

# PARSING THE MAYOR'S ARTS BUDGET

**The decimated sector has made some gains, but the Cultural Fund is down \$1 million from pre-pandemic levels.**

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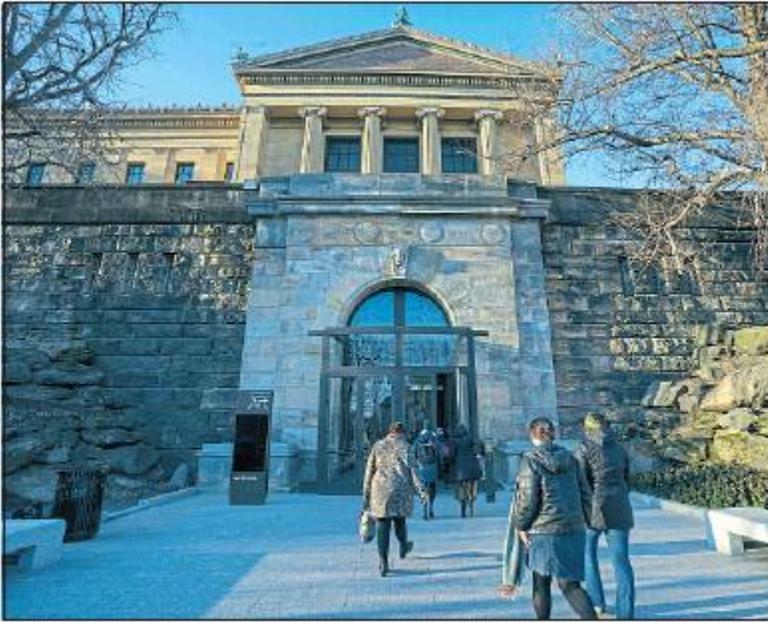
The mayor's proposed budget for the African American Museum in Philadelphia is one bright spot: Kenney is calling for an additional \$150,000 from the city, for a total of \$500,000. MONICA HERNDON / Staff Photographer

Mayor Kenney's proposed \$5.18 billion city budget for next year, outlined in his budget address on Thursday, promises to fill a lot of gaps in the wake of economic devastation wrought by COVID-19. But funding for the crippled arts and cultural sector, which generates nearly \$4 billion in economic activity annually — or did just a short year ago — still lags behind pre-pandemic levels under the Kenney administration proposal.

The mayor's proposed allocation for the Philadelphia Museum of Art, whose building is owned by the city, remains \$2.04 million — the same as this year, but down from \$2.45 million a year earlier.

The Mural Arts Program is slated for \$2.3 million, up slightly from this year because of \$200,000 for two special programs.

On a brighter note, Kenney has proposed a \$150,000 increase for the African American Museum in Philadelphia, to a total of \$500,000.



The mayor's budget proposal for next year would hold flat the city's funding of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Joe Frazier Jr. (right) at the March unveiling of a mural of his father, Smokin' Joe Frazier. JESSICA GRIFFIN / Staff Photographer

The Philadelphia Cultural Fund, the city's key vehicle for support for arts organizations in virtually every neighborhood, will also see an increase from this year.

But is it enough to do the job, arts advocates and some in City Council wonder.

Kenney proposes funding the Culture Fund at \$2 million, double its current \$1 million. Unfortunately, that \$2 million is more than 33% below the \$3.1 million Cultural Fund budget passed a year ago — before last summer's downward budget revision that was forced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

What does the Cultural Fund reduction mean?

The numbers tell the story. In 2020, the Cultural Fund provided key operating support to 349 groups. This year, following the cut from \$3.1 million to \$1 million in the city's allocation, the number has dropped to 205 groups. Individual grant levels are down about 45% from what they were before the COVID-19 midsummer cuts.

For Barbara Silzle, the fund's executive director, the mayor's budget proposal represents another year of cobbling together a viable fund with the broadest impact.

“We appreciate that the mayor is proposing to increase the Philadelphia Cultural Fund's allocation from \$1 million

to \$2 million,” she said. On the other hand, “the arts sector has been decimated by the pandemic and we risk losing many of the arts organizations and artists that will help this city and its people recover. We need the city to fully restore PCF's funding to at least the pre-pandemic level of \$3.14 million so the arts are part of its recovery,” she said.

This idea that the arts sector can be an economic driver and benefit to the city, returning far more than what the city puts into it, is also animating at least some in City Council. And council will have a major say on what gets funded and at what level once the budget bill hits council chamber.

On the mayor's proposed budget, Max Weisman, director of communications for Councilmember Isaiah Thomas, pointed out that Thomas has spent much time this year "advocating for Philadelphia to illuminate the arts — this means increased funding but also prioritizing arts and culture as economic drivers and job creators."

Weisman said that while the Art Museum and Mural Arts did not see cuts, they didn't see much of an increase over reduced levels. "Both entities need more funding for their work in this space," Weisman said.

"The Philadelphia Cultural Fund was doubled to \$2 million but to truly prioritize the arts, this office needs to be fully funded to at least \$4 million," he said. "Arts has never had its day in the budget process, and this community needs us to fight for reprioritization, not just restoration."

Thomas and Councilmember Katherine Gilmore Richardson introduced legislation a month ago that transferred \$1.3 million from Council's rainy day fund into funds targeted largely toward individual artists. The Cultural Fund is barred from dispensing funds to individuals. 

Priscilla Luce, interim head of the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, a service and advocacy organization, said GPCA supports full restoration of the Cultural Fund's prepandemic allocation. The fund, she said in a statement, provides critical support for "social impact programs in our neighborhoods — programs that so many count on for creative engagement, community support, and safety."

"Beyond social impact, however, arts and culture is essential to Philadelphia's long-term economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic," Luce continued. "We are a driving force for commerce here ... A full recovery from this crisis cannot happen if the power of arts and culture is diminished."

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