
THE COSTA MESA ARTS COMMISSION

MAY 1, 2025
6:00 P.M. – UNOFFICIAL MINUTES

CALL TO ORDER by Chair Ochoa at 6:00 P.M.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE by Commissioner Mann.

ROLL CALL

☒ = Present ☐ = Absent

Commissioners	City Staff
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Charlene Ashendorf	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Brian Gruner, Parks and Community Svs. Director
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Fisher Derderian	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Laurette Garner, Arts Specialist
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Brendan Ford	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Monique Villasenor, Recreation Manager
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Erica Lucia	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Ashley Thomas, Sr. Recreation Supervisor
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alisa Ochoa	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Laura Fautua, Executive Assistant
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Allison Mann	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Kathia Viteri, Office Specialist II
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Debora Wondercheck*	

* Commissioner Wondercheck left the meeting at 7:05 pm

PRESENTATION:

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Jim Fitzpatrick: Spoke about Costa Mesa's business permitting delays and expenses have led him to exclude the city from future plans. He urged the Arts Commission to assert its authority in budget discussions, especially regarding Measure Q funds, and to advocate for proper arts funding during the city's structural deficit.

Angel Correa: Spoke on behalf of the Costa Mesa Playhouse, informed the Commission that their lease with the Newport-Mesa Unified School District would be terminated in June 2025, threatening the future of the only community theater. He thanked two commissioners for their recent support and asked the full Commission to assist in preserving the Playhouse, including helping communicate with City Council to secure a new space.

COMMISSIONER COMMENTS

Commissioner Ashendorf: Spoke about upcoming community events, including Love Costa Mesa Day and the next Arts in the Park event at Fairview Park. She celebrated the success of the Newport-Mesa Unified School District senior art show, praised the latest edition of The Spotlight, and encouraged fellow commissioners to support the Costa Mesa Playhouse in light of its potential displacement.

Commissioner Lucia: Expressed hope that the Newport-Mesa Unified School District would provide an alternative location for the Costa Mesa Playhouse, recognizing its significance to the community and the performing arts. She offered to contribute ideas and support in any related discussions.

Commissioner Ford: Spoke about the City Council's rejection of a proposed cannabis shop, noting that cannabis tax revenue directly funds the Arts Commission and supports local arts grants. He urged those who support the arts to also support cannabis businesses in Costa

Mesa, emphasizing the connection between cannabis tax approval and the Commission's ability to fund valuable community programs.

Commissioner Mann: Advocated for community theater and the arts on Costa Mesa's Westside, envisioning a hub of black box theaters, galleries, and music venues. She also asked for clarification on how commissioners can individually engage with City Council or advocate for change, citing uncertainty about what is permitted under the Brown Act.

Commissioner Wondercheck: She voiced strong support for preserving the Playhouse, especially in its 60th year, and stated he would reach out to both the Playhouse and another organization with a potential theater space to offer assistance.

Vice Chair Derderian: He encouraged commissioners to embrace a broader, visionary role in defining Costa Mesa as the "City of the Arts," proposed a future agenda item with the city clerk to review the municipal code, and requested that the Costa Mesa Playhouse situation be formally agendized so the Commission could potentially recommend city-supported solutions.

Chair Ochoa: Thanked commissioners and staff for their support of the Newport-Mesa Unified School District (NMUSD) senior art showcase. Emphasized the value of cross-department collaboration to integrate more art into parks and public spaces. She shared that she advocated for the Costa Mesa Playhouse, requested an update on a donated sculpture by the late James McDemis, and noted that Earth Day provided a successful opportunity to engage with three (3) City Council members who expressed interest in future recommendations and a presentation from the Arts Commission.

CONSENT CALENDAR

1. MINUTES

04/03/2025 Arts Commission Draft Minutes

No public comment.

MOTION/SECOND: Commissioner Ford motioned to approve the minutes for April 3, 2025/Seconded by Commissioner Ashendorf.

The motion carried by the following roll call vote:

Ayes: Commissioner Ashendorf, Commissioner Ford, Commissioner Lucia, Commissioner Mann, Commissioner Wondercheck, Vice Chair Derderian, Chair Ochoa

Nays: None

Abstained: None

Absent: None

Motion Carried: 7-0

MONTHLY REPORTS:

1. ARTS SPECIALIST REPORT

Laurette Garner, Arts Specialist, presented.

Commissioner Wondercheck highlighted that Make Music Day is a community-driven event with ample support materials, and shared that planning was underway with

school district contacts, with outreach to musicians and promotional efforts in progress.

Commissioner Ashendorf expressed excitement about the event and encouraged the Commission to participate creatively, while noting the tight timeline due to the school year ending.

Commissioner Mann proposed finding or securing black box-style performance spaces—particularly on the Westside—for events like poetry readings or theater, and questioned how space access is managed between the City Council and the Commission. Spoke about potential funding source for arts-related space needs.

Commissioner Ashendorf spoke about TeWinkle Park as a potential outdoor theater location.

Commissioner Wondercheck inquired about adding an Arts newsletter to help inform the community of art related events.

OLD BUSINESS:

1. ARTS GRANT PROGRAM REVIEW OF GUIDELINES

Laurette Garner, Arts Specialist, presented.

Commissioner Mann asked whether there is a set number of arts grants awarded each year or if allocations are solely based on the total funding available and how it is distributed. She also expressed interest in understanding the balance between large grants to institutions and smaller grants to individuals, referencing the *Givsum Foundation's* offer to serve as a nonprofit sponsor for artists seeking funding.

Commissioner Ford recalled a prior discussion about possibly setting a funding cap for organizations receiving large arts grants and emphasized the need for data to make an informed decision rather than guessing an amount.

Public Comment:

Jim Fitzpatrick: Spoke about the city's funding priorities, contrasting the modest stipend given to the Poet Laureate with a proposed \$30,000 consultant fee, and urged the Commission to update outdated policies and advocate for greater investment in the arts. He encouraged commissioners to make formal recommendations to City Council, consider holding informal community study sessions in the future, and commended their recent efforts, noting his shift from critic to supporter.

Nancy Warzer-Brady: Education and community engagement director for *Backhausdance*, expressed strong support for the evolving arts grant process and praised the cultural growth in Costa Mesa. She encouraged greater visibility for grantees through presentations and data sharing, emphasized the role of the arts in building a creative economy, and suggested the Commission consider equity across organizations, disciplines, and audiences as the grant program continues to develop.

Vice Chair Derderian reflected on the current budget allocation and noted that a significant portion of arts grant funding has gone toward education and accessibility rather than directly supporting the creation of public-facing art. He suggested the

Commission consider reframing the grant program to prioritize funding for artists and public art projects, while still allowing room for arts education when appropriate, and invited fellow commissioners to share their thoughts on this potential shift in focus.

Commissioner Mann emphasized the importance of creating indoor arts spaces, noting that such spaces enable consistent artistic activity and community engagement. She expressed concern that, despite a budget line for reimagined art grants, there was currently no funding allocated for securing creative spaces, and she questioned whether this could be addressed in the future.

Commissioner Ashendorf expressed appreciation for the ongoing public support and noted the school district's strong commitment to arts education. She supported Commissioner Derderian's call to examine the balance between funding for education and other creative priorities within the arts grants.

Commissioner Lucia suggested reviewing the financial data of past grantees and observed that all but two funded organizations had revenues under \$1 million. She raised the idea of considering a cap or guideline based on financial size to better allocate funds.

Chair Ochoa supported the idea of introducing tiers based on organizational budgets, with flexible language to give preference to smaller nonprofits while still considering larger ones with compelling applications. She reiterated that grants should prioritize public benefit and proposed refining the rubric to reflect these preferences.

Commissioner Ford agreed with the tiered or capped funding approach and emphasized maximizing impact as small increases in funding could help smaller organizations. He also supported prioritizing public-facing performances and opportunities for emerging artists.

Commissioner Wondercheck endorsed a \$1 million revenue cap for eligibility, aligning with the idea that limited funds should be directed toward groups where the impact would be greater.

Vice Chair Derderian expressed uncertainty about implementing a cap at this stage due to the limited number of applicants but welcomed the conversation for future scalability. He emphasized redirecting focus toward public-facing art and civic impact while allowing fiscal sponsors like *Givesum Foundation* to support multiple projects under one umbrella.

Chair Ochoa explained her proposed tier system vision further, noting it would include preferences for smaller nonprofits and allow for flexibility within a structured rubric.

Commissioner Ford noted the grant rubric uses a point system and suggested that lower-tier organizations could receive bonus points to help prioritize their applications.

Commissioner Lucia proposed simply defining financial need (e.g., under \$2 million in revenue) rather than creating formal tiers, to maintain flexibility and better reflect the intent of equitable funding.

Commissioner Mann referenced the rubric's "passion" category as a possible space to prioritize smaller or more impactful applications based on emotional or community value.

MOTION/SECOND: Commissioner Lucia move that we incorporate into the definition of financial need organizations with revenues less than \$2 million /Seconded by Commissioner Ford.

The motion carried by the following roll call vote:

Ayes: Commissioner Ashendorf, Commissioner Ford, Commissioner Lucia, Commissioner Mann, Commissioner Wondercheck, Vice Chair Derderian, Chair Ochoa

Nays: None

Abstained: None

Absent: None

Motion Carried: 7-0

Vice Chair Derderian proposed shifting the arts grant program's emphasis toward direct art production—such as public performances and installations—rather than primarily focusing on education and accessibility. He suggested researching grant frameworks from other cities like Pasadena and Santa Monica and asked staff or commissioners to gather best practices to explore reframing the current grant guidelines.

Commissioner Mann acknowledged that many cities' grant samples had already been reviewed and clarified that the suggested shift would involve a different focus. She also supported the idea of applying a tier system based on audience size or reach to help shape funding decisions.

Chair Ochoa noted that art experiences often have educational impacts, even if not explicitly labeled as such, and expressed interest in reviewing impact reports from grantees before making significant changes. She emphasized the need for careful consideration of the language used in grant guidelines.

Commissioner Ashendorf pointed out that arts education is a stated part of the Commission's mission and supported continuing the discussion on integrating both educational and creation-focused elements in the grant structure.

Commissioner Lucia observed that many grantees struggle with venue access and suggested the Commission consider offering City-supported venues—similar to the free Park performances—as part of a festival-style grant model. This approach could reduce barriers for artists and encourage broader community engagement.

NEW BUSINESS:

1. REVIEW OF PUBLIC ART FUNDING OPTIONS

Laurette Garner, Arts Specialist, presented.

Commissioner Ashendorf asked for clarification on several funding sources, including whether Newport Beach's \$55,000 reserve was an annual City Council commitment,

and if Quimby funds—restricted to parks—had historically supported public art, such as the butterfly sculptures in Butterfly Park. She also inquired whether state-level "arts and parks" funding required staff to apply through a grant process.

Commissioner Lucia expressed strong support for a private development fund model, praising cities like Dana Point and Laguna Beach for giving developers the option to either install public art or contribute to an arts fund. She recommended the Commission consider making a similar policy recommendation for Costa Mesa.

Public Comment:

Jim Fitzpatrick: Urged the Commission not to impose additional art fees on developers, arguing that sufficient funding already exists through mechanisms like the TOT (Transient Occupancy Tax) and cannabis tax. He encouraged partnerships with Travel Costa Mesa and departments like Public Works to integrate public art into city-funded projects, and recommended using incentives rather than mandates to encourage art in private developments.

Seema Mishra: Supported creative, bold funding strategies for public art, advocating for a mix of public-private partnerships, grant pursuit, and leveraging city projects. Specified examples where cities successfully built large public art programs through innovative, cross-sector funding approaches, including dedicated taxes and state partnerships.

Commissioners Ford, Mann, Derderian, and Wondercheck supported exploring TOT taxes, incentives tied to development thresholds, and integrating art into city-funded projects like fire stations. They raised questions about procedural steps to incorporate art earlier in capital improvement planning and proposed forming a subcommittee to develop concrete funding and policy recommendations for City Council consideration, including clearer use of cannabis tax revenue for public art.

Commissioner Mann suggested that if there are Brown Act concerns, a study session could be a useful way for commissioners and the community to share ideas on expanding funding sources for the arts. She emphasized the value of exploring creative solutions in a collaborative setting.

Commissioner Ashendorf supported the direction of the discussion, highlighting past interest from the PACS Commission and planning commissioners in integrating arts into parks and developments. She expressed confidence that unified efforts could help gain City Council support for future arts initiatives.

Vice Chair Derderian asked whether the Commission could formally create a subcommittee or request a study session by submitting it to the City Manager, and sought clarification on the Commission's authority under the municipal code to independently conduct studies or public hearings.

2. BUDGET REVIEW - END OF THE YEAR

Mr. Gruner and Ms. Villasenor presented.

Commissioner Mann asked whether any other large-scale installations besides the butterfly sculpture had been budgeted in previous years and inquired about backup

options to safeguard unused funds for future use. She also asked about the cost breakdown of ARTventure and whether alternative action sports areas could be considered before the skate park is completed.

Commissioner Ford sought clarification on how the arts budget moves from the master plan to final approval, asking how variances arise and how a proposed amount like \$12,500 for arts grants in the master plan translates into actual budget requests and allocations.

Chair Ochoa asked if the Commission could propose maintaining a \$20,000 minimum for the arts grant line item, particularly in light of increasing individual grant awards to \$5,000.

Commissioner Ashendorf requested clarification on the \$10,000 budgeted for Action Arts and whether a specific event was planned.

Vice Chair Derderian asked how the SMART Camp's \$100,000 request would factor into the overall cannabis tax revenue allocation, and whether it would be considered part of the arts budget. He also inquired about the projected completion timeline for the skate park.

Public comment:

Jim Fitzpatrick: Spoke about staff budget recommendation and municipal role of the commission. Called for bolder, incentive-based partnerships and creative funding strategies, including collaboration with other departments and tapping public-private resources to support public art.

Mr. Gruner clarified that staff are looking for Arts Commission recommendations. We are looking for suggestions. So, it's at the commissions discretion of what you want to review and what recommendations get forwarded to the council.

Vice Chair Derderian inquired the efficiency and necessity of current programming allocations, particularly the cost-effectiveness of events like Art Crawl and larger initiatives such as hiring an external agency to lead a full master plan revamp. He argued that the Arts Commission, empowered by City Council, should take a leading role in shaping the city's arts vision and suggested reallocating funds to support a more collaborative, commissioner-driven process with targeted consultant support for specific tasks like surveys or research rather than full authorship of the plan.

Commissioner Mann praised the Art Crawl as a small but impactful event that helped showcase hidden artistic spaces in Costa Mesa and strongly supported retaining the Arts Specialist role, citing the importance of dedicated leadership in arts programming. He also raised concerns about the amount of funding directed to Segerstrom Center, suggesting that as a well-resourced nonprofit, they should consider donating tickets to the city instead of offering discounted ones, potentially freeing up funds for other local arts.

Commissioner Ford questioned whether the Commission could formally recommend that the full budget for the arts be allocated, including the remaining \$40,000 that had not yet been assigned. He encouraged fellow commissioners to support requesting

the full amount, suggesting that any cost savings should be redirected toward additional arts initiatives rather than lost in the broader budget process.

MOTION/SECOND: Commissioner Lucia motioned to moved \$40,000 into the Arts Grants line item in our budget requests from the SMART Camp to the Arts Grant funds/Seconded by Commissioner Ford.

The motion carried by the following roll call vote:

Ayes: Commissioner Ashendorf, Commissioner Ford, Commissioner Lucia, Commissioner Mann, Commissioner Wondercheck, Vice Chair Derderian, Chair Ochoa

Nays: None

Abstained: None

Absent: None

Motion Carried: 7-0

Vice Chair Derderian proposed launching a major mural initiative as a public-private partnership using the \$180,000 allocated for large-scale installations across two (2) fiscal years. He envisioned private businesses partnering with local nonprofits, such as the Historical Society, to commission murals that reflect Costa Mesa's history and civic identity to align with anniversary celebrations.

Commissioner Mann suggested incentivizing private businesses to install murals as an alternative to using public funds, while still supporting widespread large-scale public art.

Vice Chair Derderian questioned the realistic timeline for new park builds given ongoing budget deficits and likely delays.

Commissioner Ashendorf praised the mural proposal's ambition and asked whether the plan included ensuring mural placements across all city districts for broader geographic representation.

Vice Chair Derderian proposed structuring a mural initiative that partners with private property owners to provide walls for public art, with grant funds directed entirely to artists to ensure immediate creation of visible, impactful work. He also recommended allocating a portion of funds to administrative support to implement the program effectively and quickly.

Commissioner Mann asked for clarification on the process for private businesses installing murals, noting that, based on the master plan or existing framework, businesses typically fund their own murals and must receive approval. She inquired whether the current vision would prioritize murals on public walls and spaces.

Vice Chair Derderian advocated for a Costa Mesa-focused, history-inspired public art initiative that would reflect civic identity and community pride, suggesting flexibility in how businesses or districts might participate. He emphasized the urgency of making a formal recommendation to City Council before the upcoming budget deadline, urging the Commission to act now rather than delay meaningful public art investment.

Commissioner Ashendorf asked staff how many people were served by the \$60,000 allocated to Segerstrom events and expressed agreement with concerns about whether those funds might be better used for broader community engagement.

Commissioner Ford supported the mural and arts celebration ideas but recommended requesting a study session to develop more detailed proposals before presenting to Council.

Chair Ochoa expressed enthusiasm for murals in both public and private spaces but suggested that the discussion be part of a broader Master Plan budget amendment conversation.

Vice Chair Derderian supported the idea of introducing a new budget line item and proposed that the Commission recommend a public-private mural initiative for the 2025–2026 fiscal year, with a funding request of \$160,000. He noted that while the proposal could be refined later, immediate action was necessary due to the lack of additional meetings before the budget deadline and limitations on holding study sessions without city manager approval.

MOTION/SECOND: Vice Chair Derderian moved the Commission repurpose the \$100,000 in large scale installations and request an additional \$60,000 that would have been for large scale installations this year to fund the creation of a public private mural initiative for fiscal year 2025, to 2026/Seconded by Commissioner Ford.

The motion carried by the following roll call vote:

Ayes: Commissioner Ashendorf, Commissioner Ford, Commissioner Mann, Vice Chair Derderian

Nays: Commissioner Lucia, Chair Ochoa

Abstained: None

Absent: Commissioner Wondercheck

Motion Carried: 4-2

ADDITIONAL COMMISSIONER MEMBER & STAFF COMMENTS

Mr. Gruner thanked the commissioners who participated in the Earth Day event, noting their community engagement and support. He also shared that the City is working on relocating the sculpture at City Hall to a more prominent location in coordination with the artist's family, and that staff has reached out to the school district to gather more information regarding the Costa Mesa Playhouse situation.

ADJOURNMENT Chair Ochoa adjourned at 9:02 PM.