

The Portland Mercury

RACC Equity Shake Up: The City Decides to Spread the Grant Fund Wealth

*By Alex Zielinski
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Portland's community arts fund—partially financed by the faithfully bemoaned Arts Tax—is about to get a little more equitable.

For more than a decade, the Regional Arts & Culture Council, or RACC, has doled out millions of dollars in annual grants to community arts organizations and artists. From creative installations to award-winning ballets, RACC funding seems to have graced every corner of Portland's arts community.

The program is primarily funded by public dollars. In 2018, 69 percent of RACC's annual budget came from the City of Portland and 11 percent came from the city's three counties and Metro Regional Government. The remainder came from corporate donors coupled with RACC's own investments.

As a partially public organization, RACC must comply with a level of accountability not all grantmaking programs are held to, like undergoing in-depth audits into where taxpayer dollars are being spent. In May 2018, a city audit found RACC to be lacking in both oversight and direction. The report spurred needed conversations about the role RACC should play in the region.

The result? In February, the RACC board approved a new grant evaluation process—one that reflects a newfound focus on supporting artists and art organizations that represent and serve minority communities.

RACC currently calculates the amount of grant funding an organization receives based on that applicant's budget size. It's no surprise, then, that over the past decade, a whopping 57 percent of RACC's total grant dollars have been distributed among the city's five largest arts nonprofits: Portland Art Museum, the Oregon Symphony, Oregon Ballet Theatre, Portland Opera, and Portland Center Stage. The newly approved grant framework, however, flips that tradition on its head.

"It just didn't make sense when looking at our city's equity goals to continue down this path," says Pollyanne Faith Birge, the arts and culture advisor for Arts Commissioner Chloe Eudaly, who oversees the city's involvement in RACC.

Starting in 2020, RACC will still split grant dollars between applicants based on budget size, but will also factor in an organization's commitment to underrepresented communities as reflected through its programming, outreach, staff, and general mission.

RACC now anticipates that more than 80 percent of the annual grant awardees will see an increase in funds in 2020. The city's largest organizations, meanwhile, will see sharp cuts to annual grant funds they've long relied on.

Portland Art Museum, for instance, estimates a 59 percent drop in financial support from RACC in 2020: From \$427,000 to \$175,000. PAM's annual operating budget is around \$14 million.

(Birge notes that for most of the top five art nonprofits, RACC dollars make up around 1 percent of their overall budget.)

This reshuffle will force the city's top arts organizations to seek new avenues for funding while easing that pressure from smaller, lesser known programs struggling for success. It's a shift leaders are ready to make.

"Intentional and strategic conversations are taking place locally and nationally about the way we invest in our communities," RACC Director Madison Cario said in a statement released after the board decision. "This is something to celebrate."

City Attorney Can Now Represent City Employees Threatened Because of Their Job

*By Alex Zielinski
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The scope of the city attorney's office, which traditionally represents the city and its elected officials in legal settings related to city business, is growing.

City attorneys will now be allowed to represent individual city commissioners, employees, and police officers who are personally threatened because of their job.

This update to city code, approved during this morning's council session, comes after a noticeable increase in targeted harassment of city commissioners and their staff—both within Portland City Hall and outside.

"I have experienced frequent ongoing harassment here, and I have feared for my physical safety, that of my family, that of my staff, and it is unacceptable," said Commissioner Chloe Eudaly.

Eudaly recalled a January incident when a man followed her with a video camera, shouting at her as she walked to a meeting in downtown Portland.

"I was surprised... that the city could not assist me in obtaining a stalking order and that I would have to use my own time and financial resources to obtain a stalking order against someone because of what my job is."

These persistent threats have impacted Eudaly's ability to do her job.

"This behavior by a handful of people has limited the way I navigate through my city," she said. "It has limited the way I interact with the public, it makes me feel isolated and less connected to the community I am supposed to be representing."

Eudaly isn't the only commissioner facing regular intimidation from the public.

Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty, the first Black woman elected to city council, has received a steady stream of racist threats since entering office in January. During one of her first council meetings, Hardesty noted that the city hall visitors who regularly disrupt meetings and threaten city staff are relying heavily on their "white male privilege." (White men didn't like this).

"I have no fear, myself, personally," Hardesty said this morning. "But I see how people intimidate, harass, and make life a living heck for some of our employees. If you have a bone to pick, pick it with me. Do not pick it with my staff. I support this because I want to be able to assure my staff that it is not a safety risk to show up to the office."

Commissioner Nick Fish said that at least one of his employees had filed a restraining order against a member of the public for a period of time. While listening to the public's concerns is

part of any elected official's job, Fish added, the public does not have the right to threaten their safety.

This particular code change was coupled with a few other tweaks that raised the hackles of government watchdogs. One change grants city attorneys to side-step a city council vote when appealing a legal case or filing a "friend of the court" brief in cases in which they aren't directly involved but can offer support (like federal lawsuits against Donald Trump's policies).

"We are concerned about this emergency ordinance giving too much power to the city attorney with no oversight," said Dan Handleman, representing Portland Copwatch. "We're particularly concerned because of the history of the city filing appeals against the interest of community justice."

Handleman referenced the city's decision to appeal a federal judge's 2014 approval of Portland's settlement agreement with the US Department of Justice over the police bureau's abysmal treatment of mentally ill Portlanders.

City commissioners, clearly more interested in passing legal protections to city staff, didn't address these concerns.

This is the first time city code regarding the city attorney has been edited in more than a decade. It's unclear why the city attorney's office decided to package the unrelated tweaks together—but it seemed to work.

Commissioners passed the code changes in a 4-0 vote.

OPB

Report Quantifies Mistrust of The Portland Police Bureau

*By Ericka Cruz Guevarra
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A report released by the Portland Police Bureau found 71 percent of community members only trust the police somewhat, a little or not at all – and that lack of trust is much higher in communities of color.

The Portland Police Bureau's Strategic Insights Report is the first quantifiable examination of mistrust and skepticism toward the bureau since Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler hired Police Chief Danielle Outlaw to make good on his promise to reform the police bureau.

Yet the report shows the bureau has a lot of headway to make with the community – especially communities of color; 85 percent of community respondents from Black or African American communities only trust the police somewhat, a little or not at all.

That's compared to 77 percent in multi-ethnic communities and 75 percent in American Indian Communities. Forty five percent of American Indian communities don't trust the police at all.

"We aren't surprised by the survey's results," said Zakir Khan, board chair of the Council on American-Islamic Relations of Oregon. Khan said the results are "wholly consistent" with CAIR-Oregon's own informal assessment of the bureau's response to hate crimes after the deadly MAX train stabbings in 2017.

Khan said CAIR-Oregon recommended improvements in training, cultural competency, interpersonal communication and changing the way the city responds to hate crimes.

“At some point, the gap between PPB and community needs to be bridged” he said.

“When that happens rests solely on PPB doing a very honest reflection of itself and how much they truly care about the people they serve. We are beyond the days of police dictating policy to community. Transparency and accountability now matter more than ever.”

The bureau has been at the center of scrutiny in recent months, perhaps most acutely when Willamette Week and the Portland Mercury broke news of text messages between Lt. Jeff Niiya and Joey Gibson, the leader of the group Patriot Prayer.

The bureau scheduled a community listening session with the top echelons of the police bureau soon after, though it proved bureau leaders continue to struggle to overcome years of distrust and skepticism towards its officers.

“The Strategic Insights Report is not the Strategic Plan, but a tool to help guide us in the development of a plan,” said Chief Danielle Outlaw in a statement. “Some of this information demonstrates to us that we need to do a better job communicating what we do and why we do it.”

And while the bureau has come under scrutiny for a string of police shootings and use of force incidents in recent years, it also appears caught between another thread of public displeasure over its most basic duty: 79 percent of community members believe the bureau only sometimes, rarely or never does a good job at reducing or preventing crime in Portland.

The report also provides insight into pressures at the bureau. Seventy-five percent of sworn bureau staff feel that they have too much work to do, and over half of sworn PPB officers indicate that they are somewhat, to high degree or to a very high degree, burnt out, frustrated and emotionally exhausted by work.

The police bureau heard from 3,100 community respondents for its survey. It also spoke to 165 people in focus groups and to 120 people at public meetings.

It conducted focus groups with 65 sworn and professional staff and 35 one-on-one interviews.