



Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council

# STRATEGIC PLAN

**Fiscal Years 2025-29**

*PearlArts Movement & Sound dancer Chandler Maria Bingham  
at Kelly Strayhorn Theater's Alloy Studios, Photo by Beth Barbis*

# A TIME OF TRANSITION



**Beth Bershok,**  
Chair, Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council



*Photo by  
Michael Ray*

The last year has brought significant internal changes to the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council - new staff leaders, new board members, and new CEO Patrick Fisher, who took the helm in the summer of 2023 after Mitch Swain's nearly two decades of dedicated service as CEO.

Our local arts ecosystem has changed as well. Arts organizations and independent artists face vastly different challenges in 2024 than when we completed our last strategic plan. Embarking on this process, **we realized that now is the time for a thoughtful and thorough evaluation of our mission, our programming, our role in the region, and our capacity to support the arts community sustainably.**

**Through all these changes, our community has asked for accountability and transparency about how we operate and engage in the region. We take that seriously and are responding.** This strategic plan emerged from a challenging yet essential process - months of candid conversations, earnest grappling with community feedback, honest internal evaluation, and a willingness to reimagine the potential and purpose of the Arts Council.

**As we embark on this next chapter, we are bolstered by the hope that you will join us,** for only together can we have a direct and positive impact on the arts community in the Greater Pittsburgh region.

# MINDFULLY MOVING FORWARD



A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Patrick Fisher".

**Patrick Fisher**  
CEO, Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council

Photo by  
Malcolm Jackson

June 5th marked my first full year leading the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council. In that year, I discussed strategies to scale or sustain a creative practice with more than 50 individual artists through studio visits, visited more than 40 arts-based organizations and creative businesses to learn about their missions and operations, and attended nearly 100 arts events in Allegheny County. Through active inquiry and careful listening, I learned that a sizable number of people and organizations have not felt the benefits of a personal relationship with the Arts Council because our organization has not represented their interests sufficiently or served them directly. Additionally, **regardless of intentions, the Arts Council has caused harm by being inconsistent, unresponsive, or culturally inept.**

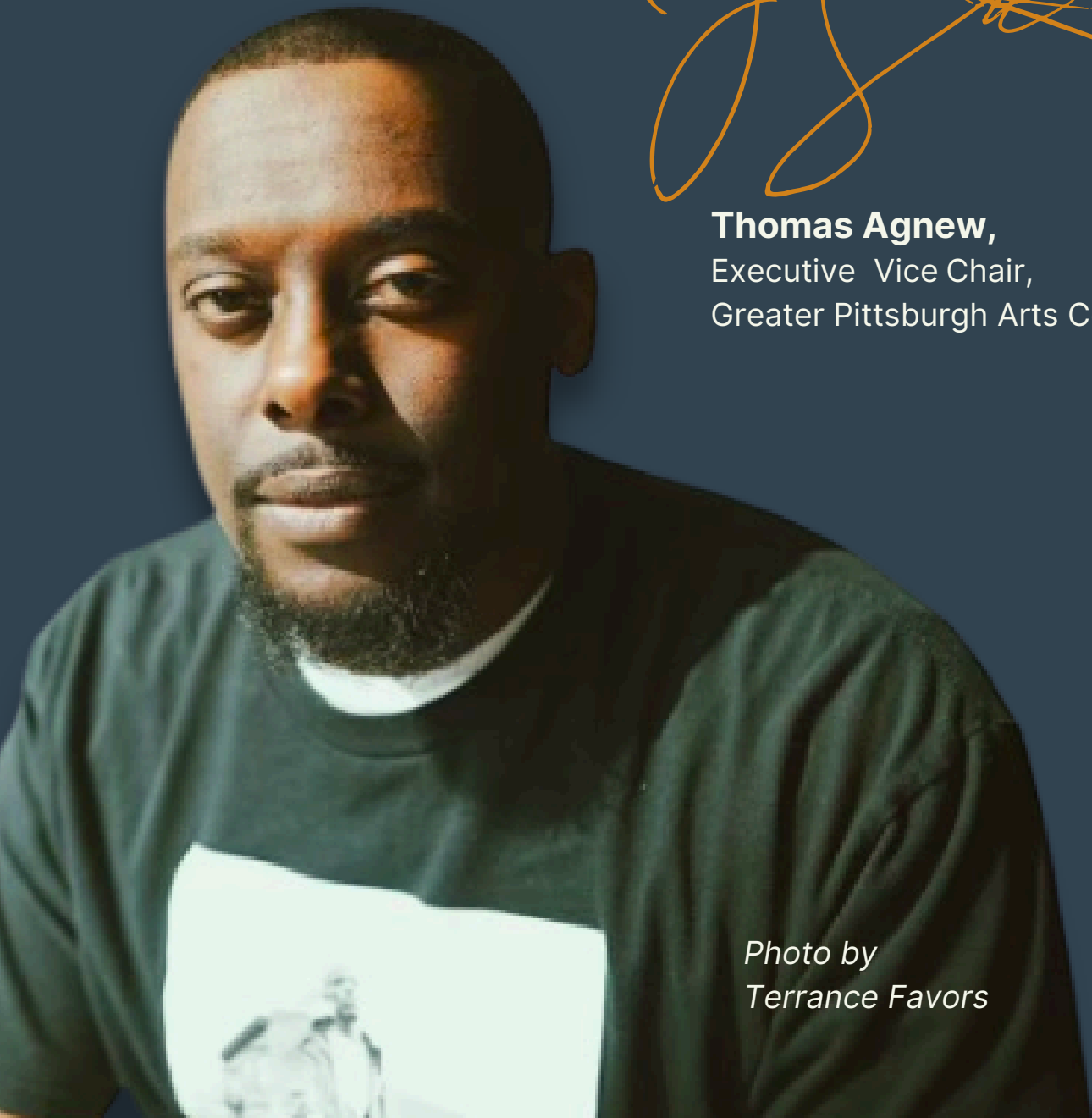
Thanks to the valuable input shared by our community through our strategic planning process, we have concluded that people want the Arts Council to have a clear vision for its role in the arts ecosystem and an operational value proposition within the ecosystem. The role of an arts council should be contextualized by the environment in which it operates, and Pittsburgh and Southwestern PA don't want us to be a producing or presenting organization. Instead, **our community craves an Arts Council that serves in a systems-level position with a service-based business model focused on sharing resources, fostering significant relationships, leading advocacy initiatives, and increasing public awareness of the arts.**

The Arts Council has never been properly resourced or exclusively positioned to fully lead in this way, but **we are ready to rise to the occasion.** This plan aims to support our ascent - not just for a year or two, but sustainably. We will strategically adjust the organization's business model to respond to our position in the community. As we take our next steps, I personally invite you to be a witness or to participate in our evolution and to hold us accountable for upholding a model of exceptional service.

# A BOLD NEW PATH



**Thomas Agnew,**  
Executive Vice Chair,  
Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council



*Photo by  
Terrance Favors*

**This strategic plan is the result of months of conversations and community feedback, internal analysis, and a willingness to reimagine what the Arts Council can be.** Together with our partners, Workhorse Collaborative and Shannon Parris Consulting, we conducted an honest investigation of how the Arts Council has operated in the past, the ways we have neglected and harmed our community, and the times we have hosted meaningful, impactful programming.

**We carefully considered community feedback we received during a public comment period, and we heard a few themes that have been critical to the direction of this strategic plan:**

- The Arts Council has a history of ineffective programming, which has created instability
- We need to earn trust by being transparent and accountable at every level.
- We need to communicate better what we do and how we do it.
- The Arts Council should lean into its role as a convener of people, resources, and knowledge.

We have explored multiple avenues of potential programs and services, and we are working to better match our work with our capacity and mission while addressing the direct needs of arts organizations and artists in the region. We plan to reorganize all our programming around a more meaningful and impactful membership model. We want to act with more transparency and better communication and share the power of decision-making with those we aim to serve.

**We're building a bold path forward, and we want you to hold us to it.**

# BACKGROUND & METHODOLOGY



*Artwork by Rainbow Serpent (Marques Redd & Mikael Owunna), Myth-Science of the Gatekeepers Exhibition at the Pittsburgh Glass Center, Photo by Patrick Fisher*

# BACKGROUND & METHODOLOGY

In October 2023, the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council issued two Requests for Proposals (RFPs): one to lead an in-depth [strategic planning process](#) that would better define our programs and impact while broadening our relationships to ensure the Arts Council is relevant and beneficial to the community; the other for an in-depth evaluation and potential restructuring of the Arts Council's [shared services and member services](#). In December 2023, we selected a joint proposal from Pittsburgh-based organizational strategy and marketing firm [Workhorse Collaborative](#) (to lead strategic planning) alongside [Shannon Parris Consulting](#) (to lead shared services exploration).

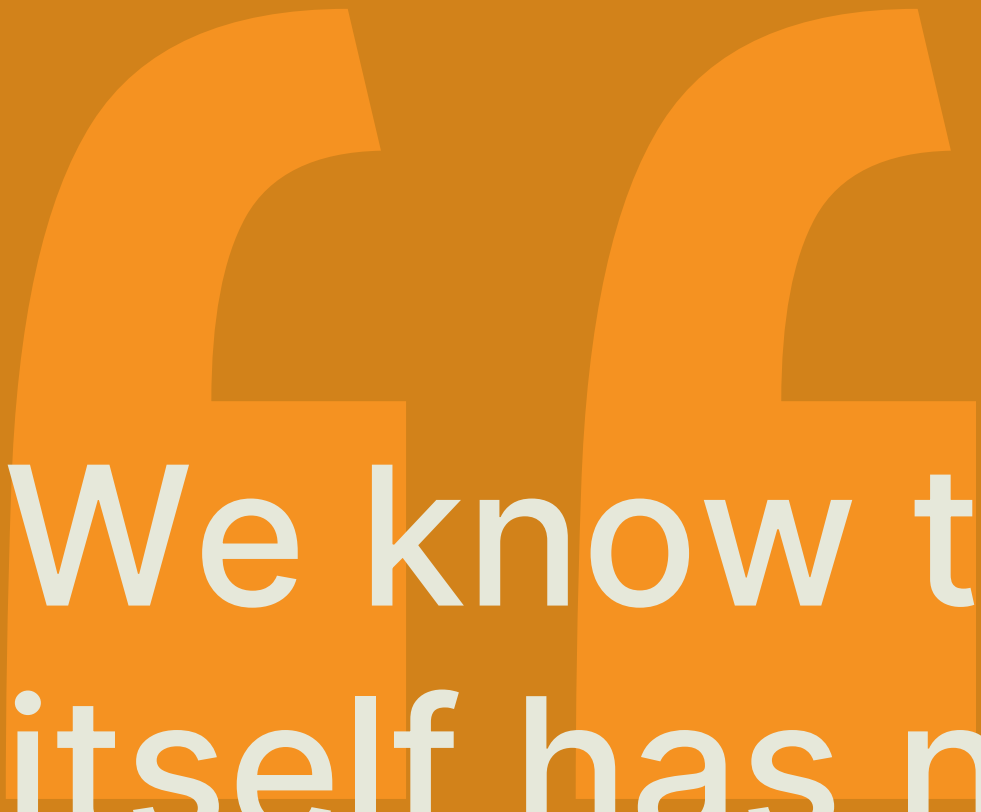
**Our shared work plan centered a staff-led process, used working meetings to interrogate the Arts Council's benefit and relevance to artists, arts organizations, and the Southwestern PA region, and committed to match the resulting plan to our internal capacity and mission.** Arts Council staff were actively engaged from the beginning and then continuously throughout the process.

We reviewed our prior and current programming, operations, finances, and communications, in a process that included relevant staff and board documents, meeting notes, prior survey and town hall findings, audited financial data, and over 40 hours of personal interviews. We combined this with an external scan of 13 potential shared service prospects, 10 peer organizations and initiatives, and an open community comment period.

# LEARNINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Photographer [George Lange](#) holding his book *Picturing Joy: Stories of Connection*, Photo by Patrick Fisher





We know that [The Arts Council] itself has not been a strong program presenter, but is an invaluable information hub and kickstart resource.

– Community Participant



# OWNING OUR MISTAKES

**Some of our programs have been in direct competition with those we claim to serve.**

Most of our programs were created to serve a need in a specific moment. As time passed, we failed to recognize when others in our community launched programs to address similar needs. By continuing these programs without recognizing these changes, we have diverted resources, public attention, and social capital away from similar programs that are already meeting the needs of artists and arts organizations in the region.

**Our pattern of stopping and starting programs—and communicating poorly about those decisions—has created instability for individuals and organizations that rely on us.**

Past examples include our accessibility and inclusion initiative and various peer groups. Our inconsistency in managing programs and communicating changes has created an environment where our community can't trust us.

**We have harmed community partners by mismanaging important programs.**

We are grateful to members of the Black Arts Action Committee (BAAC) and Disabled Artists Creative Cohort (DACCC), among others, for sharing this feedback. Our failure to properly plan, resource, and manage programs like these has harmed our relationship with the community.

# ORGANIZATION-WIDE APPLICATIONS

**The Arts Council must operationalize transparency, goal setting, metrics, and accountability.**

This includes clarifying who gets to make decisions, how decision-makers are determined, what the work being done is and why, and how its effectiveness will be measured and adjusted based on performance outcomes.

**Communications are critical to every area of the Arts Council's strategy going forward.**

Excellent service to the community will require constant and consistent responsiveness, proactive updates about the work the Arts Council is doing, and a willingness and ability to revise activity plans following increased community input.

# KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Arts Council should...

- **center and prioritize providing services over offering programs.** Furthermore, it should prioritize systemic change over plugging immediate holes in the sector. This can reduce the duplication of efforts in the region.
- **center its role as a “switchboard operator”** (connecting the audience served with providers of resources and services) and proactively promote and communicate about this valuable work. Frontline staff capacity should be dedicated to providing this service, clarifying points of contact, and internal processes for triaging requests.
- **reorganize its offerings within its membership framework**, tying clear and compelling benefits to membership and offering differentiated tiers for arts workers and non-arts workers.
- **make a significant investment in communications and membership support** to improve communication for existing activities and build the required capacity for growth.

# SHARED SERVICES

In tandem with its strategic planning process, the Arts Council sought to evaluate prospective shared services offerings, align them with the new strategic plan, and tailor its offerings to better meet the evolving needs of the sector. A shared service is defined as a service in which combined buying power results in lower rates. We created a [strategy screening tool for evaluating shared services opportunities](#), which we applied to 13 possibilities generated by the RFP and sessions with staff:

This screening process resulted in definitions for the Arts Council's [target audience segments and hierarchy of programs and services](#).

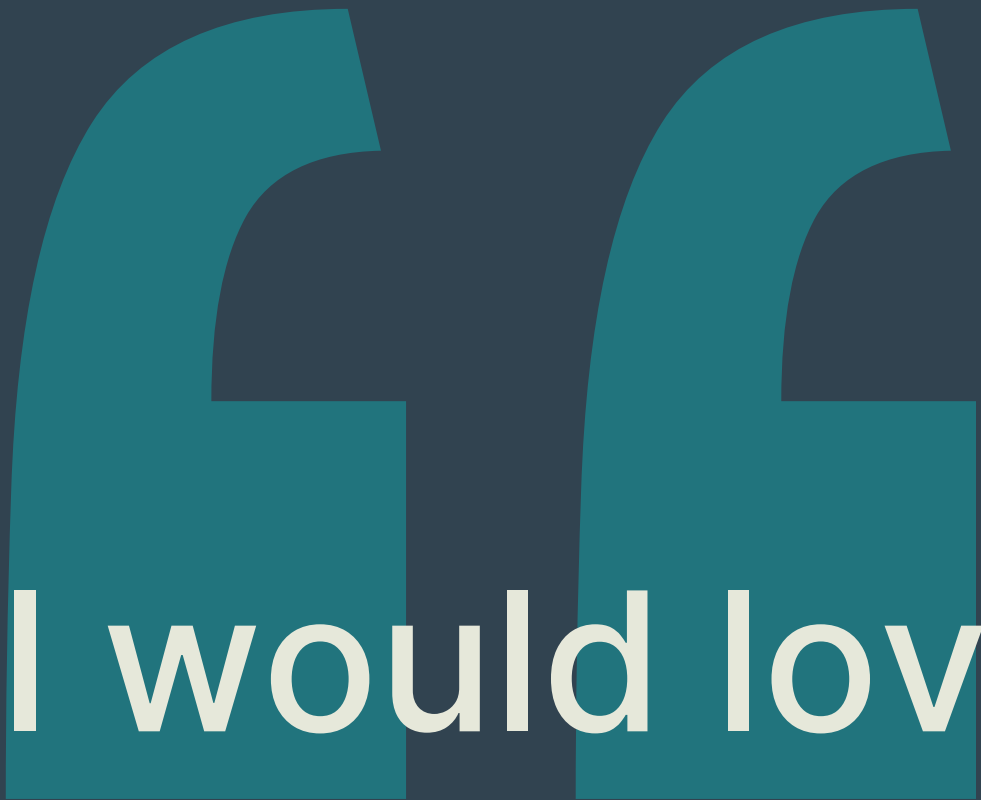
Ultimately, two services made it through the strategy screen and were explored in depth: **shared health benefits** and **shared retirement benefits**. Both a group health plan and retirement plan sharing **are not viable pursuits for the Arts Council** and its members\*, so the organization should reframe its role in the community to that of a connector and advocate.

*\*more information about this learning can be found in the strategic plan report on pages 14-16.*



# NEW FRAMEWORK

*Artist [Fredy Huamán Mallqui](#), [Pictures of the Future Project](#) in Riverview Park, Photo by [Patrick Fisher](#)*



I would love to see a database  
accessible by artists, to find whom  
the best resource or contact is for  
arts programming

– Community Participant

A NEW FRAMEWORK

# WE BELIEVE A RELEVANT EXCITING ARTS COUNCIL:

**Has a clear offer with a direct impact** on artists, arts administrators, and arts organizations.

**Is the authoritative, centralized information source** on the Arts in Southwestern PA and makes that information both **1) openly accessible** and **2) easily actionable** for its target audience (e.g. performance venues available for rent, an artist and arts organizations database, resources for workers and organizations, and more).

**Is an effective advocate** for initiatives that improve the arts community for the Greater Pittsburgh region.

A NEW FRAMEWORK

# WE BELIEVE THE ARTS COUNCIL CAN ACHIEVE THIS BY:

**Offering concierge services for artists and arts workers**, such as those modeled by Volunteer Lawyer for the Arts, and featuring one-on-one support in areas of great need, such as navigating healthcare options, financial planning, and mentoring that supports artistic cycles (fundraising, producing, marketing, etc).

**Creating an effective online asset map** that is regularly maintained and promoted as the authoritative source of information for the Southwestern PA arts community. This comprehensive resource will feature up-to-date listings of performances, available rehearsal and performance spaces, educational and funding opportunities, and a directory of regional artists and arts organizations.



# HOW WE'RE MOVING FORWARD

**We believe the Arts Council can be most effective when we embody our role as a connector for the arts community.** We plan to reduce the number of public programs that we administer directly, like arts workshops and the professional development series, and increase our focus on:

- **sharing resources** like grant funding, information about opportunities for the arts sector, and industry research
- **fostering significant relationships and partnerships** like continuing to connect arts workers to volunteer lawyers and building out additional services for artists and arts administrators such as health care navigators, financial educators, and more
- **seeking community input about the region's evolving needs** to help us be effective advocates for those who live here and better represent our region's collective knowledge
- **advocating for arts-centric policies and funding** to cultivate a vibrant arts community where arts workers and arts organizations can thrive
- **increasing public awareness of arts and culture in our region** to help drive participation in the arts

A NEW FRAMEWORK

# HOW WE'RE MOVING FORWARD

*Metal artist Jan Loney,  
Jan's Lawrenceville  
studio, Photo by  
Patrick Fisher*



**In the Arts Council's role as a connector & information hub, the organization will:**

**Continue:** Creative Hive, Grantmaking, Research, & Advocacy

**Revise & Renew:** Asset Map (Artsburgh, Artist Resources, Artist/Organization Database), Lending Library, Business/Legal Services, Membership

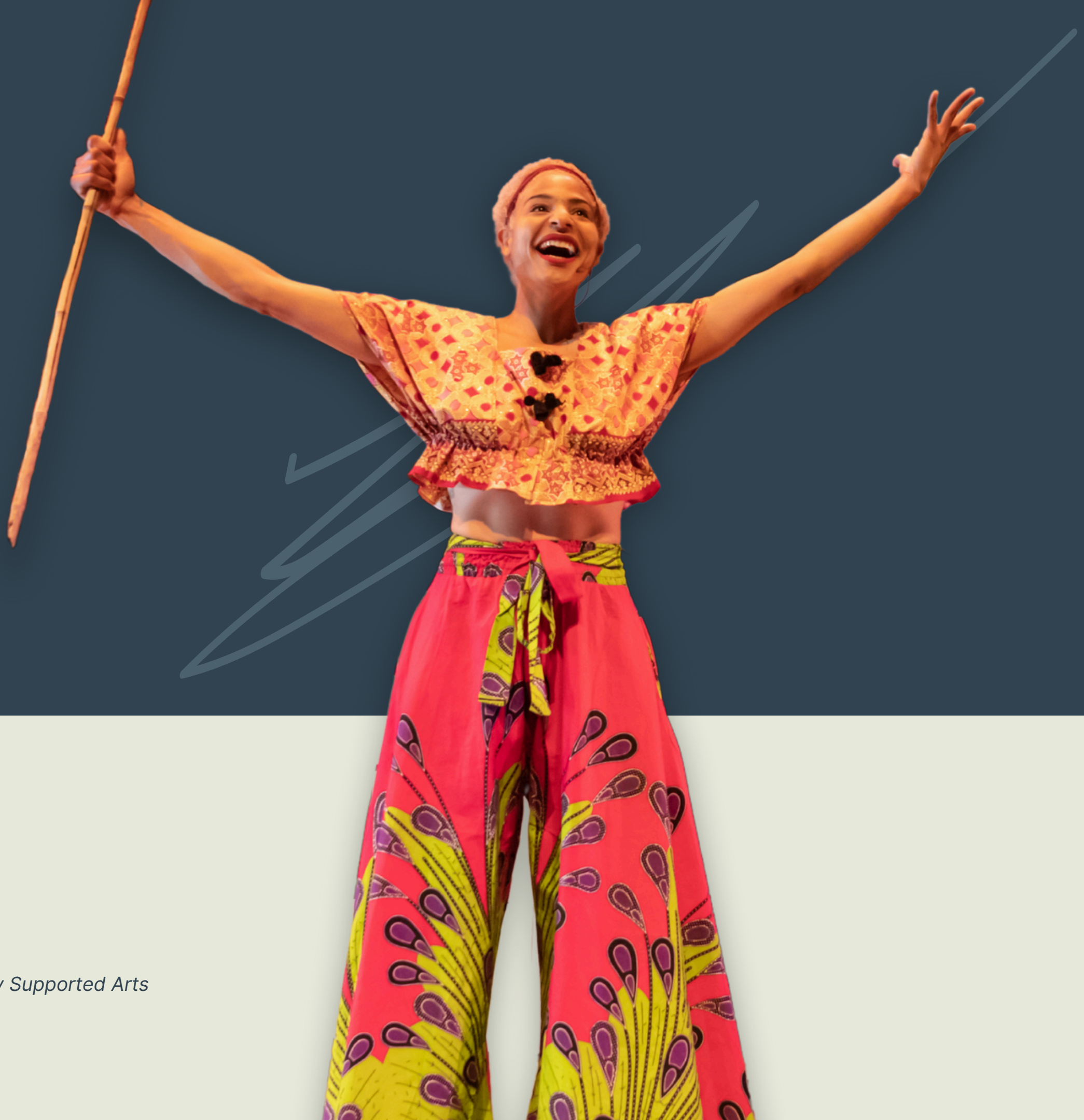
**Begin:** Concierge Services for Artists & Arts Organizations

**Sunset:** Art on the Walls, In-House Workshops, The Disabled Artists Creative Cohort (DACC), The Black Arts Action Committee (BAAC)\*

*\*additional context for the decision to sunset these programs is included in our programmatic learnings on pages 16-19 of our [strategic plan report](#).*

# OUR MISSION

*Multi-discipline artist Kelsey Robinson in New Hazlett Theater's Community Supported Arts Performance, Sunsum is Spirit, Photo by Renee Rosensteel*



## OUR MISSION

# LET US (RE)INTRODUCE OURSELVES

The Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council builds a more **resourced**, **connected**, and **informed** arts sector, **empowering** artists and arts organizations throughout Southwestern PA.

By sharing **resources**, fostering significant **relationships**, leading **advocacy** initiatives, and increasing **public awareness** of arts and culture, the Arts Council cultivates a thriving, vibrant arts community for the Greater Pittsburgh region.

# THE PLAN

*Artist & Union Project Deputy Director Michelle Clesse, [Union Project's Wheel Mobile](#) at the [Handmade Arcade Holiday Market](#), Photo by [Kitoko Chargois](#)*



## THE PLAN

# 5 GOALS FOR THE NEXT 5 YEARS



*Flutist Lindsey Goodman in Chaminade's Concertino in Resonance Works' Amahl and the Night Visitors, Photo by Alisa Innocenti*

The Arts Council has set five goals for the next 5 years, spanning fiscal years 2025-2029:

**Restore credibility** in The Arts Council by providing proactive and responsive communications with the community

**Operationalize transparency**, goal-setting, metrics, and accountability

**Become the authoritative information source** on the arts in Southwestern PA

**Create compelling membership benefits** with direct impact for artists, arts administrators, and arts organizations in Southwestern PA

**Increase financial and staff capacity**

# GOAL 1

## **Restore the credibility of the Arts Council by providing proactive and responsive communications with the community**

- A.** Produce bi-annual public reports to proactively share major operational achievements, challenges, and impact, financial information, and donor/funder contributions.
- B.** Launch and sustain an annual public meeting/forum.
- C.** Publish board meeting agendas and minutes, financial statements, and 990s on the Arts Council's website.
- D.** Create a system for stakeholders to raise real-time sector-level issues, concerns, or opportunities.
- E.** Institutionalize and operationalize ongoing, externally communicated personal presence from Arts Council staff at arts and culture events and with arts and culture individuals in the SWPA region.
- F.** Rebrand the Arts Council.
- G.** Open board meetings to Arts Council members.
- H.** Share decision making power with members by the final year of plan.

# GOAL 2

## Operationalize transparency, goal-setting, metrics, and accountability

### PROGRAMS & SERVICES:

- A.** Use a strategy screen for current and future programming that aligns with the new mission, vision, values, strategic direction, and business model of the Arts Council.
- B.** Hone and implement a standard planning tool for all new programming, which includes interdepartmental deadlines, funding minimums, desired outcomes, milestones, and metrics.
- C.** Create and implement a standard programming review rubric, and review performance metrics for all programming on a quarterly basis.



# GOAL 2 (continued)

## Operationalize transparency, goal-setting, metrics, and accountability

### FINANCES

- D.** Hire adequate staff — or contract appropriate service providers — who can track, manage, and forecast finances, regularly producing accurate financial reports that document restricted and unrestricted funds and budgets vs actuals across projects and the organization.
- E.** Restore any restricted funds that have been spent in ways that did not align with time or purpose restrictions.
- F.** Update financial policies, processes, and systems to comply with GAAP and follow best practices.
- G.** Recruit three new board directors who can advance board giving, social capital, nonprofit financial literacy, and/or leadership while ensuring that the collective demographic composition of the board adequately reflects the Arts Council's community served.
- H.** Hold at least quarterly staff and board-level meetings to review budget vs actuals, profit and loss, and the balance sheet; identify anomalies and resolve them to satisfaction.

# GOAL 2 (continued)

## Operationalize transparency, goal-setting, metrics, and accountability

### STAFF

- I. Create and follow an onboarding process that includes not only HR/compliance considerations but also onboards employees to the culture, standard practices, and strategic priorities of the organization.
- J. With new hires, co-create a “first 90 days” work plan to identify assignments to be completed, expectations, and goals. Review progress at weekly check-in meetings.
- K. Create and implement role charters and meeting agreements.
- L. Create and implement a modified 360 Performance review process tied to organizational and individual goals, as well as values alignment, for all staff, including CEO.
- M. Identify and implement equitable pay bands based on role levels (C-suite, director, manager, and coordinator).

# GOAL 3

## **Become the authoritative information source on the arts in Southwestern PA**

- A.** Launch a searchable, comprehensive arts and culture resource/asset map that includes a plan for ongoing maintenance and encouragement for adoption.
  - a.** Procure high-quality software development service provider with a track record of success and emphasis in user interface and accessibility to build out an asset map for the arts in SWPA that may contain the following information:
    - i.** Searchable resources database (performance venues available for rent, auditions, groups, grants, etc).
    - ii.** Arts-centric events calendar (currently “Artsburgh”).
    - iii.** Database of artist & arts organizations.
- B.** Make arts information more accessible and actionable.
  - a.** Reorganize information on the Arts Council’s website to be optimized for user experience.
  - b.** Identify staff points of contact and create streamlined processes for submitting and responding to requests.
- C.** Revise content strategy to frequently include arts sector news for stakeholders and followers.

# GOAL 4

## **Create compelling membership benefits with direct impact for artists, arts administrators, and arts organizations in Southwestern PA**

- A.** Launch a member services platform (concierge services).
  - a.** Develop FAQs and guides to streamline processes for helping individuals and organizations navigate common obstacles or challenges (accessing affordable healthcare, financial planning, barriers in artistic processes such as funding and access to space, etc).
  - b.** Develop relationships with professional associations/affinity groups to build out the volunteer pool for Member Services.
  - c.** Create a sustainable process for shepherding one-on-one relationships between members and volunteer service providers.
- B.** Revitalize the membership program.
  - a.** Revise membership benefits and fee structures, considering varied memberships for arts worker members (via membership fees) and non-arts worker members (via philanthropic support).
  - b.** Streamline membership onboarding and renewal processes.

# GOAL 5

## **Increase financial and staff capacity**

### **A.** Increase Contributed Revenue.

- a.** Create an annual board fundraising challenge.
- b.** Leverage board social capital to schedule at least four prospective donor/funder meetings per calendar year.
- c.** Identify two annual opportunities for the Arts Council to be named a beneficiary of sales/revenue.
- d.** Identify three annual strategic partners to deploy DipJars for on-site donations that benefit the Arts Council.
- e.** Create comprehensive business model sustainability pitch for funders.
- f.** Create philanthropic membership level.
- g.** Increase corporate sponsorship.

# GOAL 5 (continued)

## Increase financial and staff capacity

### **B.** Increase earned revenue.

- a.** Create annual membership goals, including number of members acquired and retained, use of benefits, and revenue.
- b.** Create fee structure to access passive member benefits a la carte for non-members (such as access to reports and paid downloads).


### **C.** Increase staff bandwidth.

- a.** Add dedicated staff support for membership.
- b.** Increase the professional development budget for staff.
- c.** After applying strategy screen to current programming, redirect staff capacity formerly allocated to sunsetting programs and services to advance the organization's strategic goals.



# NEXT STEPS

*Musician [Hugo Cruz](#) with his band [Caminos](#) at [Pittonkatonk](#), Photo by [Patrick Fisher](#)*



I would like arts organizations in Pittsburgh to be better connected and I feel The Arts Council has the power to make that happen

– Community Participant



# FINANCIAL PLANNING

**The activities outlined in this plan will need to be subject to financial modeling and adjusted appropriately to prove a path to sustainability before the Arts Council undergoes any significant business model change.** During the course of the strategic planning process, Workhorse Collaborative was poised to assist the Arts Council in analyzing financial projections that reflected the impact of the activities outlined in the strategic plan on the Arts Council's business model. However, this work was paused because the organization did not yet have the fiscal capacity to allow for meaningful financial analysis. So, in tandem with the strategic planning process, the Arts Council began several steps to prepare itself for more robust financial planning, including:

- completing its most recent fiscal year audit
- hiring and onboarding adequate financial staff
- reorganizing its chart of accounts
- seeking funding for a financial planning phase

**Once these steps have all been completed, in addition to preparing multi-year financial projections, the Arts Council will also need to determine the appropriate order of activities that will allow for mindful growth that pilots new efforts and makes adequate room for community input and proof of concept before committing to them year-over-year.**

# WHAT HAPPENS NEXT



**Mia Hooper**

COO, Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council



Photo by  
Sarah Schreck

This strategic planning process has been a long, in-depth, and— at times —very humbling process. However, it was also extremely exciting and refreshing. **I have been at the Arts Council for just over 5 years and can say with confidence that this is the first time I feel we have a true direction.** With that said, I am sure the question on the community’s mind right now is “...and now what?” We went through this process, spent all this money, and now *what happens?* The short answer: we rebuild our relationships and invest in support services for the people who make up the arts community.

What does this look like? **It means we are upfront about the reasoning behind our choices. We proactively share our successes and our failures. We get to know our community and our members on an individual basis so we can support them in the specific, personal ways they need.** It means we build connections across sectors so that we have helpful information to share when folks need it most.

These next five years are going to be a ton of work to create the transformational change this organization needs, but I personally don’t shy away from a good challenge. **I look forward to checking in with each and every one of you along the way to hear how we’re doing as we work to become the Arts Council you truly deserve.**

# THANK YOU

Thank you to all who dedicated their time, energy, and thoughts to our strategic planning process. Your contributions strengthened our work, and we are grateful for them.

J. Thomas Agnew · Anonymous · Jackie Baker · Beth Bershok · John L. Bonaccorsi · Sarah Christy - Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance · Community Comment Participants · Lisa Cunningham · Casey Droege · Patrick Fisher · Monteze Freeland · Heather Gray · Al Gusky - Pittsburgh Technology Council · Rob Hippert · Mia Hooper · Morgan Kasprovicz · Clara Kent · Olivia Lammel · Elsa Limbach · Clayton Merrell · Dr. Veronica Morgan-Lee · Rona Nesbit - Pittsburgh Cultural Trust & Shared Services Cultural Arts Association · Taia Pandolfi · Shannon Parris · Richard Parsakian · Jim Patton - Gallagher Benefits Services · Bryce Pfeuffer - Gallagher Benefits Services · Allison Popieski · Robert Rak · Camille Rohrlich · Jack Ryan - Henderson Brothers · Shaqui Scott · André Solomon · Kate Sphar - Regional Capacity Building Initiative · Robin Steed · Jack Tomayko · Susan Tsu · John Watt · Michael A. Wessell Esq. · Mona Wiley · Emily Willson · Ajani Zanaya Powell

This report was crafted by [Workhorse Collaborative](#) with [Shannon Parris Consulting](#).

## Questions?

Email Patrick Fisher  
[pfisher@pittsburghartscouncil.org](mailto:pfisher@pittsburghartscouncil.org)

## Learn more

[See the Full Report](#)

## Connect with us



*John Watt, Greater  
Pittsburgh Arts Council  
Manager of Development,  
at Brillobox, Photo by  
Patrick Fisher*

