

HOWARD COUNTY ARTS COUNCIL
Testimony submitted to Howard County Council
Bill #CB 64-2025
September 15, 2025

Good evening Chair Walsh and members of the County Council. My name is Coleen West, Executive Director of the Howard County Arts Council located at 8510 High Ridge Road in Ellicott City. I am here this evening to thank you for your ongoing support of the Arts Council's efforts and to ask you to support CB64-2025 which provides us with a ten-year lease at 8360 Court Avenue in Ellicott City.

Recognizing the important contributions the arts make to community life, the County Council adopted Section 12.804 of the County Code to establish, and provide support for, a private non-profit arts agency to foster the arts. The Arts Council, established in 1981, was authorized in 1984 by the Council to fulfill that role. For nearly 45 years, we have worked together to provide grants to local and regional arts organizations and to provide affordable arts space and programs at the Howard County Center for the Arts located at 8510 High Ridge.

The Art Center, which opened in 1983, is a community resource where artists work, teach and perform and where people of all ages and abilities can engage in the creative, intellectual, social and transformative power of the arts. The Center has two galleries, three

classrooms, a large space for meetings, a dance studio, a 100-seat black box theatre, and low-cost studios and offices for artists and arts groups. Today, the Center is home to 14 visual artists, 3 arts organizations, and 6 Arts Advancement groups along with 50 or so other groups who use the space on an ongoing or occasional basis.

Our mission is to enrich and uplift the citizens of Howard County by advancing the arts for the benefit of all. We fund the arts, serve as an advocate for the arts, and operate a multi-disciplinary arts center where we produce exhibits, offer year-round classes in the visual and performing arts, and provide low-cost rehearsal, performance and work-space for artists. Last year, 60,000 visitors browsed through our galleries, took a class or attended an event.

The arts center programs are critical to the Arts Council's mission and are a vital part of the County's arts eco-system. As a **community resource**, it provides opportunities for artists to work and perform AND a welcoming place where people of all ages and abilities can engage in the creative, educational and social power of the arts. As **an incubator**, it provides affordable space for artists and arts organizations to grow. And, as **a home** for emerging and professional artists, it provides a supportive, creative environment for the production and appreciation of artwork in all disciplines.

We are **excited** about moving the art center and our operations to the Courthouse AND the potential the new space offers the arts community and the public.

Relocating to a more central, place— close to a thriving business district, parking, and public transportation – addresses our long-term needs and aligns with our strategic plan.

The Courthouse location is key to our ability to serve more artists and audiences, increase awareness and engagement in the arts, and broaden experiences for County residents and visitors. The new location will provide opportunities for us to grow our programs. And, the added foot traffic will provide opportunities for artists and arts organizations **involved** in our spaces - to grow **their** artistic practices and businesses as well.

The majority of the Community Service Partnership grant that we receive from the County is devoted to providing grants to local and regional arts groups. While this grant is critical to our mission, the remaining portion of the CSP grant only covers 23% of our annual operating and programming costs. To cover the remaining costs, we need to draw on a number of other earned and contributed revenue streams. We rely on program revenue generated from our studios, classes, camps, and room rentals along with individual contributions, foundation and corporate support, and grants from the Maryland State Arts Council to cover the majority of our day-to-day programs and activities.

The Arts Council has been a tenant at 8510 High Ridge since 1983, where we:

- Provide stable and affordable studio, performance, rehearsal and office space for visual artists and small dance, music and theatre companies;
- Ensure artists and groups who use the space have opportunities to adequately plan, schedule and promote their programs and activities in advance; and
- Raise additional dollars to subsidize our programs and make improvements to the art spaces.

Each year, we provide hundreds of artists and arts organizations with opportunities to present and showcase their work and we provide tens of thousands of annual visitors with opportunities to participate in the arts through classes, exhibits, and performances. We also provide full-time studio space for 14 visual artists and office space for Ballet Mobile, the Columbia Orchestra, and Columbia Pro Cantare. In addition, the building is busy with ongoing and occasional activities by independent artists and small arts groups in need of space to grow their audiences and businesses. In FY25, we had 265 theatre bookings, 330 dance studio bookings, and 600 class and room bookings and 60,000 visitors came through our doors. The theatre, dance studio, large multi-purpose room, and galleries are heavily used and as a good steward of public resources, we have raised money to improve them. At High Ridge Road, we purchased:

- curtains and light, sound and audio equipment for the black box theatre,

- hard wood sprung floors for the dance studio and black box theatre,
- hard wood flooring for the galleries,
- art display cases for the large meeting room,
- and we paved the courtyard and commissioned an outdoor mosaic sculpture by Ginger Peloquin and a mosaic mural made by Susan Stockman and the students enrolled at the Ellicott City Head Start Center, who we share the building with.

These and other improvements to the building would not have been possible without the previous long-term agreements with the County. We expect to continue to be a good steward at the Courthouse too and have already secured a \$300,000 Capital Arts Grant from the Maryland State Arts Council, which is being used to fit-out the black box theatre. We will be eligible to apply for additional capital funds in FY27.

Our staff has been working closely with the County and the design team to ensure that our **arts** program and space needs are met. At the Courthouse, we will have:

- 18 Artist studios.
- Office space for the Arts Council and 3 non-profit arts groups
- A Black Box Theatre
- 3 Classrooms
- 2 Galleries
- A dance studio

- AND, priority shared-use of Courtroom 1, which will provide us with the large multi-purpose space needed to support our popular summer arts camp and for arts groups in need of a gathering space for large meetings, symposiums, and workshops.

The Arts Council has worked tirelessly for 4 decades to advocate for the needs of artists and arts organizations, engage the public, and enhance the quality of life in Howard County. We are excited about moving and look forward to working with the AAPI Commission, Roving Radish, and the County to transform the former Courthouse into an arts and cultural anchor. We believe this transformation will also strengthen Historic Ellicott City's ability to receive designation as a State Arts & Entertainment District and generate more opportunities for main street businesses as well as the arts.

A 10-year lease will provide us with the time and space to do this and so much more.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak with you.