

## EDITORIAL

# A bigger pie needed

## Council's support for arts and culture deserves applause — and some questions.

When Councilmembers Isaiah Thomas and Katherine Gilmore Richardson moved last week to transfer \$1.3 million from City Council's recession relief fund to a new entity that supports artists and arts organizations, it was a welcome and surprising change for a city that consistently undervalues its cultural sector. Given that the pandemic has had devastating consequences for artists in general and artists of color in particular, the relief comes just in time.

But the way in which this money will be distributed raises a lot of questions — particularly why Council is introducing new dollars when the Philadelphia Cultural Fund is so grossly underfunded. Rather than set up parallel entities that could end up battling over the same ever-shrinking slice of the funding pie, the pie itself needs to get bigger.

Last year, when the Kenney administration proposed zeroing out the Philadelphia Cultural Fund — a respected, equitably distributed, nearly three-decades-old resource that supports hundreds of cultural nonprofits every year — artists and arts advocates had to suit up and defend their existence ... again. By the time the budget was signed, the cultural fund's allies had clawed back only a third of its prior \$3 million budget — itself less than one-tenth of 1% of the city's total budget.

The arts have a \$4.1 billion annual economic impact on the region, according to research by the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, supporting 55,000 jobs and \$1.3 billion in household income. Yet, when any crisis hits — be it pandemic, recession, or school budget shortages — cultural funding is often first on the chopping block.

That's why City Council's proposed new funding is heartening — on the surface. Members of Council's recently formed Arts and Culture Task Force will make funding decisions; that group represents a healthy crosssection of Philadelphia's arts communities. Additionally, these dollars can go to individual artists who might not be eligible for the cultural fund, and removing a layer of gatekeeping is an important step toward inclusive representation.

Still, whenever Council members are given control over funding that goes to individuals — particularly on something as subjective as the arts — it opens the door for potential abuse. Like the Philadelphia Activities Fund, which has received criticism for its lack of oversight, Council members could steer money toward pet projects or constituencies without accountability.

The cultural fund, on the other hand, does an excellent job of distributing money to large and small organizations alike. Its barriers to entry are low, its eligibility guidelines are clear, and its peer-review process is transparent. Both the cultural fund and the activities fund were created in the 1990s to replace the scandal-ridden "Class 500" fund, a patronage piggybank that former Council President Joseph E. Coleman used to funnel money to two nonexistent youth organizations. But while the activities fund

suffers from similar transparency issues as the Class 500 fund, the Philadelphia Cultural Fund's most consistent criticism is that it doesn't have enough money to give away.

With the arts facing perennial cuts due to the crisis du jour, artists are tired of singing the same old we're-perpetually-underfunded tune. The city should value their work with sustained, elevated funding across the board.