

RECOMMENDATION FOR IMPROVEMENTS TO CULTURAL ARTS FUNDING  
PROGRAMS

TOURISM COMMISSION BOARD

Recommendation Number: 20240410-007

These recommendations from the Tourism Commission identify improvements to the cultural arts funding programs that will support long-standing tourism destinations in Austin with histories of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

WHEREAS, City of Austin is recognized for its vibrant cultural arts scene and a diverse and creative community, with a decades-long history as the cultural and counter-cultural capital of Texas which enjoys the competing mantras of “Keep Austin Weird” and the “Live Music Capital of the World”; and

WHEREAS, on June 25, 2018, Austin City Council adopted ORDINANCE NO. 20180614-067, establishing the Tourism Commission “to provide expertise and recommendations to the city council concerning hotel occupancy tax revenue collected by the city and issues related to and that promote tourism” and to “advise the city council on ... matters relating to the allocation, investment, and budgets for the hotel occupancy tax revenue”; and

WHEREAS Texas Tax Code Chapter 351, Section 351.101 (a) states that “Revenue from the municipal hotel occupancy tax may be used only to promote tourism and the convention and hotel industry”; and

WHEREAS, Austin’s tourism industry actively uses our cultural arts and live music events to promote tourism to Austin, as readily seen from Visit Austin’s website cultural events listings, including the [Red River Cultural Arts District](#), the [Zilker Hillside Theater Productions](#) and other longstanding groups that support professional artistic jobs, generate tourism and serve audiences of both visitors and residents; and

WHEREAS, the City of Austin’s cultural arts funding grant programs have made necessary changes in recent years to address historic inequities; and

WHEREAS, these changes to cultural arts funding allocations do not fully account for a range of equitable considerations, such as the diversity of the audiences who enjoy the cultural arts programs or the artists who perform in the cultural arts programs, resulting in significant disruptions to long-standing cultural institutions in our community which have a demonstrated history of positive tourism impact, as well as diverse, inclusive and equitable curatorial, hiring and audience development practices; and

WHEREAS, on February 15, 2024 City Council passed a resolution directing the City Manager to investigate ways to preserve accessible, inclusive, open-to-the-public events and to identify opportunities for the City to support and promote community events which are completely free and open to the public, which would include events produced by Zilker Theater Productions, Austin Shakespeare and the Red River Cultural District, among many others; and

WHEREAS, numerous cultural arts groups have provided public comments to the Tourism Commission about how the recent changes in cultural arts funding programs have negatively impacted the operation of cultural arts programs and events, including to their tourism impact; and

WHEREAS, cultural arts funding programs in other cities, such as San Antonio, Baltimore, Detroit and others, have implemented funding allocation models which delineate different funding categories with different priorities, including providing funding categories intended to address historic inequities, while also providing other funding categories which consider tourism impact, artistic merit, professional arts jobs created, and history of community service in their scoring; and

WHEREAS, the recent changes in cultural arts funding allocations from the City of Austin have reportedly resulted in significant amount of unexpended cultural arts funding from FY2023.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the City of Austin Tourism Commission recommends that the City of Austin maintain an Arts funding category that addresses historic inequities;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the City of Austin Tourism Commission recommends that the City of Austin implement additional Arts funding categories that prioritize in their application scoring: tourism impact, artistic history and merit, support for professional arts jobs, and diversity of artists and audience served; in order to support longstanding Arts organizations who provide free public programming, such a Zilker Theatre Productions, Red River Cultural District, Austin Shakespeare and others;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the City of Austin Tourism Commission recommends that Council allocate funding in the Fiscal Year 24-25 Budget to the Red River Cultural District consistent with amounts allocated to the other Cultural Districts; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that any available cultural arts funds that have not been allocated from FY2023 should be directed by the Austin City Council to fund long-standing cultural institutions in our community which have a proven history of broadly diverse artists and audiences, such a Zilker Theatre Productions, Red River Cultural Arts District, Austin Shakespeare, Austin Dance Festival, and other established non-profit organizations that serve the public and visiting tourists with free cultural arts programs and events.

Date of Approval: April 10, 2024

Record of the vote: 9-0 vote

Attest:  \_\_\_\_\_

(Staff or board member can sign)