

December 2023

Ventura County Board of Supervisors
County Government Center
800 S. Victoria Avenue
Ventura CA 93009

RE: Board Action on the Use of Arts Community Funds on November 7, 2023

Dear Supervisors:

We write this letter with a twofold purpose. First and foremost, we would like to thank the Board of Supervisors for your creation of the first arts grant program in the county of Ventura. However we are also compelled to express our dismay and disappointment at the Board's process and direction to staff in this matter and our dissatisfaction with the inequitable and adverse consequences of this action.

On October 11, 2022, the Board approved its State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) Plan, allocating \$1,000,000 to the Arts Community. The Board identified the Arts Community as a Priority with Countywide Arts and Culture as the Project. The Project is described as *"to provide services and resources in support of arts & culture organizations and projects. **Particular emphasis is to be placed on communities most impacted by the pandemic** and activities that align with the County Economic Vitality Strategic Plan's (EVSP) focus on the creative economy"*. EVSP Strategy A.6. reads: Create a countywide arts and culture Collaborative.

The arts community appreciated this action and awaited the customary notice of funds availability (NOFA) along with the application and award process. Here is the agenda item as posted:

Receive and File a Report, and Provide Direction Regarding, the Proposed Use of Arts Community Funds Designated by your Board on October 11, 2022 in the Amount of \$1,000,000; Authorization for the County Executive Office to Implement the Three Proposed Arts Community Programs Identified in the Report; Approval of, and Authorization for the County Executive Office to Negotiate, Execute and Make Minor Agreements to Support the Administration and Implementation of These Programs with the Ventura County Community Foundation and Other Service Providers in a Total Cumulative Not-to-Exceed Amount of \$100,000. LEVINE ACT ITEM (County Executive Office – 15 Minutes)
CEO RECOMMENDS APPROVAL AS PROPOSED

However on November 7th, the Board, led by Supervisors Gorell and LaVere and in a unanimous 5-0 vote, took the extraordinary action of directing “one-time funding grants of \$250,000 each to the Rubicon Theater Company and New West Symphony” (Board of Supervisors Summary Minutes, Agenda Item #61). We are dismayed, shocked, surprised and disappointed with the Board’s lack of process in this unanimous decision for the following reasons:

1. The Board completely disregarded the recommendation of the County CEO and staff for the proposed plan to distribute these funds and took a completely new course of action in the process, timeline and distribution.
2. There was no transparency about this action. There was no indication in the Board Letter that any funds would be allocated at this meeting, certainly not in direct contravention of the following identified Overall Program Outcomes:
 - a. Accelerate the recovery of the arts community in the County through **widespread government support**
 - b. **Support widespread sustainability** in the community with workshops and training
 - c. Deepen the County’s relationship **with the arts community**
3. There was no vetting of the two organizations (of which we are aware). The Board was not provided any verifiable data to show that the two organizations meet the Project Description of “Particular emphasis is to be placed on **communities** (emphasis added) most impacted by the pandemic...” but instead relied entirely on hearsay.
4. Supervisors Gorell and LaVere used the words “slight” and “pillars” repeatedly and wholly inaccurately in reference to their “slight amendment” to the staff recommendation and, to Rubicon Theater Company and New West Symphony respectively. Giving away half of the available funds to just two organizations without vetting is not a “slight amendment” by any measure, it’s just simple favoritism. In addition, to suggest these two organizations are “pillars” holding up the county’s arts community is a terribly scornful insult to all other arts organizations. There are scores of other hardworking organizations locally with equal or greater community reach and impact. This is an important reason why matters of process should not be bypassed by “slight amendments”.
5. \$500,000 or 50% of the available \$1,000,000 went to only 2 of approximately 300 nonprofit organizations in the county.
6. The grant funds were awarded in a non-competitive manner to only two of six Tier 1 (large) nonprofits. The remaining four Tier 1 nonprofits will compete for funding along with approximately 290 Tier 2 and Tier 3 (small and medium) nonprofits, and will have less funds made available to those four remaining Tier 1 nonprofits than had they been included in the staff recommended category or Tier 1.
7. Less funds are available to the rest of the nonprofits.

8. All of the other valued and hard-working nonprofits in the county will ethically and morally compete for funding, while Rubicon Theater Company and New West Symphony were given grants without competition.
9. Tier 2 and Tier 3 (small and medium) nonprofits will need to compete against four Tier 1 (large) nonprofits for funding.
10. One or more Supervisors stated that these two organizations “earned” the grants by assisting with the County’s efforts regarding the source of funds for this program. We ask: What comparable opportunities, if any, were provided to any other arts organizations? In addition, there were many organizations who assisted the County’s early efforts regarding the source of funds for this program. To ignore their early participation is a huge omission,
11. What oversight will the County, through its grants administrator (Ventura County Community Foundation) utilize to ensure that Rubicon Theater Company and New West Symphony expend the grant funds in compliance with the program’s identified purposes?

Notwithstanding the above, we are confident there is a remedy to erase the adverse and inequitable impacts created by the Board. We look forward to the opportunity of working with staff in this effort. It should be noted that county staff and Mr. David Yoshitomi in particular are to be commended for their work product presented to the Board.

The signatories to this letter request that the Board of Supervisors immediately address our underlying concerns with how the Board conducted business on November 7, 2023. Ventura County government enjoys a well-earned fiduciary reputation as good stewards of the public’s resources. Each member of the Board of Supervisors betrayed the public’s trust in this instance.

We look forward to an open dialogue on how we can move forward to make this process fair and equitable to all nonprofit arts organizations in Ventura County.

