



MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and Council Members, Arts, Historic Landmark, and Music Commissions

FROM: Sylvania Holt-Rabb, Director, Economic Development Department

THROUGH: Veronica Briseño, Assistant City Manager

DATE: November 1, 2023

SUBJECT: Grant Making Process Improvements for Economic Development Department

The Economic Development Department issues up to \$15MM annually in grants for creatives, non-profits, individuals, and small businesses in our community. In 2019 our staff embarked on a Cultural Funding Review Process where we engaged stakeholders in the community, boards and commissions, other City of Austin staff, and grantmaking/subject matter experts and professionals. Their feedback contributed to the development of program priorities, equitable scoring rubrics, and diverse panels for reviewing applications. Lead with racial equity, this process helped build new cultural funding grant programs, and is a nationally recognized project that has built the foundation of our grantmaking strategy. Our review process wrapped up in 2022, and we vetted our new grant guidelines with several commissions including Quality of Life commissions, the Audit and Finance committee, and Arts and Music Commissions who all approved. With approval of grant guidelines our staff moved forward to begin launching the first year of our pilot programs in Fiscal Year 2023.

Simultaneously during the review process, our administrative and support services teams were: streamlining the number of data inputs we had, streamlining our department-wide tools, and building a robust customer relationship management (CRM) tool to create a better understanding of our customers/clients/awardees and how we interacted with them across our department. With the blessing of the CTM Department, we built out the Microsoft tool "Dynamics 365". A function of this multifunctional tool has served as our application platform over the pilot year, known as "Portal."

Throughout the pilot year our community, arts and music commissioners, our third-party partners, and City of Austin staff have identified areas of opportunity for improvement in the user experience and related processes of our grant application cycles. The major themes that surfaced for improvement were:

- Better user experience with the application Portal
- Better Spanish translation, and better support for and engagement with Spanish-speaking applicants/potential applicants
- Simpler application/less time consuming
- Potential re-evaluation of panels/panelist requirements

- Optimized application timing/cadence (to reduce issues such as applicants applying for funds they can't accept due to being awarded a different grant)
- Clearer eligibility guidelines across opportunities
- Aligned/comparable deliverables for grants as part of funding requirements
- Better and more communication from staff and third-party partners on what to expect

We take this feedback very seriously and are working diligently to make improvements in line with City of Austin policies, procedures, and best practices. Throughout the pilot year we adjusted our tools, processes, and resources where possible. With overlapping applications open and closing throughout the year, we had some difficulty in our ability to make major changes on-going.

Now that we have ended our pilot year, we are taking an opportunity to reflect on these needs for improvement. We have contracted three outside consultants to support our process improvement work: Gartner (tech), SNAP Management (Organizational Development), and Measure Austin (community impact). Gartner is looking at the best solutions for our application tools/tech needs as a whole department, SNAP Management is engaging with our staff to support a wholistic process improvement that focuses on the aforementioned major themes, and Measure Austin is doing an impact study in the community to evaluate our grant programs. Gartner has a goal to advise on technical solutions by the end of the year, and the Measure Austin impact study should wrap up by the Spring. We are still building a final overall project timeline which will include process improvement recommendations with SNAP Management, but we are targeting to wrap up all recommendations also by Spring 2024.

As we work with our consultants, we will learn more about our timelines for opening our next applications, and integrating changes that will improve the user experience and accessibility of working with the Economic Development Department grant opportunities. Our mission is to promote a competitive, sustainable, and equitable economy for all – and we will continue to be best positioned to deliver optimal results as we learn from our community and our recent experiences. We will continue to provide monthly updates on our plans and progress at the Arts and Music Commission meetings.