



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

1600 PACIFIC HIGHWAY, ROOM 335, SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA 92101-2470

AGENDA ITEM

DATE: May 5, 2026

14

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

**INVESTING IN ARTS, CULTURE, AND CREATIVE OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL
(DISTRICTS: ALL)**

OVERVIEW

Civic leaders bet on arts and culture in the midst of the Great Depression, and the landmark County Administration Center stands as the legacy of that choice.¹ Today, the County faces that choice again.

San Diego County's arts and culture ecosystem is at a critical moment. After several years of significant disruption and recovery, it is now facing a federal government that is pulling back from its long-standing support for the arts, contributing to a broader contraction in public investment. At the same time, local governments, under fiscal pressure, are cutting arts and cultural programs.

Artists and cultural practitioners—most of them sole proprietors and micro-enterprises—are increasingly being pushed to the margins by rising costs, limited access to capital, unstable income, and a lack of affordable and accessible space to live and create. Without immediate, intentional public investment, San Diego County will lose creative talent we cannot replace—and with it, the jobs, local spending, tourism, community connections, and creative dynamism that the \$1.4 billion arts and culture sector generates. This loss would not just impact an industry—it would be felt across our communities.

In communities that have historically been excluded from public investment—including Black communities, Tribal Nations and Native American communities, communities of color, and rural and unincorporated communities—art and cultural practices are deeply rooted in the fabric of everyday life. In many of these communities, they are among the most consistent and trusted ways people come together, build relationships, and stay connected to one another, to culture, and to a

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shared sense of belonging. When County leadership supports arts and culture, we gain more than beauty and expression—we create infrastructure for togetherness and belonging.

This impact extends beyond individual communities to the strength of our region as a whole. San Diego County’s binational creative economy — rooted in the unique San Diego–Tijuana corridor — is a competitive advantage that no other region can replicate. Our identity is shaped by this cross-border exchange, shared history, and collaboration. Investing in arts and culture means recognizing and supporting this unique binational strength.

Today’s item advances the *Investing in San Diego County Arts and Culture Initiative*, a comprehensive package of ongoing public investments and actions to strengthen the region’s arts and culture ecosystem. At its core, this initiative invests in artists and cultural practitioners, supports place-based strategies that activate neighborhoods and cultural districts, prioritizes Black arts and cultural investment, and strengthens our binational creative economy. It also expands partnerships to scale impact through collaboration with state and federal partners, philanthropy, and the private sector, alongside continued advocacy for arts and culture funding.

Arts and culture are not optional—they are essential to the strength and vibrancy of our communities. Through this initiative, the County is choosing to invest in our artists, our neighborhoods, and the cultural infrastructure that connects us.

**RECOMMENDATION(S)
SUPERVISOR LAWSON-REMER AND SUPERVISOR MONTGOMERY STEPPE**

1. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to implement the *Investing in San Diego County Arts and Culture Initiative* as outlined below in consultation with relevant County departments and leadership, including, but not limited to, the Office of Economic Development and Government Affairs, Land Use and Environment Group, Department of General Services, Parks and Recreation, Office of Equity and Racial Justice, the Chief Binational Affairs Officer, and County Counsel, as appropriate.

The San Diego County Arts and Culture Commission shall serve as the advisory body for the implementation and ongoing support of this initiative, including program design, criteria, and community engagement.

- a. Artist Grant Program:** Allocate \$1,000,000 in ongoing funding to design and implement a direct grant program for artists and cultural practitioners, with initial awards distributed by the end of fiscal year 2026-2027. These funds shall be included as an ongoing annual investment in arts and culture and are not intended as one-time allocations. Funding allocated for these purposes shall be used exclusively for direct grants, capacity building, and program delivery and shall not be redirected for unrelated uses. The program shall:
 - Prioritize direct funding to individual artists and cultural workers;
 - Be designed for low-barrier access and timely distribution;

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- Ensure grants support both emerging and established artists;
 - Prioritize participation from underserved communities;
 - Include multi-month funding opportunities, such as non-governmental artist-in-residence programs, that provide financial stability and communities of practice to support the development of local artists.
- b. Artist-in-Residence Program for San Diego County:** Allocate \$250,000 in ongoing funding to design and implement a San Diego County Artist-in-Residence Program, with initial placements by the end of Fiscal Year 2026-2027. These funds shall be included as an ongoing annual investment in arts and culture and are not intended as one-time allocations. Funding allocation for these purposes shall be used exclusively for program delivery, stipends, and associated support and shall not be redirected for unreleased uses. The program shall:
- Embed artists who live and work in San Diego County inside County departments to develop artist-led and community-informed solutions to social challenges faced by County departments, introduce arts-based methods for engaging with internal and external stakeholders, and support articulated County goals;
 - Draw upon best practices for program design and operation from Los Angeles County’s Creative Strategist/Artist-in-Residence Program, New York City’s Public Artist-in-Residence Program, and other successful public sector artist-in-residence programs;
 - Provide 12 months of engagement for Artist(s)-in-Residence in a manner consistent with industry best practices. Artist(s)-in-Residence shall be provided with workspace, material stipend and technical resources required for completion of their work.
- c. Artist Space Grant Program:** Allocate \$500,000 in ongoing funding to establish and implement an Artist Space Grant Program, with initial awards distributed by the end of Fiscal Year 2026-27. These funds shall be included as an ongoing annual investment in arts and culture and are not intended as one-time allocations. Funding allocated for these purposes shall be used exclusively for direct grants, capacity building, space access, and program delivery and shall not be redirected for unrelated uses. This program shall:
- Provide direct funding to artists, cultural practitioners, and community-based organizations, including through grants, capacity building, or direct support for space access, use, and activation;
 - Support access to creative space for both artistic production and public presentation;
 - Prioritize the use of County-owned and underutilized public spaces for artists to create, exhibit, and present work, maximizing public access and community benefit;
 - Support public-facing arts and cultural programming, including exhibitions, showcases, and installations that are free and accessible to the public;
 - Include a clear and accessible process for artists and small organizations to apply for funding and utilize County spaces.

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- d. Binational Creative Economy Investment:** Allocate \$250,000 in ongoing funding to support binational creative economy initiatives and cross-border arts and culture collaboration. These funds shall be included as an ongoing annual investment in arts and culture and are not intended as one-time allocations. Funding allocated for these purposes shall be used exclusively for program delivery, partnerships, and related activities and shall not be redirected for unrelated uses. This investment shall be led by the Chief Binational Affairs Officer and may include, but is not limited to:
- Support binational creative projects, partnerships, and initiatives that strengthen cultural exchange, workforce development, and regional economic opportunity across the San Diego–Baja California region;
 - Build on and expand existing efforts, including the San Diego–Tijuana Artist Count and related initiatives;
 - Prioritize initiatives that are high-impact, visible, and regionally significant.
- e. County Arts and Cultural District Designation Program:** Develop a County Arts District Designation Program to formally recognize and support geographic areas with a high concentration of arts, culture, and creative economy activity, especially in underserved communities across the County. The designation would strengthen place-based cultural investments and infrastructure and expand economic opportunities for artists. These efforts may include but are not limited to:
- Develop eligibility criteria, application and evaluation processes, guidelines, branding, marketing and technical assistance services, and a designation process for County-recognized Arts and Cultural Districts;
 - Engagement and outreach to artistically and culturally-rich areas of the county that have traditionally been underrecognized and underfunded;
 - Identify potential funding sources, including philanthropic partnerships, public-private collaborations, and matching-fund opportunities, to sustain both the designation program and associated artist support and cultural investments and infrastructure efforts;
 - Provide recommendations on program rollout, administrative structure, and long-term governance.
- f. Investment in the Black Arts and Culture District:** Allocate a one-time \$500,000 to bolster the development, activation, and enduring sustainability of the Black Arts and Culture District as a vital place-based cultural asset and community anchor within San Diego County.

This investment in the Black Arts and Culture District shall support, but not be limited to:

- Public Space Activation and Cultural Infrastructure—upgrades to physical spaces, including site preparation, lighting, seating, landscaping, and cultural design elements that promote safety, accessibility, and community engagement;

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- Arts and Cultural Programming—funding for free, publicly accessible performances, exhibitions, events, and intergenerational activities that celebrate Black arts, culture, and history;
 - Economic and Workforce Opportunities—initiatives to bolster local creative businesses, develop workforce capacity, and foster youth engagement in arts and cultural sectors.
- g. Philanthropic and Partnership Development:** Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to pursue and establish partnerships with philanthropic organizations, foundations, and private-sector partners to expand and leverage the County’s arts and cultural investments. These efforts may include, but are not limited to, identifying and securing opportunities for matching funds and co-investment, aligning County priorities with existing philanthropic and private-sector initiatives, and leveraging external funding to increase the scale and impact of County investments.
- h. Legislative Advocacy for Arts and Culture Funding:** Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to include in the County’s Legislative Program support for legislation that would increase funding to support investment in arts, culture, and creative industries.
- i. Designation through the California Arts Council State-Local Partners Program:** Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to Designate the County of San Diego through the Office of Economic Development and Government Affairs as Local Arts Agency for the California Art Council’s State-Local Partners Program:
- Adopt the resolution titled: Resolution of Board of Supervisors of County of San Diego Designating the County of San Diego through the Office of Economic Development and Government Affairs (EDGA) as the County’s official State-Local Partner with the California Arts Council.
 - Authorize the County of San Diego to apply for, accept, and administer the State-Local Partner grant funds for 2026-2027 through 2030-2031.
 - Waive Board Policy B-29 *Fees, Grants Revenue Contracts – Department Responsibility for Cost Recovery*, which requires full cost recovery for grants.
- j. Annual Return to the Board:** Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to return to the Board annually each January, beginning in January 2027, with updates on implementation of these actions. The annual return should include, but not be limited to:
- Updates on implementation of the Artist Grant program, including funding distribution, program reach, and participation, as well as updates on the development of the artist income program;
 - Updates on implementation of the Artist Space Grant program, including use of County spaces, grant distribution, and public-facing programming such as exhibitions, showcases, and cultural programming that expand access to arts and culture across the County;

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- Updates on implementation of the San Diego County Artist-in-Residence program, including recruitment, placements, operations, community and staff outreach and engagement, deliverables, and impacts;
 - Updates on implementation of binational creative economy investments, including funded initiatives and regional impact;
 - Updates on philanthropic and partnership development, including identified partnerships, funding commitments, and matching or co-investment opportunities;
 - Progress on implementation of the Black Arts and Culture District investment, including public space activation and cultural infrastructure improvements such as site upgrades and activation milestones;
 - A summary of arts and cultural programming, partnerships, and levels of community participation within the Black Arts and Culture District;
 - Outcomes related to economic and workforce development within the Black Arts and Culture District, including support for local creative businesses and youth engagement opportunities;
 - Recommendations for changes to County procurement and contracting policies and practices when it comes to the arts and culture to increase participation from under-resourced local practitioners, including but not limited to creative rights and insurance requirements;
 - Recommendations for continued work and implementation, including opportunities to refine, expand, or better align investments with community needs.
2. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to designate the appropriate County department to lead implementation of the *Investing in San Diego County Arts and Culture Initiative* and to allocate up to \$250,000 in ongoing funding to support staffing and administrative capacity necessary to carry out these actions. These funds shall support grant administration and program delivery, partnership development and coordination, and outreach, technology, and community engagement to ensure effective implementation. The Chief Administrative Officer may identify appropriate staffing classifications and administrative structures to support this work. In accordance with Government Code Section 26227, find that the programs identified in the above recommendations are necessary to meet the social needs of the population of the County of San Diego.
 3. Refer to the Fiscal Year 2026-27 CAO Recommended Operational Plan the establishment of appropriations of up to \$2,750,000 in the department determined by the Chief Administrative Officer, to implement the *Investing in San Diego County Arts and Culture Initiative*, subject to available funding sources. This includes up to \$2,250,000 of appropriations for ongoing programs and related administrative costs, and \$500,000 of appropriations established on a one-time basis.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

San Diego County's art and culture ecosystem are encountering significant pressures that threaten its long-term sustainability, including rising living and business costs, reduced federal support, and a lack of affordable physical spaces and facilities. This refers to both public and private creative

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spaces, unequal access to resources, and shifting audience behaviors that are constraining artists, businesses, organizations, and creative entrepreneurs. These challenges are intensified by limited job opportunities and the presence of “arts deserts” in several areas across all five districts. By investing in San Diego’s art and cultural ecosystem in an equitable way, today’s item serves to enhance accessibility and affordability for producers and consumers of art and culture countywide.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT

Implementation of these creative sector actions will result in sustainability enhancements in terms of health/well-being, equity, economy, and environment. Transforming the regional creative sector toward low-barrier access modes will contribute to County of San Diego Sustainability Goal No. 2 to provide just and equitable access to County services by providing a wider availability and range of supportive and inclusive options.

FISCAL IMPACT

There is no fiscal impact for Fiscal Year 2025-26. If today’s recommendations are approved, there will be costs and revenue totaling up to \$2,750,000 that will be referred for consideration to the Fiscal Year 2026-27 CAO Recommended Operational Plan, subject to available funding.

This amount includes ongoing costs and revenue totaling up to \$2,250,000 that will be referred for consideration to the Fiscal Year 2026-27 CAO Recommended Operational Plan, based on General Fund resources. The funds would support the requisite staffing and administration to support the following proposed ongoing programs:

- Artist Grant Program (\$1,000,000)
- Artist-in-Residence Program (\$250,000)
- Artist Space Grant Program (\$500,000)
- Binational Creative Economy Investment (\$250,000)

Preliminarily, staffing and administrative costs are estimated at up to \$250,000, subject to refinement as the appropriate administrative structure is determined. In alignment with Recommendation 2, the Chief Administrative Officer will establish the staffing and administrative structures to support these programs. There is anticipated to be additional staff years.

Additionally, there will be one-time costs and revenue of \$500,000 that will be referred to the Fiscal Year 2026-27 CAO Recommended Operational Plan based on General Fund resources for the Investment in the Black Arts and Culture District.

BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

Investing in San Diego County’s arts and ecosystem will help to sustain a \$1.4 billion sector that supported 19,771 jobs in 2022.ⁱⁱ Arts and culture organizations are themselves businesses that employ staff in a variety of roles and purchase goods and services from suppliers. They also drive business activity in adjacent industries such as hospitality, tourism, and retail.

ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT

N/A

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BACKGROUND

Public investment in arts and culture is increasingly recognized—both nationally and internationally—as a strategy for economic resilience, community development, and public well-being. The programs proposed today are necessary to meet the social needs of the County’s population as set forth in Government Code Section 26227. The package consists of the following:

The Artist Grant Program

Direct grantmaking addresses a key barrier to sustaining creative practices in a high cost of living locale on the low and unsteady incomes in the arts and culture field. The program will seek to limit administrative burdens and long waits for applicants and awardees, ensure that grants support both emerging and established artists, prioritize participation from underserved and underinvested communities, and include multi-month funding opportunities to provide greater financial stability and career development.

San Diego County Artist-in-Residence Program

Public sector artist-in-residence programs are a well-established model for bringing the novel perspectives and methods of artists to bear on the challenges of public administration. San Diego County Artists-in-Residence will be embedded inside County departments where they will learn the workings and goals of the department and the communities they serve. By opening up two-way dialogue and undertaking art projects that engage, speak to, and reimagine the interface between government and community, artists-in-residence will open up new possibilities and approaches to challenges facing County departments.

The Artist Space Program

Access to affordable places to create and exhibit work remains one of the most significant barriers facing artists and cultural organizations. Across the County, publicly owned facilities—including libraries, community centers, parks, and other civic spaces—represent an underutilized opportunity to support creative activity and public engagement. When activated for arts and culture, these spaces can become welcoming and visible hubs for community life—places where residents can experience art, participate in cultural programming, and connect with one another.

Exploration and Development of an Artist Basic Income

Alongside the development and implementation of the artist grant program and the San Diego County Artist-in-Residence program, we encourage continued exploration and development for an artist basic income in San Diego County. In recent years, governments have begun to explore direct support models for artists as essential workers in the cultural economy. For example, Ireland’s Basic Income for the Arts pilot provides recurring payments to artists to stabilize income and support long-term creative practice. Early findings indicate improved financial stability, increased creative output, and broader participation across disciplines. Similar efforts in U.S. cities,

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including San Francisco, have demonstrated the potential for targeted income support to reduce precarity and strengthen the creative workforce. These models reflect a broader shift in how governments understand the role of artists—not as optional contributors, but as essential to economic systems, public life, and community well-being. Today’s proposed actions build on that understanding by pairing immediate direct investment through grant programs with the exploration of longer-term income strategies that support stability and sustainability for artists and cultural workers.

Place-based strategies advance targeted investments that strengthen arts and cultural destinations and deepen neighborhood cultural vitality – particularly in communities that have been historically underinvested, including Black, indigenous, and communities of color, as well as rural and unincorporated areas.

County Arts and Cultural District Designation Program

Arts and cultural districts are formally recognized, place-based cultural ecosystems in which a concentration of artists, cultural organizations, and creative activations serve the neighboring communities' economies and social engagement.

The designation program is a strategic tool to invest in and grow San Diego's cultural creative ecosystem, especially in communities that have experienced systemic disinvestment and cultural exclusion. These efforts preserve long-standing cultural infrastructure significant to the communities they serve and champion place-based investment. This pathway channels resources directly into communities where arts and culture already serve as a critical infrastructure for economic mobility and intergenerational belonging.

Investment in the Black Arts and Culture District

The Black Arts and Culture District (BACD), located in the community of Encanto on Imperial Avenue between 61st Street and 69th Street, was established on June 14, 2022. Then Council President Pro Tempore Monica Montgomery Steppe secured the San Diego City Council’s unanimous approval to establish the BACD.

The BACD was created to be a central location to celebrate the history, arts, and culture of Black people. It currently has several Black-owned arts and cultural organizations, businesses, and restaurants. There is also the Marie Widman Memorial Park, named after an activist in San Diego during the civil rights movement, serving as Secretary of the San Diego Branch of the NAACP from 1959 to 1966. Ms. Widman later joined the Board of Library Commissioners for the City of San Diego, the San Diego Parks and Recreation Board, the Metropolitan Transit Development Board Citizen’s Advisory Committee, and the San Diego City Planning Commission.

Led by the San Diego African American Museum of Fine Art, the BACD is a dedicated space where Black arts can thrive, local talent can grow, and cultural businesses can increase capacity and scale. In the absence of equitable public investment, the BACD has shouldered the burden of maintaining its cultural space, often with limited resources, recognition, and ongoing investment.

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An investment in the BACD will support their efforts to build and maintain its public spaces and infrastructure; to continue their arts and cultural programming to celebrate Black arts, culture, and history; and bolster economic development and workforce opportunities. Supporting the BACD will result in a more vibrant San Diego County for all residents and visitors alike.

Binational Creative Economy Investment

San Diego County is also uniquely positioned within a binational region, where creative industries and cultural exchange extend across the San Diego–Baja California corridor. Culture, creativity, and community do not stop at the border—they move fluidly across it, shaping the identity and economic potential of the region. This cross-border relationship presents opportunities for economic growth, cultural collaboration, and global positioning, but requires intentional investment to support artists, organizations, and initiatives that operate across borders.

Philanthropic and Partnership Development

San Diego is fortunate to have a philanthropic community invested in supporting the arts and culture ecosystem. The County can increase the scale and impact of public dollars by aligning County priorities with existing philanthropic and private sector initiatives and identifying and securing matching funds and co-investment.

Legislative Advocacy for Arts and Culture Funding

Through its legislative program, the County can use its voice in Sacramento and Washington to pull additional funding for the local arts and culture ecosystem.

Designation through the California Arts Council State-Local Partners Program

In 2025, the California Arts Council released the State’s first creative economy strategic plan, *California’s Future is Creative: Strategies for Cultural Resilience, Economic Growth, and Global Identity*. The plan emphasizes workforce development, cultural infrastructure, cross-sector collaboration, shared metrics, and regional implementation—priorities that align with the County’s role in supporting local creative economies.

The California State Legislature established the State-Local Partners Program (SLP) through the California Arts Council to strengthen local cultural development in partnership with designated local arts agencies. The program supports local arts infrastructure, advances community priorities, promotes equity, and ensures that each county has a designated partner.

Since the 1980s, the County has designated the City of San Diego to serve as the region’s SLP due to limited County staffing and the absence of a formal arts commission. In 2022, the Office of Economic Development and Government Affairs (EDGA) established dedicated staff for the arts

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and creative economy and began supporting the County’s Arts and Culture Commission. With this capacity in place, the County is now positioned to apply for and administer SLP funding for the region.

In 2025, the City was informed that the County would seek designation, through EDGA, as the region’s SLP in the next application cycle. In preparation, the City and EDGA collaborated to support a smooth transition, including sharing program data, outcomes, and operational practices. The County is now prepared to apply for SLP designation and associated grant funding. As part of this process, the California Arts Council requires a resolution from the Board of Supervisors formally designating the County, through EDGA, as the State-Local Partner for the San Diego region.

LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

Today’s proposed actions support the Strategic Initiatives of Sustainability, Equity, Community in the County of San Diego’s 2026-2031 Strategic Plan.

Respectfully submitted,



TERRA LAWSON-REMER
Supervisor, Third District



MONICA MONTGOMERY STEPPE
Supervisor, Fourth District

ATTACHMENT(S)

RESOLUTION OF THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS OF THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO DESIGNATING THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO THROUGH THE OFFICE OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS AS THE COUNTY'S OFFICIAL STATE-LOCAL PARTNER WITH THE CALIFORNIA ARTS COUNCIL, AND AUTHORIZING THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO TO APPLY FOR, ACCEPT, AND ADMINISTER THE STATE-LOCAL PARTNER GRANT FUNDS FOR 2026-2027 THROUGH 2030-2031.

ⁱ The County Administration Center, built with federal Works Progress Administration support during the Great Depression, reflects a legacy of public investment in arts and culture. Its design and public art—including *The Guardian of Water* by Donald Hord—highlight the role of arts and culture in civic identity and place-making.

ⁱⁱ [CA_SanDiegoCounty_AEP6_CustomizedFinalReport.pdf](#)