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To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council
 From: Councilmember Sophie Hahn (Author)
 Subject: Budget Referral and Technical Support for the Berkeley Art Center

RECOMMENDATION

Direct the City Manager to support the Berkeley Art Center (BAC) during a time of financial crisis with technical assistance and other resources at the City's disposal, and to work with BAC to develop a long-term plan for viability.

Refer to the November Budget Process a one-time emergency grant of \$100,000 for the Berkeley Art Center, pending review of the organization's current financial status and plans for long-term recovery by the City's Economic Development and Civic Arts team.

SUMMARY STATEMENT

The Berkeley Art Center is a beloved and longstanding Berkeley community arts organization experiencing significant financial hardship exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Arts organizations have faced new and unprecedented challenges due to the pandemic, the end of COVID-19 relief funds, a reduced donor base, and more.

This referral requests the City Manager's Office to provide technical assistance to the Berkeley Art Center. BAC has previously accessed City resources that helped the organization continue supporting and showcasing local artists. An emergency grant of \$100,000 would further enable the Berkeley Art Center to close part of the gap necessary to survive, to ramp up private fundraising, and to establish strategic plans to continue contributing to the cultural life of Berkeley and the Bay Area.

BACKGROUND

Since its founding in 1967, the Berkeley Art Center has been a hub for artistic exploration and community building that champions Bay Area artists and curators. Located in Live Oak Park in North Berkeley, the BAC makes contemporary art approachable at an intimate scale while serving diverse communities through exhibitions and artist-conceived events, workshops, and programs.

Designed by architect Robert Ratcliff and built by the Rotary Club as a gift to the City, the Berkeley Art Center was run by the Parks and Recreation Department and funded by the City of Berkeley for many years until the passage of Proposition 13.¹ As a result, the organization became a private nonprofit in the late 1970s. BAC's first director, Carl Worth, quickly established BAC as a destination for experimental contemporary art by Bay Area artists. Worth would go on to produce 89 exhibitions over 12 years as the director through 1979. Since its opening, BAC has exhibited work by important local figures such as Robert Bechtle, Enrique Chagoya, Bill Fontana, Taraneh Hemami, Mildred Howard, Hung Liu, Jim Melchert, Chiura Obata, Sonya Rapoport, Katherine Sherwood, Peter Voulkos, Carrie Mae Weems, and many others.

The Berkeley Art Center is committed to building an equitable organizational culture that advances opportunities at all levels of the organization for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), queer and trans people, and people living with disabilities. BAC is dedicated to offering a welcoming and inclusive environment for artists, members, and visitors, and believes in the power of the arts to build community and conversation, opening its visitors' minds and imagination to the experiences of others. Importantly, the organization believes in supporting its artists in their professional growth and development, and that participation in exhibitions and programs should be both sustainable and financially beneficial.

Throughout the years, BAC has been working to connect the Berkeley community with exhibitions of work from a broader community of artists in the Bay Area, focusing on creating a space for our community to connect with artists and curators who are Black, Indigenous, POC, queer and trans, formerly incarcerated, and people living with disabilities. Most recently, BAC put together "[Painting Ourselves Into Society](#)," an exhibit that showcased artwork from current and formerly incarcerated artists. Co-curated by Orlando Smith aka "O. Smith" from inside San Quentin Prison and Rahsaan "New York" Thomas, who has returned to society after 22 years inside, the exhibit features the works of eight currently and formerly incarcerated artists nationwide exploring what it means for incarcerated people to stay connected to the larger community and to challenge the idea of what healing looks like together. The show features artists Cedar Annenkovna, Corey Devon Arthur, Mark A Cádiz, De'jon Joy, Jessie Milo, Joanna Nixon, Jared Owens and Alvin Smith, and will run until January 12, 2025.

Aside from its programming, what makes the Berkeley Art Center so unique is that over the years it has worked to address pay disparities of artists and curators of underrepresented communities, particularly in the Bay Area. BAC pays competitive rates at 3-7 times what is recommended by Working Artists and the Greater Economy or W.A.G.E. to support artists in the Bay Area. According to a report by Artfinder from 2017, a full three quarters of artists made \$10,000 or less per year from their art and close to half made no more than \$5,000.²

¹ White, D. (2016, October 24). *After years of deferred maintenance, Berkeley asks Nonprofits to pay for fixes*. Berkeleyside. <https://www.berkeleyside.org/2016/10/24/after-years-of-deferred-maintenance-berkeley-asks-nonprofits-to-pay-for-fixes>

² Kinsella, E. (2017, November 29). *A new study shows most artists make very little money, with women faring the worst*. Artnet News. <https://news.artnet.com/market/artists-make-less-10k-year-1162295>

Unfortunately, sustaining this mission, which aligns with the City of Berkeley's longstanding commitment to fair and livable wages for all who work in our City, is extremely difficult when relying substantially on private donors and earned income to close funding gaps.

In recent years, the Berkeley Art Center has faced an uncertain future. Recognizing the contributions the organization makes to Berkeley, the City has long supported BAC, including with a yearly grant of approximately \$60,000 that was increased to \$86,000 around 2017. In addition, the organization also regularly benefits from the City's Civic Arts Grants, receiving \$10,000 in FY 2025.

Three years ago, the organization implemented a co-director model for the organization and with that, a commitment to livable salaries and benefits for the staff. In alignment with its mission to champion Bay Area artists and curators, BAC was dedicated to paying curators and exhibiting artists for their labor. Shortly thereafter, with the COVID pandemic at hand, fundraising efforts stopped producing anticipated results and other factors such as inflation, rising costs of living, and a more competitive donor and funder arena have presented unanticipated challenges for the organization.

Since June, the BAC Board has completed an audit of its finances, reduced personnel costs, bridged staffing gaps with dedicated volunteers, and brought its monthly operating expenses down to a third of what they were. The organization is currently operating on a shoe-string budget, with just two part-time, short-term staffers. To make ends meet, the Board launched its fall fundraising campaign, with the goal of raising \$125,000. For 2025, the organization has received one grant from the Walter & Elise Haas Creative Work Fund for \$32,000 and another from the California Arts Council for Creative Youth Development for \$25,000. BAC plans to continue applying for general operating grants to support the organization.

Funds from the City would be immediately used to stabilize the organization and transition to new leadership, including a new Executive Director with extensive fundraising and development experience. BAC will also work to hire a development consultant to help secure future general operating and exhibition funding through government and foundation grants, and create a signature annual fundraising event in addition to its community dinners. The organization will also develop a 5-year strategic plan to build a sustainable operating model for the organization.

For over 50 years, the Berkeley Art Center has been a home to Bay Area artists and an intimate space for the Berkeley and Greater San Francisco Bay Area community to connect with art. Despite its financial challenges, BAC has a committed membership base, highly devoted Board of Directors, vital programming, a loyal donor base, foundation funding, and recognition by the greater arts community for how it engages with the public and the greater community.

RATIONALE FOR RECOMMENDATION

During a time when arts and cultural organizations across the country are in freefall, Berkeley has the opportunity to support an arts organization that is not only showcasing thought provoking and civically engaged art, but one that pays its artists a fair wage.

BAC began as a City of Berkeley program. It has been largely self-sustaining for almost 50 years, but with rising costs in Berkeley and the Bay Area, making ends meet for a cutting-edge arts organization committed to fair wages may no longer be feasible without a more robust public commitment. *Currently requested funding, and anticipated additional funding requests for FY2026 and 2027, will allow the organization to hire a development professional and launch a strategic planning process that will answer these key questions: how to maximize fundraising from individuals and foundations/organizations, and what long term commitment from the City of Berkeley may be required to sustain this important arts resource for Berkeley.*

BAC provides employment and funding opportunities for artists and cultural workers, sustaining creativity in the Bay Area and contributing to the cultural vitality of our City. BAC is a hub for community engagement, with exhibitions that provide spaces for dialogue, collaboration, and creative expression, and a keen focus on social justice and equity. Their programming has a legacy of commitment to amplifying marginalized voices, addressing systemic inequalities, and celebrating diverse narratives. In addition to focusing on equity both programmatically and organizationally, BAC magnifies the arts' role in supporting mental health, well-being, and belonging through our artist-driven projects, programs, and community partnerships.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

N/A

FISCAL IMPACTS

A one-time emergency grant of \$100,000 from the General Fund. Additional grants may be requested in future years, to sustain the organization during this period of accelerated private fundraising and long-term strategic planning.

CONTACT

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