



**GRANTS**  
METRO ARTS / NASHVILLE

**AGENDA**  
**Grants and Funding Committee**  
**Wednesday, March 13, 2024**  
**12:30 p.m. – 3:30PM**  
Metro Southeast Building  
Bordeaux Conference Room  
1417 Murfreesboro Pike  
Nashville, TN 37217

**METRO ARTS MISSION:**  
**Drive an Equitable and Vibrant Community through the Arts**

**Committee Members:** Tim Jester, Carol McCoy, Dawana Wade, & Diana Perez

**Staff:** Sydnie Davis & Claudia Lawhon

**Guests:** Dr. Megan Jordan, Sangeetha Ekabaram, Alayna Anderson

**A. Call Meeting to Order**

**B. Public Comments**

The public is encouraged to attend Commission and committee meetings and may make comments in person during the designated time on the agenda. The public comment period is limited to twenty (20) minutes total. Comments are limited to a maximum of two (2) minutes per person. Persons wishing to provide comment on matters that are germane to items on the agenda must sign up prior to the beginning of the meeting, on the sign-up sheet provided at the meeting. The opportunity to provide public comment is offered on a first come, first served basis. At all meetings, the commissioner chairing the proceedings shall have the authority to manage/limit the number of persons (non-Commission members) allowed to speak on an issue and to manage/limit such speakers' time.

**Dr. Megan Jordan** – Community member, social scientist that studies equity, expert in arts policy, studying arts organizations equity statements, her research has shown that Nashville's programming and funding does not match with equity statement. As a former grant editing panelist, she believes there needs to be a focus on what equity is - giving funding to the little guy so democratic processes can take place.

**Sangeetha Ekabaram** – She also served on grants editing panel last summer. She explained that funding needs to be prioritized for emerging artists especially those without prior grant writing experience. Although the simplification of application process helped, and she has applied 3 times since 2022, significant redistribution must be implemented.

**Alayna Anderson** – She is a musician and community organizer and served on the grant editing panel. She said there was an alarmingly low number of applications in that year, and, despite being eligible she had not considered applying and has since engaged deeper in shared funding frameworks from across the nation such as community centric principals, and questions of collective efforts. She is concerned that strides made last summer are at risk of being undone. She asked "What is the underlying intent of convening today – to build upon progress or chart new course? How do we ensure community members, staff, and consultants stay involved?"

**Navethan Singh** – He is a lifelong educator, serves on DEI committees, and has a deep understanding of historical context of state and metro money. He saw historical allocations to large performing arts organizations especially during COVID were from the same well from which small artists and orgs cannot draw. He has concerns about funding promised to TPAC from Mayor Cooper while BIPOC and queer staff were terminated from TPAC.

**C. Approval of Minutes** - None to approve at this time.

Approval of October 9, 2023 minutes deferred to next meeting.

**D. Updates**

1. FY24 Second Payment Update

Sydney Davis introduced herself as new Strategic Grants Manager – she is advocating for funds to be released, her team is working hard in this tumultuous time. As an artist herself and someone who calls Nashville home, reminding everyone of the humanity and asking for grace as taking on a system clouded in confusion and criticism. She has read through the work of the people in the room and her goal is to understand and listen, not to implement anything outside of releasing the funds as quickly as possible. She shared her email and made an open call to receive emails to hear from the artists, hoping to find the human in the situation.

Commissioner McCoy explained there were not very many people on the grants committee last October, invited in January as the only remaining member of the grants committee. She asked Sydney about her background in grants and invited Sydney to share her qualifications and background.

Sydney said she has worked in Higher education in title 3 and title 6 grants, she worked at NSF working with HBCUs increasing Black data scientists, rooted in strategic communications, not inviting more “mess” into this, recognizing that sweat equity has been put into this and gone unappreciated but she is open to hearing and wants to do right and good work.

Commissioner Wade thanked Sydney, the unfortunate occurrence is that many of the people are new and were not involved in what happened last year, we are all around this table to support staff and artists. Question to lack of minutes from October 9 minutes. Who should have been providing update about second payment from FY24? Such grave consequences, we can attempt to move on but are at a disadvantage to do that? When should we expect it?

Sydney responded that unfortunately that is up for us to discover today, from Sydney’s understanding there has not been communication from the ED, need to ask commission for next steps, we can’t make a decision for the future unless we know what to do with the past. Staff needs to know who our direct leadership will be, she behooves the commission to go directly to Director of Finance.

Commissioner Tim Jester interjected that although he is not the person to be answering this question, his understanding is that we are waiting on Kevin Crumbo about the audit and received an ambiguous answer about when the audit will be completed. To answer Alayna – we heard the MHRC report loud and clear, we are sitting here to work hard to figure out how to more equitably distribute funds. We’re here to right a ship that seems to be floundering and make sure funding gets to the artists.

Commissioner McCoy seconded Commissioner Jester’s comment and said she does not have any additional information.

Sydney wanted to answer the question about what the meeting is for today. She said “to get some continuity among rescheduling and chaos.” Trying to work our way through the next few months that will likely be rocky, she agrees and read the MHRC report. The equitable work has to come internally and she cannot just do that on her own. Wanting to meet more often and have a transparent procedural process for everyone. That is understandable and accessible. There are bigger titans here at play that we are waiting on, not by her hands.

Commissioner Wade asked who needs to be at these meetings for continuity? The people in this meeting do not have the information they need, she is acting for director or interim director be here, that metro finance and metro legal be here at future meetings. The people that need to be here need to be here, it is a waste of time to have 3 hours meetings without those key people.

***Commissioner Wade made a motion to determine who needs to be at subsequent meetings including finance, legal, ED or designee and they are specifically determined relative to what information they would share relative to each agenda item. It was seconded by Commissioner Jester. The motion passed.***

Discussion – Commissioner Jester asked for person responsible for addressing each issue to be put on public Agenda for update, Commissioner McCoy asked who that would be, Commissioner Wade said Metro Legal and Finance.

2. Overview of Current Applications and Rubric
  - a. Invited editors from last year

Sangeetha Ekhabram – continued where she left off from public comment. Talking about how to make sure things happen in action and not in words in terms of bridging equity between patron class and working class organizations. Last summer at training Director Singh noted that Metro Legal encouraged him to conduct disparity study, they did not have enough BIPOC representation to even do the disparity study. How do we actually shift the structure – shifting authority, resources, and that the work would be inherently disruptive. The status quo was fixed in a certain way so disruption is a sign that we are doing the work.

Dr. Megan Jordan – how do equity statements go into the funding structure and programs. Its messy, uncomfortable, exhausting work. All committees she has served on since fall of 2022, we were trying to put Metro Arts' money where its mouth is, proof in the pudding. November of 2022 meeting was a beautiful mess, artists from small, medium, large orgs, independent artists. Who has access to funds to actually do innovative work. Policy Link – leader in arts equity, we define equity as getting rid of barriers within systems, just and fair society so everyone can reach their full potential. Inherently democratic, accessible, special focus and attention on BIPOC members that have been overlooked since Metro Arts inceptions. Needs to be built into the structure. Arts org that is doing it right – TN Craft, wrote DEI statements, one of the oldest arts orgs in the state. The statement is a start, who is actually living up to it? TN Craft – scholarship for African American artists. Programming not just during Black History Month. Now funding Indigenous artists programming. ED behind it which Metro Arts has. Change is uncomfortable, everyone sat down and had an uncomfortable conversation and reached a common ground. That's what this process is going to look like.

Sydney jumped in and made sure people knew that we want to hear what they say.

Sangeetha said part of the equitable distribution is the most direct funding to artists as possible, that's the biggest difference between patron class. When you fund artists directly, you diversify the art community. Thrive artists create communities and projects for each other. Going to the actual labor from the artists. Diversify the arts scene that way, representing the reality of the rich creative culture. The more we do that the more we will put Nashville on the map. Independent and micro-orgs have artistic control. Huge part of equity across the board, historically arts that are prioritized are part of a white dominant paradigm, we have to acknowledge that as part of this too.

Alaina Anderson – not only does the thrive grant support artists, it also launches small organizations, thrive money gives artists direct control over the project, they can see opportunities to create more structures that open doors for other funding opportunities. The thrive grant is important to go directly to artists, it's not just supporting one off projects but builds future arts organizations, don't need to be funneling money through art monopolies – they are the gatekeepers of Metro money. Prioritize efforts toward the Thrive grant and allocations and have bigger pot for individual artists. Everyone is frustrated, a second round of money continuing the process of FY25. New wave of artists affected by not having FY24 funds.

Dr. Megan Jordan – to cosign importance of funding independent artists, births new organizations. Essential in a democratic society to protect first amendment rights. Could point to restrictions in current grant process. Innovative work does not come from big institutions, it comes from the ability to be independent. Without going through middlemen. Need more funding for the arts period but need to protect Thrive for independent artists.

Commissioner Watts – Thrive artists have been funded before. Her belief from the MHRC report, race neutral language was used previously. We have capacity to continue to do so. It is important to continue to do so. As an org that has opted out of Metro funding. Worked with Thrive artists who were directly funded. It is imperative to stop pretending like it hasn't happened before. We should get better every year and not fall into going back on what we said. We need to stop pretending about where we are. We have the capacity with what Sydnie brings to the table. Who is the decision maker that releases the funds? We need to go to them within the next week or two and tell them to make a decision.

Commissioner Jester – He understands why people seem nervous, but he wants to assure the community that we are not trying to get rid of Thrive. He asked Dr. Megan Jordan to email her concerns about the grant application.

Commissioner McCoy – she has said she has never seen the application. She said it is almost impossible to read through everything.

Alayna Anderson asked Commissioner McCoy - wouldn't you want to know what the people were applying for?

Commissioner McCoy – by the time she came on everything had been done. She is doing the best she can as a volunteer. Sydnie is working day and night to do what you all want. She observed a meeting last April.

Alayna – the grants editors were strategically scheduled when the commission was meeting about the grant allocations.

Commissioner McCoy – the process is messy, unusual, disruptive. We do want to fund artists at every level. I was asking questions and labeled a troublemaker. We've had questions and sometimes we don't know the answer. We're doing the best we can.

Sangeetha wanted to clarify that she is not worried about getting rid of thrive. Last year after analyzing the data, thrive would help bridge the gaps, an active effort was made to get funds directly to the community. There was active recruitment to get a record number of applicants. Director Singh explained why that is the most equitable scenario. It was voted on in July and rescinded in August. It was a small shift that was blocked. Keeping eyes on basic facts to know that is what we are up against. There are identifiable actors that blocked that funding.

Alayna – How do we ensure the individuals that were on the grants editing process last year are included in the future of how grants are moving forward? We should also talk about the staff and consultants that were leading those efforts. We are all aware that Dana and Justin are no longer working with Metro Arts and there are some other contracts happening that there is not transparency around. If you spoke with the panel from last summer you would know how integral Justin and Dana's work was in moving the equity practices forward.

Sydnie – thrive should not be equity, everything we do should be equitable.

Claudia – Restorative Arts and Equity team will connect with grants editors from last year.

Alan Faye – on grant editing panel November of 2022, echoes what has already been said, there were really important steps forward for the community. His only concern really is transparency. There was no transparency about why and who was making the decisions, lack of transparency between July and August. Since Director Singh has been hired. He has sent one email to the arts community as a whole. FY24 thrive and operating recipients have only received 50%. Be transparent with what you do and how

the decisions are made and continue that as we move forward. Between 1 and 3 Commissioners and everyone currently on it is supportive of doing the work moving forward.

Sangeetha – two reasons for lack of transparency – one of the goals from last summer was to make things as transparent as possible because a strategy of maintaining power is to do things behind closed doors. What didn't we find out between July and August – done behind closed doors. And sometimes people are silenced. It took filing a report to find out more. We need to define terms, talk about facts, and stay clear.

3. FY25 Program updates

- a. Operating Grants – 109 submissions
- b. Thrive Call for Artist Services – 201 submissions
- c. Panel Review – Dates and Commissioners Signed Up

Sydney – panel review process has been paused until we can get clarity on FY24. So we can finish out FY25 correctly. Without direct leadership we cannot start a process or be in a situation where we put artists in a limbo. Understands that it was last minute to pause them but when weighing the options, she did not think it was fair, just, equitable. We have looked at the applications through different lenses. In terms of an update, we need some big house rules figured out first before we invite more people in and do a disservice. She would rather wait to clean up from last year and have a true transparent conversation. That the process is clearly accessible so when money is distributed, we are not in the same position. Paused until those who we need answers from can give us answers.

4. Tennessee Arts Commission

- a. March 19<sup>th</sup> meeting with TAC Panel and Staff  
Sydney – DA training but no other information other than that.

**E. Staff Report**

Sydney – we have essentially talked about it – making sure we get our questions answered and get a better understanding of what our leadership in the department looks like.

**F. Old/New Business**

**G. Adjourn**

*Commissioner Jester offered a motion to adjourn, Commissioner Watts seconded. The motion passed.*

Meeting adjourned at 1:47pm.