly as arts groups try to rebound from the pandemic

Chicago and other cities have put the arts at the center of post-pandemic planning. Here, proposed city budgeting is less ambitious.



A pedestrian walks past a poster of the opera outside of the Kimmel Center Thursday at Philly's Avenue of the Arts.

HEATHER KHALIFA / Staff Photographer

by Stephan Salisbury and Peter Dobrin

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On April 20, with the pandemic still stealing away lives and municipal resources at an alarming rate, Chicago Mayor Lori E. Lightfoot announced a recovery campaign for the cultural sector unlike anything the city had ever seen.

The plan was dubbed [Arts 77](#) — invoking the number of city neighborhoods — and it would be a game changer backed by \$60 million in new investments, she said. The funds would go to individual artists and to arts organizations, big and small, all over Chicago. City departments from parks and rec to libraries, community development, streets, and schools would all participate.

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“It’s embedding the arts in the city,” Mark Kelly, head of the city’s Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, said at the time. “Think of this as a new Works Progress Administration project for the entire city.”

Like Chicago, several other cities across the nation have begun to emerge from the pandemic with major new ideas not just to “rescue” the arts but to center them more fully in daily municipal life.

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San Francisco has started an experimental program that pays artists \$1,000 a month for 18 months. The project is designed to measure the impact of a guaranteed basic income on the productivity and well-being of artists.

New York City has set aside \$25 million for a municipal jobs program that aims to put 1,500 artists to work in communities across the city. San Francisco has started a pilot program with a similar focus. Los Angeles has established a \$36 million arts recovery fund to help support arts organizations, with a particular focus on underrepresented and underfunded groups, for up to three years.

In Philadelphia, a few new ideas have been floated for possible city action — and then have floated away.

A program based on a 1970s federal community jobs program, for instance, explored by Councilmember Isaiah Thomas, “didn’t get much traction” in City Hall, a disappointed member of his staff said. Proposals for increased emergency funds and increased ongoing support have also been met with little discussion.

So far, the mayor has proposed a budget that includes about \$10 million in cultural spending next fiscal year, including \$2 million for the Philadelphia Cultural Fund, the main city vehicle for funding arts organizations. That \$2 million is about \$1 million less than the cultural fund received the year before the pandemic.

That \$10 million also includes \$2.04 million for the Philadelphia Museum of Art (the city owns the Art Museum building), \$2.1 million for the Mural Arts Program, \$470,407 for the Office of Arts, Culture, and the Creative Economy (the cost of an additional staff person and about \$250,000 promised to arts groups in 2020, but never delivered), \$500,000 for the African American Museum in Philadelphia, and \$2,805,000 in capital expenditures, including \$1 million each for the Philadelphia Zoo and the Art Museum.

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The mayor’s office has tamped down expectations regarding the latest proposal for a \$20 million emergency relief package advanced last week by the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance.

The proposal, which cites the loss regionally of 29,000 jobs in the sector and dependent parts of the economy, has attracted some support in Council, but little discussion.

“It is important to note that when it comes to the impacts of the pandemic on revenues, Philadelphia has been harder hit than most other large cities, including New York, Los Angeles, and Boston, which limits the investments we can make regarding our budget,” said Kevin Lessard, a spokesperson for the mayor.

“We’ve had conversations with the managing director’s office,” said Priscilla Luce, interim head of GPCA. “I think the mayor’s budget reflects his current thinking and the many demands he has. It’s a continuing effort we have to make.”

The [toll the pandemic has taken](#) on the finances of arts groups and artists eclipses that of the Great Recession, Luce says — something other cities have recognized with support. “That is the message and takeaway for Philadelphia, that other cities are already there, they are making this investment.”

Here, audience spending dipped 15% during the Great Recession, and a year into the pandemic audience spending was down 77%, she said. And while it is true that [philanthropy increased](#) at many arts groups, “we are now in a place where philanthropy may have done what it could do and happily did. It is time for the public sector to step up and get us over the finish line.”

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profound.

Over the next nine to 12 months, without a major influx of money, a “significant cohort” of organizations would be vulnerable to closing, and not all arts and culture organizations qualify for federal relief through the [Shuttered Venue Operators program](#), she said.

Beyond the dollars themselves, government support is seen by many as having an important multiplier effect.

“City funding is a powerful show of support, it is a powerful sign that an organization needs to be able to approach a wide portfolio of funders to gain sustainability. It is critical,” says Jamie J. Brunson, executive director of First Person Arts and a GPCA board member. “City funding is their foot in the door.”

Yet artists and arts organizations say there appears to be no new thinking evident in the city budget, and they are particularly concerned by the \$1 million cut from the Philadelphia Cultural Fund. Council must approve a final budget by the end of June.

“Arts has never had its day in the budget process, and this community needs us to fight for reprioritization, not just restoration,” said Max Weisman, a spokesperson for Thomas, the City Council member. Thomas and Councilmember Katherine Gilmore Richardson successfully backed legislation earlier this year that transferred \$1.3 million from Council’s emergency recession fund to a one-time COVID-19 emergency arts granting fund, called Illuminate the Arts.

“The mayor’s proposed budget restores pandemic cuts to the arts but does not bring them to [pre-pandemic levels](#) — this budget saves the arts but does not illuminate them,” said Weisman, adding that Thomas is committed to “reprioritizing and increasing funding” for the cultural sector.

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Gilmore Richardson said she fully supported the GPCA proposal for emergency arts funding.

“Artists are crucial to our economy and our overall recovery,” she said. “If we are serious and truly care about arts and culture, we must invest significantly now to help the industry through and past COVID-19 and beyond.”

Lessard, the Kenney spokesperson, said the city wants to help the arts but there are many demands on its pocketbook. He pointed out that businesses, including those in the arts, have been encouraged to apply for “business relief funding.”

“Despite the pandemic’s severe impact on the city’s budget, an estimated \$140 million in government, philanthropic, and private funding has been directed to Philadelphia’s small businesses and nonprofits,” Lessard said.

There also may be some money that can be used from the \$1.39 billion for Philadelphia in President Biden’s American Rescue Plan, he said.

“The city plans to use the local fiscal recovery funds to replace the significant amount of revenue which was lost due to the COVID-19 emergency,” Lessard said. “The federal resources enable the city to restore services and funding.”

Meanwhile, the city’s arts fabric is unraveling. Dancer and choreographer Silvana Cardell, for instance, unable to perform

since March 2020, says she is close to shuttering her studio, which opened in November 2019 and promptly shut down in March 2020. “I have very little money coming in,” she said. “I don’t have an income to show, but I do have a big expense that is the rent.”

LaNeshe Miller-White, executive director of Theatre Philadelphia and West Philadelphia’s Theatre in the X, said that the city needs to make “a concerted effort” to free up funds for “artists and arts organizations, and, even more specifically, for non-Center City artists and arts organizations, for smaller arts organizations, and for performance in the theater.”

“The creative economy in Philadelphia needs sustenance if it’s going to survive and thrive, and we need the city to assist with that,” said Luce.

Chicago, which has been hit hard by the pandemic and has dire problems with gun violence, housing, and education, just like Philadelphia, has looked at its fragile landscape and reimagined the role of the arts as a solution and a resource, not a problem and a drain.

“The arts can’t be seen as a frill and the arts can’t be for certain individuals but for everyone in our city — the issue of equity is directly connected to the arts,” said Kelly, the head of Chicago’s cultural affairs department.

“If you’re a city that aspires to be a great city, then you have to be a cultural capital. That’s one of the definitions of a great city,” Kelly said. “The arts are as necessary a part of infrastructure as our schools, as public safety, as the public way and streetscape, and to try to separate it out as the extra is just a failure of imagination. It misses what cities are and why they work at their best.”

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