

HOWARD COUNTY ARTS COUNCIL

September 22, 2026

2026 Howard County Arts and Culture Plan Testimony

Submitted by: Coleen West, Executive Director, Howard County Arts Council

Good evening Chair Jones and members of the County Council. I am Coleen West, Executive Director of the Howard County Arts Council located at 8360 Court Avenue. On behalf of the Arts Council, I want to thank you for your leadership and all that you do on behalf of the arts and the citizens of Howard County.

As the County's designated arts agency, the Arts Council has been working with the County to enrich and uplift our community through the arts for 45 years. Creating an environment where artists can thrive and people of all ages and backgrounds have access to the arts are important goals for both the County and the Arts Council. I am here tonight to ask you to support CR159 2026 by approving the 2026 Howard County Arts and Culture Plan. The Plan is a strategic blueprint to advance arts and culture, make our county a more vital, creative place, and elevate our position as a regional hub for arts, culture, and innovation.

The Arts Council secured funding from Howard County, the Maryland State Arts Council, and the National Endowment for the Arts to undertake the 20-month community planning process – our first comprehensive arts and culture master planning effort - since ArtsVision 2001 - in more than two decades.

The Plan was developed through a collaborative process led by the Arts Council and Designing Local, a national arts and culture planning firm. It is meant to complement the County's general plan - HoCo By Design - which references arts and culture as part of the county's economic prosperity framework. The Plan expands on that foundation and prioritizes arts and culture as a powerful tool that strengthens our economy, deepens community belonging, and supports equity, education, and environmental progress. It also provides a framework for artistic development and growth and for how

the County, HoCo Arts and other partners can work together to address community priorities, support artists, creators, and creativity and advance arts and culture for all.

A 31-member steering committee of local artists, creative practitioners, civic and educational leaders, and county officials provided guidance and oversight at every stage. The plan was shaped and informed by rigorous research, deep community engagement, a review of cultural assets, listening to artists, business owners, and community stakeholders and reflects the voices and aspirations of county residents. We received input from over 1300 people through our survey, tabling at community events, stakeholder interviews, regular meetings with our focus and affinity groups, and public workshops. What we heard throughout the process decisively affirms that a vibrant, creative environment is a deeply held community value in Howard County.

The Plan's goals and strategies will help guide arts and culture decision-making and provide actionable steps to increase awareness of arts and culture opportunities, diversify arts and cultural offerings, and strengthen the county's identity as a vibrant arts and cultural destination. It is an ambitious plan, no single individual, organization, or agency can do it alone. To move the Plan from concept to practice, a collaborative effort with the County, the Arts Council, local arts and cultural organizations, and other community partners is needed to achieve its goals.

We are deeply grateful to everyone who helped shape this vision, and we look forward to partnering with artists, nonprofits, businesses, institutions, and residents across Howard County to bring it to life.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you.