



City of Culver City

Mike Balkman Council
Chambers
9770 Culver Blvd.
Culver City, CA 90232

Staff Report

File #: 26-182, **Version:** 1

Item #:

CAC - ACTION ITEM: Consideration of (1) Recommendation from the 2026 Performing Arts Grant Program Ad Hoc Subcommittee Pertaining to the Grant Awards for 2026 Performances; and (2) Make a Recommendation to the City Council

Meeting Date: December 16, 2025

Contact Person/Dept: Lee Lawlor / City Manager - Office of Economic & Cultural Development

Phone Number: (310) 253-5772

Fiscal Impact: Yes ☒ No ☐ **General Fund:** Yes ☐ No ☒

Public Hearing: ☐ **Action Item:** ☒ **Attachments:** Yes ☒ No ☐

Public Notification: (E-Mail) Meetings and Agendas - Cultural Affairs Commission (12/11/25); Sony Pictures Entertainment (12/11/25); Culver City Arts Foundation (12/11/25); 2026 Performing Arts Grant Program Applicants (12/5/25)

Department Approval: John Nachbar, City Manager (12/09/25)

RECOMMENDATION

Staff requests the Cultural Affairs Commission to consider the recommendation of the 2026 Culver City Performing Arts Grant Program Subcommittee (Subcommittee) and approve a motion that (1) recommends the City Council approve the 2026 Performing Arts Grant Program awards, totaling \$200,518 and related grantee contracts for 26 organizations; and (2) recommend that the City Council designate the related performances as City-sponsored.

BACKGROUND

Local arts agencies are an essential backbone strengthening the arts and cultural infrastructure across the United States. Ongoing cultural grants are not merely a transaction but a driving force within a system that includes creative workers, engaged residents, visitors, robust cultural organizations, local municipalities, and key partners. Municipal cultural agencies contribute to the well-being, economic vitality, and spirit of their community by actively encouraging accessible and relevant programming, subsidizing free or reduced ticket prices, and encouraging broad public cultural participation.

The Cultural Affairs Commission and staff have implemented Culver City's Performing Arts Grant

Program (Program) since its inception in 1994. Culver City Municipal Code (CCMC) Section 15.06.160 stipulates that no more than 25% of the money deposited into the Cultural Trust Fund (CTF) in the prior fiscal year be allocated for performing arts in the subsequent year. \$125,000 has been appropriated from the CTF for Fiscal Year 2025-2026 and is supplemented with anticipated carryover of \$163,334 from prior fiscal year CTF allocations. Additional donations of \$30,000 received from Sony Pictures Entertainment and \$25,000 pledged from Culver City Arts Foundation are designated for regranting to supplement the 2026 Program.

DISCUSSION

The Subcommittee (Tania Fleischer and Shona Gupta) propose total allocations of \$200,518 in grant awards for the 2026 Program from all sources.

Staff published the Program application during the week of August 7, 2025, on the Arts & Culture page of the City's public website. At that time, the application was open to the public, to be completed and submitted online. The City's website was updated with current eligibility, schedule, guidelines, deadline, requirements, and sample documents. Based on discussions with the Subcommittee and analysis of available funding, the application guidelines stated that there was a grant request limit of \$10,000 per organization, and that applicants must provide matching funds that are equal to, or greater than, their requested grant amount.

The Notice of Funding Availability was distributed by email newsletter on August 12, 2025. During the following weeks, staff continually promoted and invited applications via email, social media, message groups, and other appropriate third-party sites, including the Los Angeles County Department of Arts & Culture. A copy of the Notice of Funding Availability is attached to this staff report (**Attachment 1**). Support materials were posted on the City's website, including potential performance venues in Culver City, sample application, and budget templates. Staff provided multiple training workshops, consultation with potential applicants, technical assistance, and venue referrals.

Forty-six (46) performing arts organizations submitted signed applications electronically via the City's website by the published deadline of September 26, 2025. Staff reviewed all applications to confirm eligibility criteria and requirements. Due to technical difficulties with the online application system, one application that arrived late was accepted as eligible.

On October 1, 2025, the Subcommittee met to discuss the incoming applications and preliminary eligibility questions. The Subcommittee and staff determined that forty (40) of the applications met the eligibility requirements and would be sent for review and scoring by independent Peer Review Panelists.

Six (6) of the incoming applications, all from first-time applicants, were determined to be ineligible. Staff provided detailed feedback to each applicant and encouraged them to re-apply in the future, advising them to confirm suitability with staff in advance.

Eight (8) qualified professionals, with expertise in music, dance, theatre, multi-disciplinary performance, grantmaking, and/or non-profit management, were invited to participate as Grant Review Panelists (Panelist). Each Panelist signed a Confidentiality Agreement and Conflict of Interest Statement. They all received a Panelist Handbook and Scoring Guide (**Attachment 2**). They also received training about avoiding bias in arts grant selection during a mandatory virtual Panelist Orientation meeting. Every eligible application was assigned for review and scoring by some of the

eight (8) Panelists listed below.**2026 Performing Arts Grant Application Review Panelists**

- Joshua R Lamont - Corita Art Center, Actor and Teaching Artist
- Natalie Marrero - Cultural Affairs Supervisor, City of Santa Monica
- Nicole McCabe - Saxophonist, Composer, Music Faculty at Loyola Marymount University, Pasadena Conservatory of Music and Cal State Northridge
- Nereya Otieno - Writer, Content Strategist, Creative Consultant, Founder of The Rising Artist Foundation
- Ashley Walden Rumber - Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Unlock Creative
- Jeannine Wisnosky Stehlin - Managing Director of The New American Theatre, Cultural Affairs Commissioner 2016-2024
- Hester Tittmann - Cultural Strategist and Communication Designer, Rabbit Rabbit Studio Inc.
- Sadie Yarrington - Choreographer, Performer, Dance Chair at New Roads School

Panelists received electronic access to assigned applications and viewed artistic video samples submitted by the applicants. They examined project budgets, financial reports and artistic materials from applicants. Staff and panelists attended mandatory Mid-Point Scoring Review Meetings (November 5 and 7, 2025). Members of the Subcommittee joined the meetings and shared relevant local information, history, program goals, and Culver City community needs.

The following four scoring criteria, with total possible score of 100 points, were included in the guidelines and provided to Panelists (see Attachment 2 for full scoring guide):

- **Artistic excellence and cultural merit of project (45 points)**
- **Culver City outreach and engagement (20 points)**
- **Realistic project budget and funding (20 points)**
- **Contribution to cultural equity and inclusion (15 points)**

In prior years, Panelists attended a group meeting where they discussed the grant applications, their scores and group rankings. For the 2026 grant cycle, that process was updated and redesigned, based on a system currently in use by the state-wide California Arts Council, and intended to mitigate group-based bias in grantmaking. Panelists worked independently, guided by the orientation materials and scoring rubric. Average scores of Panelists, plus their combined comments, were compiled and analyzed by staff and Subcommittee to make award recommendations.

On December 3, 2025, the Subcommittee met and reviewed the total panel scores and the requested grant amounts for all applicants. The Subcommittee considered many factors including the balance of artistic disciplines (music - theatre - dance), public access and frequency of venues, budget allocation for FY 2025-26, availability of resources, total number of submitted applications, and performing arts priorities of the Cultural Affairs Commission.

With the intention to support a full year of enriching, diverse, and accessible public performances, the

Subcommittee concluded that twenty-six (26) of the eligible applications should receive 80% of their requested grant amount and that fourteen (14) of the applications would not be recommended for awards. The Subcommittee highly encourages applicants who are not recommended for funding in this cycle to apply again in future years. To assist, staff can provide personalized feedback with a contact person from each organization. Staff will proactively invite them to apply and are readily available to provide additional information and grant workshops upon request.

City Sponsorship

These events meet the criteria for City sponsorship. To be categorized as “City-sponsored,” an event or activity must meet the criteria set forth in Culver City Municipal Code (CCMC) Section 17.330.040.B.7.b.ii confirming that the City is (a) participating in an official capacity in the planning, preparation or promotion of the event or activity; and (b) contributing 25% of the total estimated costs of the civic event or activity or at least \$1,000, whichever is less. This contribution may take the form of funds, labor, staff time, materials, a waiver of fees, or any combination of the foregoing. City Council Policy requires that in order for an event to be considered City-sponsored, the City Council determine, by specific action, that the above criteria have been met.

As a requirement of the grant contract, the performing arts organizations must include the following acknowledgement in certain promotional materials: This performance is made possible in part by the City of Culver City and its Cultural Affairs Commission, with support from Sony Pictures Entertainment and Culver City Arts Foundation.

The total amount recommended for all grant awards is \$200,518. Staff will work closely with the grant recipients throughout 2026 on the public outreach and promotional plans for their performances. The City will promote the sponsored performances via its website, email, and social media. After their sponsored performance, each organization will submit an invoice, audience attendance estimate, and evaluation.

Attached is a chart of the forty (40) submitted eligible applications sorted alphabetically. It includes requested grant amount, artistic discipline, Review Panel total scores, recommended grant awards, and a brief description of each proposed project. **(Attachment 3).**

FISCAL ANALYSIS

The Subcommittee recommends that a total of \$200,518 be allocated for the 2026 Culver City Performing Arts Grant Program. Twenty-six (26) grant contracts will be executed, with amounts ranging from \$4,000 to \$8,000. The contracts are partially funded (\$145,518) from the Art in Public Places Program (Cultural Arts Fund - 41380000.730100 PZ614) Adopted Capital Improvement Program Budget. Additional donations from Sony Pictures Entertainment (\$30,000 received) and from Culver City Arts Foundation (\$25,000 pledged) will also be fully regranted and used to fund these grant contracts.

ATTACHMENTS

1. ATT 1_ 2026 Performing Arts Grant Notice of Funding Availability

2. ATT 2_ 2026 Panelist Handbook and Scoring Guide
3. ATT 3_ Applications and Scoring 2026 Performing Arts Grant Program

The electronic 2026 Performing Arts Grant Program applications are available for public review by sending a written request by email to cultural.affairs@culvercity.org

RECOMMENDED MOTION

That the Cultural Affairs Commission:

1. Consistent with the recommendation from the 2026 Performing Arts Grant Program Ad Hoc Subcommittee, recommend that City Council approve the 2026 Performing Arts Grant Program awards and related grantee contracts as outlined in the staff report; and recommend that City Council designate the related performances as City-sponsored.