

DISMANTLING MUSIC AND ART IN PHILADELPHIA: MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL'S POTENTIAL LEGACY

Philadelphia's reputation as one of America's most important cultural centers is clearly threatened by the Mayor's Fiscal Year 2021 Budget Proposal to eliminate the Office of Arts, Culture, & Creative Economy and the allocation to the Philadelphia Cultural Fund. The vibrant arts community in the city has evolved over many years but has been particularly enhanced by the support of the local government for arts programs that extend to every neighborhood and reflect the rich diversity of our community. Those most greatly affected will certainly be those least able to maintain these cultural initiatives.

Great civilizations have always been marked by the quality of their respective cultures. The arts have often been referred to as the very soul of advanced civilizations. Philadelphia has long been regarded as a national treasure in the area of music and art.

We all recognize the need for belt tightening during these trying times, but to slash an entire program rather than making judicious decisions about budget allocations going forward is simply to take the easy way out or to reach for the low-hanging fruit. It is well known that when budgets contract the arts are often the first victim. The result of such an injudicious budget reduction in this case will surely be to choke many of the smaller arts organizations – particularly those from less affluent neighborhoods – to extinction, potentially reversing much of the progress over these nearly three decades during which the Philadelphia Cultural Fund has been working on behalf of the citizens of our city, and excluding those who most need to be served.

As David Bradley recently predicted [*The Philadelphia Citizen*, May 12, 2020], if the Fund is eliminated it will almost certainly not come back. Reduction is one thing; elimination is another. The Mayor and City Council must not allow our city's culture to be eroded by the withdrawal of funds from arts programs. Millions of dollars are generated by a healthy arts presence through performances, for example, that engage the production professionals, the venues, the restaurants to which patrons go, and the communities themselves in positive, income generating activity. Many programs supported by the fund have had important and demonstrable educational impact as well. The need to make economies is clear but this should be done only with great sensitivity where arts organizations are concerned and where the cultural and educational benefits to the least able of our community may be withdrawn. Inclusion in the greater culture should be the right of all Philadelphia residents.

The Presser Foundation is not alone in providing additional assistance to arts organizations during this crisis. We ask that the City honor that commitment and the extraordinary commitments of so many other organizations and individuals by maintaining this Fund and the Office of Arts, Culture, & Creative Economy. Budget decisions need to be made, but they should be made with sharp pencils and most judiciously in the interest of the greater good.

Wholesale elimination of the Philadelphia Cultural Fund will surely be met by a reaction from voters who will be called upon to dig into their own pockets to support the arts in Philadelphia. This is a false economy. The current city administration's legacy should not be the dismantling of one of Philadelphia's signature qualities. This is an issue of civic responsibility, and it is our hope that the Mayor and City Council will meet the challenge with care and compassion.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey Cornelius, President
The Presser Foundation