

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS,
LIBRARIES AND INTERNATIONAL
INTERGROUP RELATIONS

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SEPTEMBER 14, 2021

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HELD AT: COMMITTEE ROOM - CITY HALL

B E F O R E: JAMES G. VAN BRAMER, CHAIRPERSON

COUNCIL MEMBERS: JAMES G. VAN BRAMER
DARMA V. DIAZ
JAMES F. GENNARO
MARK GJONAJ
FRANCISCO P. MOYA

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

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JACK BERNATOVICZ, Legislative Director

MATT WALLACE, Chief of Staff

BRENDA MCKINNEY, Committee Counsel

SHEELAH FEINBERG, Department of Current
Affairs (DCOA) Deputy Commissioner

STEFAN GRYBAUSKAS, Director of the Street
Activity Permit Office (SAPO), Deputy
Executive Director of the Mayor's Office
of Citywide Event Coordination and
Management (CECM)

ROBIN SCHATELL, Open Culture Worker

LUCY SEXTON, New Yorkers for Culture and
the Arts

EMILY MATHIAS CORONA, Assistant Director
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FRAN GARBER-COHEN, President of Regina
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A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

JULIANA COPE, Assistant Executive
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Advocacy Assistant at Dance NYC

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2 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Thank you
3 very much. Good afternoon everyone and welcome to
4 the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and
5 International Intergroup Relations. Our oversight
6 hearing, the re-opening of culture in New York, the
7 return of indoor programs, open culture and COVID-19
8 and for the record this is our first in-person
9 Cultural Affairs Hearing in over 18 months so it's
10 great to be back here in person, even under different
11 circumstances. I am joined by Council Member Darma
12 Diaz from our Committee. Thank you very much Council
13 Member and we are in session. As everybody knows
14 it's a historic time for us not only because this is
15 our first in-person hearing after 18 months but
16 because the City and in particular cultural community
17 is at a most important time in our history. It's
18 important to remember that the pandemic is not over
19 and there is a long way to go on the pathway to
20 recovery. Culture never cultured. In fact it
21 pivoted. But being able to discuss the recovery,
22 update and not just survival is something that we
23 have to mark and celebrate. I also want to applaud
24 our colleagues and the sector that we all represent
25 and work for because we know that they have worked

2 incredibly hard to not only make it through the
3 crisis but to support and lift up each other in
4 earnest and organic ways just as I have considered it
5 a privilege of a lifetime to fight for culture and
6 the arts and artists to keep our City's lifeblood
7 alive beyond this pandemic as Chair of the Committee
8 for the past 12 years which is truly one of the great
9 honors of my life, I have tried to create a platform
10 for art and culture, organizations artists to
11 highlight their ongoing needs including through
12 related oversight hearings over the past year, but it
13 is also a privilege to be able to author and champion
14 legislation that makes a tangible difference. We
15 have seen this with the creation of the open culture
16 program and last week I was proud to introduce open
17 culture 2.0 or Intro number 2398 which the committee
18 is hearing today and which directly addresses
19 feedback from the art and cultural community but how
20 to include the open culture program and which will
21 make the program permanent much like open restaurants
22 and open streets to incredibly successful programs as
23 well that come out of the response to the pandemic.
24 It goes without saying that open culture is an
25 opportunity to further democratize our streets,

2 activating streets across the city with arts and
3 culture. We celebrate indoor opportunities of
4 course, more so than ever but the truth is that
5 COVID-19 and variants such as Delta are a reality and
6 it may still be safer to host performances outdoors
7 and many still prefer to experience performances
8 outdoors at least in the immediate future. For some
9 it's impossible to return to full indoor performances
10 like we had prior to March of 2020 so the program
11 continuing and being made permanent would be greatly
12 impactful and I'm grateful to all of those who are
13 here in person to provide testimony on the
14 legislation and I think we are going to hear from
15 some folks in the administration probably a little
16 bit about the success of open culture and what we've
17 experienced to date in the law that we passed. But I
18 know that hundreds of performances have taken place
19 across the City and I, myself have gone to several in
20 my, my neighborhood and it is, it is so amazing to
21 walk down the street and see dancers dancing, drag
22 queens reading to children as we had a drag queen
23 story hour on the Skillman Avenue in my neighborhood
24 and music happening. It makes people very happy and
25 we can all use a little more happy these days. So,

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2 to the art and cultural community both including and
3 beyond those who are here in person today we thank
4 you again for doing the work and for creating, even
5 more community than existed. We look forward to
6 hearing and learning how as a Council we can support
7 you moving forward. I also want to acknowledge some
8 folks including my Legislative Director, Jack
9 Bernatovicz, my Chief of Staff, Matt Wallace, the
10 Committee's Principal Financial Analyst, Aliya Ali,
11 our Policy Analyst, Cristy Dwyer who is to my right
12 and our Committee Counsel Brenda McKinney. And with
13 that the Committee Staff will deliver the oath of the
14 Administration. Take it away Cristy.

15 CRISTY DWYER: Hi. Good morning
16 everyone. I'm Cristy Dwyer the Legislative Policy
17 Analyst to the Committee on Cultural Affairs,
18 Libraries and International Intergroup Relations. I
19 am here to administer the oath to DCOA Deputy
20 Commissioner, Sheelah Feinberg and to Stefan
21 Grybauskas, Director. Do you both affirm to tell the
22 truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth in
23 your testimony before this Committee and to respond
24 honestly to Council Member question?

25 SHEELAH FEINBERG: I do.

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2 STEFAN GRYBAUSKAS: I do.

3 CRISTY DWYER: Thank you. Chair Van

4 Bramer.

5 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Thank you

6 very much. I want to recognize Council Member

7 Francisco Moya from Queens, a member of our Committee

8 as well. Thank you for being here Council Member

9 Moya and Council Member Diaz. So, before we hear

10 from Stefan and Sheelah, I just want to say thank you

11 to both of you because you are incredibly helpful in

12 making open culture a success and working with the

13 Council and the Committee to design a program that we

14 could stand up in a relatively short period of time

15 and, uh, and bring a lot of artists opportunities to

16 work and get paid for their work and I think it's

17 been a great success. So with that, thank you to

18 both of you and whoever want to start first, feel

19 free to begin your testimony.

20 SHEELAH FEINBERG: Sure, I'll go

21 first. Good afternoon Chair Van Bramer and members

22 of the Committee. It's lovely to see you all in

23 person and not on a little 3 x 3 or 1 x 1 square on

24 Zoom. So, thank you for this opportunity. My name

25 is Sheelah Feinberg, I'm Deputy Commissioner at the

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2 Department of New York, excuse me, New York City

3 Department of Cultural Affairs. Thank you for the

4 opportunity to present testimony on today's topic the

5 re-opening of culture in New York, the return of

6 indoor programs, open culture and COVID-19. Cultural

7 activity is at the foundation of our healthy

8 communities and our strong economy. A slow but

9 steady return of culture to our outdoor spaces and

10 increasingly to indoor venues have been a

11 tremendously powerful signal that New Yorkers are

12 ready to reclaim the City we all love. We, at the

13 agency have said this many times in the last 18

14 months but it bears repeating, New Yorkers in every

15 corner of our City and every walk of life of suffered

16 from COVID-19. The cultural community was especially

17 hard hit. Culture thrives on the exact type of in

18 person interactions that overnight became a threat to

19 public health. We have conducted two major surveys

20 that detail a cultural constituent since the start of

21 the pandemic. Together they paint a devastating

22 portrait of loss in our cultural community.

23 Financial losses are approaching \$1 billion while

24 layoffs and furloughs mean that the cultural

25 community is at least for now smaller. My Center for

2 an Urban Futures Estimate the City lost roughly half
3 of its arts and culture jobs in the first year of the
4 pandemic. The damage experienced by the most
5 marginalized groups is even worse. Layoffs and
6 furloughs and organizations primarily serving low-
7 income communities of color have persisted at much
8 higher rates. Organizations in low-income ZIP codes
9 also lost access to their programming spaces at rates
10 more than double those located in wealthier areas.
11 Small organizations saw their operating income
12 plummet nearly 40% compared to just over 21% for
13 larger groups. We've been living through a dual
14 pandemic, both the public health crisis and a crisis
15 from decades of systemic racism and disinvestment.
16 We've listened to our constituents advocated on their
17 behalf and have made it a priority to drive home but
18 not everyone experienced the same pandemic. We've
19 also set aside funding specifically to address these
20 disproportionate impacts. Last year we invested in a
21 relief fund for arts educators, a job category that
22 was particularly devastated by layoffs and increased
23 funding for organizations working in ZIP codes most
24 affected by COVID-19. With a record high budget for
25 the agency at \$230 million in the current physical

2 year, thanks to the continued partnership between the
3 Council, the Committee and the Mayor, we will
4 continue to support the cultural community where it's
5 needed most. And I want to thank you again for all
6 of your hard work on that, it's something to be very
7 proud of so thank you. Without losing site of the
8 profound damage caused to our communities and
9 cultural groups, we've been overjoyed to see the
10 return of creative programming to New York City. It
11 has been important both as a powerful symbol of
12 recovery and a very real return of immense value that
13 culture brings to our communities. The cultural
14 communities' commitment to supporting one another
15 throughout this challenging time has been inspiring
16 and has made re-opening efforts safe and successful.
17 The culture at Three Comb (sic), the New York City,
18 the NYC Museum Reopening Task Force and other
19 collective efforts are, we hope, here to stay. We've
20 been proud of the City's work to support the
21 reopening of culture and revival of New York. Since
22 the start of the pandemic, DCOA has been working
23 closely with cultural groups and our city partners
24 particularly in the Mayor's Office of Media
25 Entertainment, NYC and Company and Department of

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2 Small Business Services to understand and support the
3 needs of our constituents. Early on, we partnered
4 with these offices on Virtual NYC to highlight and
5 connect audiences with an amazing variety of digital
6 programming that helped sustain us through those
7 difficult months. Later our partners in the Mayor's
8 office created programs like Curtains Up NYC to help
9 groups navigate the Federal and State Relief Funds
10 available to them. In a DCOA our staff worked
11 tirelessly to process changes, to grant applications,
12 to make sure that City dollars could continue to flow
13 to the cultural community. But what are you makes?
14 Starting in March of this year, Open Culture NYC
15 created through legislation sponsored by you, Chair
16 Van Bramer has been a major success. Over 450 events
17 have been permitted since the program began.
18 Alongside other programs that have been brought, that
19 have brought city streets to life with dynamic
20 performances. Open Culture gave New Yorkers the
21 chance to engage in arts programming in their
22 neighborhoods. It also gave artists and art groups
23 the opportunity to earn much needed revenue. You'll
24 hear more about this program from my colleagues in
25 the street activity permit office shortly. Regarding

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2 the proposed bill, Intro 2398 which would make Open
3 Culture permanent, we share your goals of expanding
4 the role of culture in the life of our City and we
5 look forward to working through details with you as
6 the Legislation progresses. Another major source of
7 support for artists and cultural connection for New
8 Yorkers this year has been the City Artist Corps
9 Announced by Mayor De Blasio and Commissioner Casals
10 in May, the program has provided support to more than
11 3000 artists to date. In addition to investing in
12 those hard hit community, City Artist Corp is
13 bringing performances, workshops and more to every
14 corner of New York City. There are over 100 public
15 programs planned just through the end of the
16 September by artists who received City Artist Corps
17 Grants administered with New York Foundation for the
18 Arts and local partners around the City. The City
19 Artist Corps has also been partnering with hundreds
20 of artists and DOE students to create murals and
21 performances with NYCHA Residents to design and
22 install murals on public housing sites and with
23 artists in hard-hit neighborhoods city-wide through
24 Carnegie Hall Beautify NYC Program. The full return
25 of live indoor performance will be another important

2 milestone in our city's recovery. Indoor cultural
3 activity resumed, cautiously last summer and outdoor
4 performances through Hallmark Summer Events like the
5 Public Theatres Free Shakespeare in the Park, Open
6 Culture Programs and the City's Home Concerts last
7 month have heralded a new phase of recovery as
8 vaccines give us a major new tool to fight COVID-19.
9 Earlier this year Mayor de Blasio, the Mayor's Office
10 of Media Entertainment and Actor's Fund set up a
11 vaccination site in Times Square for members of the
12 performing arts community. The City clearly
13 recognizes the importance and value of this
14 community. NYC and Company has also launched a
15 historic campaign to attract visitors back safely and
16 the key to NYC a vaccine mandate for which full
17 enforcement began yesterday, the next major effort we
18 need to support our recovery. To clarify, we are not
19 seeking a return to the previous status quo. The
20 pandemic showed a harsh light on too many aspects of
21 our society that are in dire need of major systemic
22 repair. We have lots of work ahead and while culture
23 never really closed in New York City, a return to
24 sort of live social connections that we've all missed
25 these last 18 months are a welcome sign that our work

2 together is paying off. Thank you for the
3 opportunity to testify today. And I'm happy to take
4 any questions.

5 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Thank you.
6 I want to recognize Council Member Gennaro who is
7 Chairing another hearing in the other room so thank
8 you Council Member Gennaro for joining us on the
9 committee, of course as he goes to chair his
10 committee in the other room. So, thank you.

11 STEFAN GRYBAUSKAS: Good morning Chair
12 Van Bramer, members of the committee and the public.
13 Thank you for the opportunity to testify in Intro
14 2398. My name is Stefan Grybauskas. I am the
15 Director of the Street Activity Permit Office also
16 known as SAPO and Deputy Executive Director of the
17 Mayor's Office of Citywide Event Coordination and
18 Management (CECM). CECM serves as a broad umbrella
19 overseeing and coordinating events and other
20 temporary use of streets, plazas, sidewalks and
21 parks. We are a one stop shop for guidelines and
22 permissions from agencies who ensure events are safe
23 and positive for all New Yorkers. From FDNY, NYPD,
24 DSNY to DOB and TEP. SAPO grants permits for
25 streets, sidewalks and plazas including signature

2 events like the New York City Marathon to the
3 smallest neighborhood block party. In early 2021
4 following the passing of Chair Van Bramer's Open
5 Culture Legislation SAPO implemented this program on
6 New York City Streets. Open culture has allowed
7 eligible arts and cultural institutions along with
8 cultural venues to apply for expedited and low-cost
9 permits to host events on city streets. Our office
10 implemented a simplified application process for
11 these permits to enable wider accessibility. As of
12 September 13th, we have permitted over 459 Open
13 Culture Events. The program has been a success for
14 many organizations however, it has not been without
15 its challenges. New York City Streetscape is shared
16 by a wide of users and this has posed some problems
17 for our applicants in executing their events. Our
18 office works tirelessly to help our applicants and
19 ensure that their events go off as seamlessly as
20 possible. Regarding Intro 2398 the Administration
21 supports this bill and the permanent implementation
22 of the Open Culture Program. We do have some
23 concerns about the best way to increase the number of
24 locations available to Open Culture Permits. We look
25 forward to working with the City Council during the

2 aging process to address these issues and ensure open
3 culture remains a vibrant and effective program from
4 all New Yorkers. In closing, I look forward to
5 working with the Council and our sister agencies and
6 continuing to support cultural organizations and
7 utilizing public space throughout the City. Thank
8 you for the opportunity to speak today.

9 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Thank you
10 very much to both of you and thank you, uh, to the
11 Administration for supporting the bill and let me
12 see. There are a few things we want to discuss and
13 we will have that process take place. I'm sure James
14 Archer will be a part of those discussions who is
15 very instrumental in the first round but maybe Stefan
16 you can tell me what some of the challenges are that
17 we faced, maybe that we didn't anticipate or what
18 have we learned through these first 459 permitted
19 events that we could do even better with Open Culture
20 2.0?

21 STEFAN GRYBAUSKAS: Sure. You know I
22 think just. I'm going to give a few examples of the
23 issues that we have and it's definitely things we can
24 work on trying to find solutions for in the future.
25 Um, you know as I mentioned in the testimony there is

2 a variety of users on the street, not just cars but
3 also, um, parking garages, auto body shops and other
4 businesses that have access, need access to the
5 street. So the frequent closure of certain blocks
6 has definitely caused some friction between
7 applicants and the owners of those businesses.
8 Additionally, you know we had over 144 locations;
9 however, only about 76 of them were actually applied
10 for which did lead to a lot of applicants utilizing
11 the same streets over and over again. Obviously,
12 some of those streets are probably in culturally
13 significant neighborhoods and there is no doubt that
14 they would want to use those locations; however, that
15 definitely led to some friction between neighbors,
16 businesses on those blocks who felt that the streets
17 was being closed on a very frequent basis but you
18 know generally we are supportive of expanding the
19 number of locations and finding more opportunities
20 for applicants to use but we definitely want to kind
21 of examine what those locations are more closely.

22 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Again,
23 thank you for that information, so if those 76
24 locations are experiencing some tension with some
25 folks thinking it's over utilized additional streets

2 to use might actually help alleviate some of that
3 pressure.

4 STEFAN GRYBAUSKAS: Having additional
5 streets would, could potentially help with that
6 issue. Um, but yeah. We look, we look forward to
7 talking about it further with you and your office but
8 yeah.

9 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Yeah, but
10 144 different locations have been utilized under the
11 program?

12 STEFAN GRYBAUSKAS: No sorry. We have,
13 we have 144 and I'll send your office the exact
14 number after this but I think we have 144 locations
15 in total and only 76 of those were used.

16 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Oh, I get
17 it. Okay. Got it. And so, um, we can obviously
18 take a look at some of the locations maybe that have
19 not been utilized at all and work to find other
20 locations that might be much more relevant for the
21 program. Um, but that's helpful to know and so those
22 459 programs have taken place on those 76 . . .

23 STEFAN GRYBAUSKAS: Yes.

24 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: . . .
25 locations essentially?

2 STEFAN GRYBAUSKAS: Yep.

3 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Got it.

4 And we built into the, the program some limitations
5 on how often, um, a street could be used, right?

6 What is that again and how is that helpful? Or are
7 we seeing some of those locations that are used every
8 available date essentially that could be used?

9 STEFAN GRYBAUSKAS: Um, so the, the
10 limitation we had on the guidelines but it was not in
11 the Legislation specifically, the original
12 Legislation was up for four events per month which in
13 some situations amounted to a location being used
14 once a week. So, I think there were some, um,
15 locations where, you know we've received complaints
16 from residents on those blocks that their, their
17 street is closed every Saturday. So, that basically
18 amounted to that but we can definitely look towards,
19 you know coming up with a different, um, metric for
20 how frequently somebody can use that street.

21 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Got it.

22 Um, and I don't know if you or DCLA has this, because
23 I certainly saw rehearsals going on, on 39th Avenue
24 in, in Sunnyside which was great, Queens Borough
25 Dance, um, were rehearsing for performances. Do you

2 have a sense of how often folks have used this
3 program for rehearsals as opposed to paid
4 performances . . .

5 STEFAN GRYBAUSKAS: Um.

6 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Or full
7 on performances?

8 STEFAN GRYBAUSKAS: We did not collect,
9 just, in our application we didn't collect
10 specifically if people were, were charging for
11 tickets because they was, they were permitted to do
12 regardless. So that wasn't like a condition of their
13 application. Obviously, we worked with you to make a
14 kind of streamline application. We did do a survey
15 recently, um, which we did find out that 63% of
16 applicants did use this event to generate income
17 directly and/or indirectly. That was from an
18 applicant's only response to our survey.

19 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: 63% of
20 the 459 events . . .

21 STEFAN GRYBAUSKAS: Yes.

22 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Were
23 revenue producing?
24
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2 STEFAN GRYBAUSKAS: Based on their own
3 feedback to our survey so not, obviously not everyone
4 responded but.

5 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Right.
6 That's, uh, that's 63%.

7 STEFAN GRYBAUSKAS: That's either
8 indirectly or directly. So not necessarily ticket
9 sales.

10 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Right,
11 right. That's good. And have we had any response in
12 terms of, of folks continuing to ask for additional
13 locations or, or, any additional issues with, you
14 know we aimed at geographic diversity, right? Making
15 sure that there were open culture locations in every
16 borough but obviously there still may be some areas
17 that could benefit from having access to the program?

18 STEFAN GRYBAUSKAS: Um, we def-, so DOT
19 managed the locations in terms of vetting and, and
20 stuff like that and obviously they are a partner in
21 this, in this program. Um, you know I think we tried
22 for a, kind of a pilot slate of streets but again
23 definitely interested in working with your office on
24 coming up with a long-term permanent solution for
25 where the locations are going to be. Um, there were

2 some, some requests at times for additional
3 locations. I think when we had to remove locations
4 because of issues like with parking garages or auto
5 body shops, um, in some cases we were able to replace
6 them. I don't have the total number of locations
7 removed but I can definitely get you that number from
8 when I speak to DOT after this.

9 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Got it
10 and obviously we are going to hear from some folks.

11 STEFAN GRYBAUSKAS: It was, it was not
12 a lot. Uh . . .

13 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Right.

14 STEFAN GRYBAUSKAS: It was not a big
15 total.

16 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Terrific.
17 We are going to hear from folks in the, in the sector
18 and in the community and, and perhaps some folks will
19 have some ideas about how we can enhance the program
20 and make it work even better for artists and arts
21 organizations while also making it permanent and, I
22 am anxious to hear from, from, from those folks.
23 And, um, for UCLA, so the, uh, the program, uh, that,
24 uh, that you have going, these 3,000 the artists
25 choir, folks are, are some of those folks being

2 directed to open culture or are many of them, I've
3 had several artists in, in my own district who, who
4 were recipients and are recipients of the grant. I
5 am very excited for them for what they are working on
6 some of them I think are already, you know, looking
7 to dovetail into open culture.

8 SHEELAH FEINBERG: Yeah, I believe
9 there has been some overlap. I can get you the exact
10 number later. I don't have the exact number but yes,
11 that is something that has happened.

12 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Most
13 folks have to, uh, produce those programs pretty
14 quickly, right?

15 SHEELAH FEINBERG: Yeah.

16 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Yes. So
17 hopefully before the weather gets cold obviously we
18 are in uncharted territory, Stefan because you just
19 began the program, we've had good weather, um, and
20 now we are going in to the cold weather but the
21 program will continue year round, right?

22 STEFAN GRYBAUSKAS: Yeah. All of our
23 permitting is done on a rolling basis and they expect
24 open culture will be the same, um, so yeah, generally
25 we see numbers go down in the winter, I mean we've

2 already started to see some numbers start to go down,
3 um, just in the fall, but it may also be the result
4 of the re-opening of some venues, but, um, you know
5 we do permit year round so, it's just a question of
6 snow and weather and weather it holds up.

7 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Right.

8 We could have a winter festival or, um, . . .

9 STEFAN GRYBAUSKAS: We do that. We do
10 New Year's Eve as I mentioned in my testimony, so.

11 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Yeah.

12 Lots of hot cocoa for everyone. Um, to get through
13 the freezing weather. Um, do you have any questions,
14 Darma?

15 DARMA DIAZ: Yes, I do.

16 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Okay.

17 Um.

18 DARMA DIAZ: Thank you. Artistic
19 Communities have suffered a lot and I know very
20 little about this process. So thank you, thank you,
21 thank you. My question is for DCOA.

22 SHEELAH FEINBERG: Okay.

23 DARMA DIAZ: You referenced the
24 housing program. I would like to know your

2 involvement and if it is a positive on the forefront
3 as well?

4 SHEELAH FEINBERG: Um, are you
5 speaking specifically about our work with NYCHA or
6 are you just talking about the broader program?

7 DARMA DIAZ: The broader program.

8 SHEELAH FEINBERG: You know we haven't
9 had as much to do with that but, you know, we are
10 supportive of it.

11 DARMA DIAZ: Thank you. That as
12 well.

13 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Thank you
14 very much Council Member Diaz for your support for
15 our sector in the Arts and Culture in the City and
16 obviously your beloved Brooklyn but, um, we love
17 artists in all boroughs.

18 DARMA DIAZ: Well of course.

19 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Um, so,
20 um, so thank you. I mean I think, uh, as you both
21 know we worked very hard to stand this up and, um, I
22 think it has met with some success which is very
23 exciting. Every earned income opportunity for
24 artists and arts organizations is just that. Very
25 important earned income opportunity. We want to keep

2 extending the program and do it in a way that's
3 equitable of course for all. I know that both of
4 your organizations, agencies believe that. You know
5 the Administration does. So, look forward to working
6 with all of you to, to make this happen very, very
7 soon and it's a good thing to lead the City of New
8 York and the cultural sector in particular.

9 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: So, with
10 that we'll close this portion of the testimony. I
11 thank both of you. Send our regards to Commissioner
12 Casals who I spoke to and I know, um, could not be
13 with us today. And we will hear from is it, you guys
14 are free to go. Two folks at a time at the table,
15 two at a time. Okay? So, why don't we hear from
16 Robin Schatell from Open Culture Works and Lucy
17 Sexton from New Yorkers for Culture and Arts? And
18 then we have two other panels to follow, um, right
19 after that. I can't hear you Robin. Is the light
20 on? When the light is on, we can hear you better.

21 ROBIN SCHATELL: Hi there. Are you going
22 to, are we being timed?

23 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Um, there
24 is a clock. Um, I think we'd be fairly generous in
25

2 terms of if you have a little bit more, but we, we
3 generally ask folks to be in that . . .

4 ROBIN SCHATELL: Sure. Thank you.

5 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: In that
6 zone shall we say.

7 ROBIN SCHATELL: I will say I'm aware of
8 the time I'm a little over so I hope you will bear
9 with me, but thank you so much.

10 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: You are a
11 little over? Don't worry about it. But, um, so you
12 are going to go first Robin, right? Feel free to
13 start.

14 ROBIN SCHATELL: Hi, good afternoon and
15 thank you for this opportunity to speak. My name is
16 Robin Schatell I am a 30+ year's cultural worker and
17 the co-founder of Open Culture Works. Uh, we formed
18 in January of this year to help artists navigate the
19 Open Culture Permitting Process and to mount their
20 work outdoors on City streets. We were inspired to
21 do so after hearing about Open Culture um, through
22 the Culture of Three Meetings. Um, hence our name
23 and I thank you for that Councilman Van Bramer. Um,
24 and with the help of New Yorkers for Culture and Arts
25 on March 19th, a year after our City's Arts and

1 COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS

29

2 Culture Sector shut down the pandemic we produced our
3 first Open Culture events. That weekend we worked
4 with six art groups in four boroughs on Open Culture
5 Streets, 140th in the Bronx, 130th East Harlem, North
6 6th in Brooklyn and Hyatt in Staten Island. Since
7 then, and over the last seven months and through
8 October we will have supported nearly 80 performing
9 arts groups in open culture streets as well as in
10 parks and plazas through Green/Arts Live the City's
11 Open Boulevards Performance Series. Two programs
12 inspired by Open Culture. I figure around 400
13 artists we worked with, about five per group we got
14 the chance, who got the chance to share their art and
15 perform and get paid to do so during this pandemic
16 year. We have been in all kinds of neighborhoods on
17 all kinds of streets, Arthur Avenue in the Bronx,
18 75th and Broadway Manhattan twice, Garfield Place in
19 Brooklyn, Menthorn Street in Staten Island and
20 Ditmar's Boulevard and 33rd Street in Queens to name
21 a few. We've employed 50 stage hands, technicians
22 and sound engineers, collaborated with dozens of bids
23 and open street groups, touched the lives of and
24 brought smiles to the faces of countless New Yorkers.
25 Now picture this, this past weekend, the sun is

2 setting on Ditmars and 33rd Street's Open Streets.

3 No traffic. We had our stage on one corner. A bar

4 with outdoor tables and stools is on the other, next

5 door to us more outdoor dining, across on the other

6 corner, Taverna Kyclades which is a great, a great

7 seafood restaurant and down front about 100 people or

8 so sitting in folding chairs on the bus stop bench

9 and some standing around. Martha Redbone Roots

10 Project was on the stage. We had these blue, pink

11 and red lights mixing with the white street lights

12 and the yellow, green traffic lights. Martha's

13 rainbow skirt is glistening under these lights and

14 her bluesy voice was mesmerizing. I felt like I was

15 on some kind of movie set, an MTV studio show with

16 built-in audiences but I wasn't, I was on a street in

17 Queens on the eve of the 20th Anniversary of 9/11.

18 Everyone around me was there because they wanted to

19 be. People were singing and clapping. Kids were

20 running up and down the street. I befriended Jimmy

21 the Fireman. Jessie Mallet our

22 headliner/singer/songwriter/composer and Queens

23 native said he never would have thought to do this on

24 the street and certainly and certainly not back on

25 Queens, his hometown. Open Culture brought this

2 recording artist back home. Now it hasn't been
3 without its challenges but I need about 2,000 minutes
4 to talk about that. It took a village to make Open
5 Culture happen, the City Council who listened to its
6 citizens, determined arts advocates who pushed for
7 change, creative artists and cultural workers who
8 bring it to life, Community Partners to welcome us
9 in. I urge you City Council to make Open Culture a
10 permanent City Program with designated funding, with
11 staffing, with marketing promotion, oversight,
12 program review and evaluation processes. Thank you.

13 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Thank
14 you. Thank you very much. Um and I don't know if
15 you knew that I grew up in Astoria, Queens but I
16 certainly appreciate your leaning in to the Astoria
17 story which is very beautiful, um, and you brought to
18 life that evening on Ditmars so thank you for that.
19 Um, it's really great to actually, um, hear a story
20 like that, you know, because you pass a piece of
21 legislation and often you don't really get to see or
22 feel how it impacted people's lives and in, in your
23 time at Astoria you certainly got to see that. So,
24 anxious to hear from you after, Lucy, about some of
25 the challenges you faced and how we can make the

2 program better but, but as an Astoria kid, thank you
3 for telling that story. Lucy.

4 LUCY SEXTON: Thank you Chair Van
5 Bramer and Council Member Diaz and Cristy. My name
6 is Lucy Sexton. I led the Cultural Advocacy
7 Coalition New Yorkers for Culture and Arts. While it,
8 I was to just say that it is personally exciting to
9 be here in person with you all. I do want to
10 register the complaint that eliminating the virtual
11 option to meetings means limiting and often excluding
12 artists and cultural workers from out of boroughs and
13 smaller organizations with less capacity to take a
14 day off to come and testify. It was one of the great
15 things about the shutdown was the number of people
16 that could testify. I just wanted to say that I've
17 testified at Council Hearings since the shutdown,
18 reminding you that the most fragile parts of our
19 sector are having the hardest time and I have
20 repeatedly said we cannot emerge for this crisis with
21 a more centralized and more white cultural ecosystem
22 and yet that is what has happened. I am attaching
23 the link to a copy of the report by the DCLA done in
24 partnership with Americans for the Arts and Howard
25 Gilman Foundation. It's stark findings, we are a

2 more inequitable cultural ecosystem than ever. As
3 you know Arts and Culture were one of the and by some
4 measures THE hardest hit sector. We were first to
5 shut and will be the last to fully re-open. The key
6 to NYC has delivered another economic setback and
7 again those, with again those cultural organizations
8 in the least vaccinated and often least white
9 neighborhoods are the most impacted. Many will not
10 survive. I implore you in thinking of re-opening to
11 think about finding federal emergency relief monies
12 to support cultural organizations in the most
13 impacted ZIP codes. Funds to not only get them
14 through but to partner with them to increase
15 vaccination outreach and education to the communities
16 that trust them. Now, Open Culture. One of the big
17 innovation of Open Culture was allowing groups
18 accessing the permits to charge and collect money for
19 the publically performed work. A first for the City
20 but as we know ticket fees often cover only a small
21 portion of the cost of the work. Particularly if you
22 keep prices affordable and make the work accessible
23 to all. Additional support in the form of grants and
24 production assistance would be an enormous
25 improvement while permitting programs I know don't

2 come with grants, this program does come with a
3 website as required by its partner legislation. That
4 site could be used to list grants, subsidize
5 production help and a whole host of information and
6 resources that would make this program more
7 accessible to the artists and groups that most need
8 it. I refer you to the Green/Arts Live Program as a
9 model. It's a program that provides many grants and
10 production support for work done in parks and plazas.
11 One final point, a major program with Open Culture
12 has been resistance from residents of Open Culture
13 blocks. In discussing this with the Arts Community,
14 Sophia Harrison of Arts House Schools in Coney Island
15 suggested that the City send postcards to each
16 residents of, of the affected blocks. Similar to the
17 recent cards the City sent about composting. These
18 communications should make clear the benefits of the
19 programming and bringing traffic to local businesses
20 and safe activities to local families and perhaps
21 most importantly make it clear how the residents
22 themselves might use this program to put on
23 performances, dance recitals, fundraisers for the PTA
24 or a chance for locals to share their own cultural
25 talent. We need clear communication and buy in from

2 the residents if this program is to succeed. Thank
3 you for your time and attention. Thank you Chair Van
4 Bramer for your legendary and ground breaking support
5 and work for arts and culture in our City. We are in
6 your debt.

7 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Thank you.
8 Thank you very much. Oh, I'm sorry, I'm hearing the
9 other room. Um, thank you very much Lucy for those
10 kind words but also as always for some really
11 constructive suggestions on how we can make this
12 program better and, and more equitable going forward
13 and I, I definitely think in those areas where
14 Stefan's team experiences resistance from local
15 residents of those streets that there, there must be
16 some way of notifying and somehow including them
17 more. That won't make everyone happy of course.
18 That won't address all of the issues but it, it can
19 be helpful and I think, I think bringing folks in to
20 the program and letting them know what's happening
21 in, in their neighborhood. Again, most people I
22 think as I, I experience Kregia's programs and couple
23 of times and rehearsals. Most people are thrilled
24 and, and walk up not know that there was going to be
25 a performance on their street and you know I, I saw

2 lots of ballet and children doing ballet and it was
3 wild, wildly successful with hundreds of people just
4 sort of stumbling on to the music but I also saw a
5 couple of people who were less than thrilled with the
6 performance but, um, you know, there, there might be
7 more that we can do to try and alleviate some of
8 those tensions.

9 ROBIN SCHATELL: I, I would say that in
10 my neighborhood the local bid give those Open Culture
11 on the block every Tuesday so the bids might be
12 another area where they can be communicating with the
13 local businesses, etc. and I want to give a shout out
14 to say while I use the Open Culture Program and boy
15 were people helpful and communicative and helping me
16 make it happen so I really appreciated the support.

17 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: That's
18 great. Um, and, uh, do you know, I know you started
19 off with some other comments and thoughts and I, I
20 just want to share obviously having gone through the
21 virtual experience, we did see increased
22 participation obviously in the virtual hearings which
23 I, I loved. And you know, I think the, the Council
24 is I think thinking about how to do this work, right?
25 Going forward and so we have today an in-person

2 hearing with limited ability for folks to, to testify
3 and, um, you know, I, uh, I think it's an ongoing
4 discussion of how do we, we merge the two if we do
5 and how does that happen. What's that?

6 DARMA DIAZ: I said hybrid.

7 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Yes, yes,
8 yes, hybrid for sure. So, um, I want to just, um, go
9 back to Robin because your testimony, you talked
10 about just in the, in the programs that you worked
11 on, 400 artists and, and 50 stage hands and you know,
12 getting paid for their work, um, which is just a
13 portion of the programs that have taken place at a
14 time when folks are desperate in many cases to work.
15 That demonstrates the success of this program as a
16 job creation tool. But I know you had some thought
17 and some things that, some challenges that you faced
18 and I am anxious to hear what those are and if you
19 have suggestions on how we could improve the program
20 in Open Culture 2.0 to, to help you further.

21 ROBIN SCHATELL: Sure, yes I. I do. I
22 mean I, I, I mean, there are sort of three areas I
23 suppose, one would be the funding and financial
24 support. Obviously you know the Open Culture Program
25 was announced and it was, it was sort of here's your,

2 here's your four walls they call it in a theatre.
3 Your open space, have a show, good luck but the
4 artists need support and that support costs money and
5 without that funding of some sort, you know, they
6 couldn't, they couldn't do what they needed to do and
7 from the production standpoint the part that we did
8 production for our company we really did the best
9 that we could to offer our services as free as
10 possible as people also arts in the arts continued
11 to, to be able to work. So that was a big part of
12 it. I also think institutional support. I've talked
13 about institutional support or agency support that
14 this is not, this to me was always a program and not
15 just a, a, a permit right and that to be a program it
16 needs staffing. It needs to be marketed. It needs
17 to be promoted. The public needs to be educated
18 about it and it needs, um, you know the institutional
19 support. Everything from the police departments
20 being involved in helping moved parked cars, to you
21 know, NYC See and Go which is the City's marketing
22 arm helping to create something or the office of the
23 MOAM Office, you know, as they do a lot of their big
24 announcements like the one book or one film. I think
25 this is a program that could really take off and do

2 that for the City of New York. You know, yes, I
3 think I would also begin with a choice of streets and
4 how the streets are chosen and to, to work with the
5 arts community to work with local communities groups
6 and bids to choose the streets intentionally. And
7 intentionally in that, you know, there are partners
8 in neighborhoods that would be working, we, artists
9 and groups would be working with so that there are
10 those resources, bathrooms, electricity, um you know
11 and stuff like that and that's, that's a way to
12 engage I think neighborhood residents when there is a
13 community organization involved and so I think that's
14 something that would really be helpful to really be
15 intentional about the street choices and often
16 obviously some of these streets are very narrow and
17 small and so just on that sort of built-in
18 environment standpoint of trying to fit in, you know,
19 the filings of 15 feet but you need to have it small
20 stage or you want to perform or you have speakers.
21 You know, how do you fit all that in? Um, so I think
22 intentional street choices but I again really and I
23 don't know how this could happen but some kind of
24 funding, really turn this into a program. Really get
25 the support of the, of all the city agencies behind

2 this to, to announce this and I could see, I could
3 see this being a, you know a summer festival. The
4 Open Culture you know Summer Festival all five
5 boroughs, I could see something like that happening.
6 It would take financial support and marketing support
7 and I think that's ...

8 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Yeah.

9 ROBIN SCHATELL: That's it. And you know
10 just the, you know, again I think as far as Lucy's
11 point about and Stefan's point about unhappy
12 residents I mean I think it's not just marketing
13 promotion but it's really educating the public about
14 what this program is and who it's serving and why it
15 exists.

16 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Those are
17 all very good points and, uh, I know, funding is
18 always needed and requested and always the most
19 challenging thing to come by but I, I definitely
20 agree with you about this being a program and I think
21 one of the ways that we make sure that it actually
22 becomes a fully functional program is that it be
23 permanent and, and I think including NYC and company
24 and getting support from, from them is, is something
25 that we absolutely must achieve.

2 ROBIN SCHATELL: And, and earlier I think
3 you said something about this being an economic
4 driver as we know the arts are and I mean, and you
5 know, I've been to so many neighborhoods and you
6 know, it brought people out. The restaurants were
7 busy, the bars were busy, the cafes, you know we
8 spent money, the artists spent money, we spent money,
9 so it's really on a local level really it helps the
10 local economy as well so I think that is an important
11 factor. Um, one the last thing I would like to
12 mention and I mentioned this on some phone calls that
13 I've had with Jack about, you know, if this is going
14 to be a permanent program something like a kit that
15 an artist can use that's in, that's in a container on
16 that street and anyone can use, there are a
17 combination of chairs, whatever might be needed for
18 your show, some kind of like technical support
19 materials would be very helpful..

20 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Thank you
21 very much.

22 ROBIN SCHATELL: You're welcome.

23 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Lucy, and
24 more suggestions or ideas, things that you've heard
25

2 from the sector in terms of what we could do better
3 here?

4 LUCY SEXTON: Uh, Robin covered a lot.
5 I think that the, the website is where I'm going back
6 to in terms of communication, uh, so that we can also
7 let people know that these are happening. Right now
8 it does a good job of listing all the things but it
9 just lists what's on the permit application so it
10 says like, you know, Dance Theatre of Harlem, you
11 know 9:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. and where it is. But
12 you know, if in the permit application you asked
13 everybody to put in their website or a link to, I
14 think then people would say okay, I'll link on that
15 website and find oh they are doing this and it's at
16 7:00 p.m. not at 8:00 a.m. or whatever. So, just in
17 terms of improving the way we communicate about all
18 of these things that happening.

19 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: This is
20 for both of you rather, either of you can answer this
21 question. Uh, have you, what has been your
22 experience with local community boards? Local
23 precincts? You know some of the folks you, you might
24 need help from and/or could be helpful in promoting
25 the event but in some cases obviously you might also

2 face resistance from a local civic or community
3 board? Has there been a lot of interaction between
4 those organizations and entities or what have been
5 those experiences like?

6 LUCY SEXTON: Uh, yeah, the neighborhood
7 where I'm in which is Soho and where I did my event,
8 you know, it's mostly businesses and so they were
9 happy, um, and everybody was involved so that was,
10 that was seamless. We had wanted to do it on 104th,
11 East 104th which is another of the Open Culture
12 blocks and one thing that, we were hiring Open
13 Culture Works and one thing they provided is like
14 okay, these are the guys that hang out in front of
15 this store, they are really helpful, go talk to them,
16 you know, invite the local school. So like in that
17 website where you say like, okay, whose, what, I'm
18 going to go down 104th Street. Okay, here's all the
19 community organizations on 104th Street that you
20 might want to reach out to say we are doing this.
21 So, it's that deep local, on the ground, you know,
22 whose hanging out where and whose going to help you
23 do this in a way that will make the community enjoy
24 it and not be resistant to it. So, I think it's
25 definitely possibly but I think it's about using our

2 communication tools and some of the local knowledge,
3 etc.

4 RACHEL SCHATELL: Yeah and being on the
5 ground, I, I mean the Community Affairs offices are
6 very helpful you know at the precincts but it, more,
7 some more than others. Really depending on the
8 relationship they have with the local bids. You know
9 we were on the upper west side and, uh, the Columbus
10 Avenue Bid there, northern bid had a great
11 relationship with the Community Affairs Officer so we
12 were able to get the four cars parked where our stage
13 was supposed to go or where the performers were
14 supposed to perform but that didn't, you know, it
15 didn't happen everywhere and in fact I didn't even
16 get a sound permit on Saturday because they were too
17 busy. But, um, you know, I think, I think there
18 seemed to be like a, sort of a lack of knowledge
19 really about what we were doing in a way, you know,
20 and, um, I think that would be more helpful. Um, I,
21 something, what Lucy was just talking about almost to
22 me sounds like the back end a little bit. Like
23 there's the marketing, once these events are together
24 there's the marketing, promotion and communicating to
25 the general public that this is happening but then on

2 the other side to be able to have a team that can
3 actually pull all of those resources together to know
4 if you are having a street. You know what is, uh,
5 you know Garfield Place in Brooklyn. It's like a
6 completely residential block but what's near there
7 and whose near there? You know, it takes a team of
8 people to do the research and to find the resource
9 and to know whose there and to knock on those doors
10 so how do you, how do you sort of build that in this
11 this? That would be a question. But, yeah, I mean,
12 we, we, crossed our fingers whenever we went to a
13 street and hoped that the cars weren't parked where
14 we were supposed to be setting up and that was the
15 big -- that was the biggest issue I guess.

16 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Uh, any
17 sound or amplification issues? How did that, did
18 that always work out?

19 ROBIN SCHATELL: Yeah I, I have,
20 yeah I haven't gotten. It did always work out. You
21 know we had to bring power, that's the other thing
22 when we did the events in the, on the 140th Street in
23 the Bronx it was the best, one of the best blocks
24 that we've been on because it was two Arts
25 Organizations were on the block, the Bronx Arts and

2 Culture Center and ID Studio Theatre so we were able
3 to use their power. We didn't have to worry about
4 generators, you could plug in to their power, we
5 could go in there and do our set up so that was an
6 ideal block, to be on a block where you have a
7 cultural partner who can help you provide that stuff
8 but mostly it's generators and you know generators
9 are run with gasoline and that's the cheapest way to
10 go and the most expensive way, the green generators
11 were very expensive so, so that's you know we had to
12 bring, we brought power wherever we went basically in
13 order to amplify. But as far as any feedback or
14 people being upset about the sound, I hadn't come
15 across that.

16 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: That's
17 great. Um, that's great. This is very helpful.
18 Thank you for everything that you're doing both of
19 you to make sure the program is a real program, is
20 successful and ultimately permanent and of course
21 funded, so I really, really appreciate everything you
22 do and Lucy I think you were on more than just a few
23 of our virtual hearings. I feel like you were on all
24 of our virtual hearings over the year and a half that
25 we went virtual and thank you for, for that and for

2 your advocacy on behalf of the community. So, um,
3 unless Council Member Diaz has any questions for this
4 panel, um, thank you very much for coming to join us
5 in person today and for everything that you do for
6 our sector. Uh, and with that again we have two more
7 panels of two, um, Emily Mathis Corona from Ballet
8 Hispanic and is it Fran Garber-Cohen. All right.
9 One more panel after that.

10 MALE: Okay.

11 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Feel free
12 to start.

13 EMILY MATHIS CORONA: Is it on?

14 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: As long
15 as the light is red it's on. Oops. There you go.

16 EMILY MATHIS CORONA: Uh, good afternoon
17 my name is Emily Mathis Corona, Assistant Director of
18 Institutional Relations at Ballet Hispanico. Uh,
19 thank you Chairman Van Bramer and members of the
20 Committee for the opportunity to speak with you
21 today. I'm here to advocate for the permanency of
22 the Open Culture Program and for continued City
23 Funding to support the return of indoor programming
24 in 2022. As Ballet Hispanico joins its fellow arts
25 leaders in recovery and in the immense challenge of

2 reopening it looks to City leaders for guidance and
3 support. The sustainability of the successful open
4 culture program is imperative to this recovery. The
5 economic impact of a thriving arts ecology to New
6 York City cannot be overstated. Nonprofit cultural
7 groups generate over \$8 billion annually and citywide
8 economic impact and employ more than 120,000. The
9 City's booming tourism industry, neighborhood
10 vitality and commercial vibrancy are dependent on the
11 contributions of the cultural sector and in an era of
12 start division the voices of culture organizations
13 like Ballet Hispanico founded on the principals of
14 bringing people together through Art are more
15 important than ever. From its inception, Ballet
16 Hispanico has been centered in its mission to
17 increase access to dance, to community outreach,
18 engagement and education. The age community programs
19 reach thousands of New Yorkers of every walk of life,
20 uplifting young people of Hispanic heritage and
21 inspiring all to learn about Latin-X culture through
22 the lens of dance. The pillars of the Open Culture
23 Program, open space affordability and accessibility,
24 sustainability and solidarity between cultural
25 organizations will ensure critical Ballet Hispanico

2 Programs and others like it can continue to thrive in
3 a post-pandemic economy. Through efforts like the
4 Open Culture Program the City has indicated that it
5 deeply values a thriving arts ecosystem. More than
6 ever, organizations like Ballet Hispanico will need
7 robust public support in order to continue
8 championing and amplifying under-represented voices.
9 The proposed permanency of the Open Culture Program
10 ensures our survival as we enter this next phase of
11 re-opening Ballet Hispanico was founded upon and is
12 always believed in the importance of reaching and
13 serving our community through dance. We thank the
14 City of New York for making that possible. Thank you
15 for the opportunity to testify.

16 FRAN GARBER-COHEN: I'm Fran Garber-
17 Cohen, President of Regina Opera. For 51 years,
18 Regina Opera located in Sunset Park has offered fully
19 staged operas with full orchestra and English
20 subtitles as well as many ticketed and free operatic
21 and classical concerts. We provide affordable
22 entertainment in accessible venues for audience
23 members who may not otherwise attend like
24 performances. The performances bring happiness and
25 empathy to our audiences and bring people together

2 especially senior citizens who make up about 65% of
3 our audience. We perform three full operas each
4 season, each featuring four ticketed and one totally
5 free performance complete with subtitles. The need
6 for this cultural enrichment is reflected in the fact
7 that over 4,000 people usually attend our
8 performances each season. Due to COVID, we lost
9 ticket income from 16 months of live performances.
10 Moreover, we lost our audience. People had to remain
11 in their homes, they lost the connections that they
12 made when they attended live musical performances.
13 People who live in Sunset Park and other low-income
14 sections of Brooklyn who are lucky enough to have
15 essential jobs or had work that they could do
16 remotely were still not able to attend the musical
17 performances they love. Once New York City opened a
18 little in March 2021 and live performances were
19 permitted in outdoor locations, Regina Opera took
20 advantage of the open streets, open boulevards, Open
21 Culture Programs. Since March 2021, our company
22 reached out to people who needed Music to bring a
23 little cheer to their lives. Regina Opera presented
24 seven free outdoor concerts on 59th Street, 3rd
25 Avenue, 5th Avenue, Berry Street in Brooklyn. We

2 even sang opera selections in a school playground and
3 in Public Park. Better than nothing. We were so
4 grateful for our performances and so were the people
5 in the audience. We got extra names for our ticketed
6 performances that we will be scheduling in fall 2021.
7 The outdoor performances brought increased foot
8 traffic to local restaurants and shops a system,
9 assisting them financially in this difficult time.
10 We request that New York City continue to permit the
11 open streets, open cultures to be added to the New
12 York City Charter and be open to additionally
13 fiscally sponsored Arts, Organizations and individual
14 artists. Thank you.

15 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Thank you
16 very much. Love to hear that you've added to your
17 mailing list and the, and the performances as part of
18 Open Culture have made some folks aware of the
19 organization that maybe who weren't aware before
20 because that was one of the things that we talked
21 about as we were developing the legislation and then
22 implementing it with, um, the teams we very, very
23 specifically wanted that to happen and that to be an
24 outcome of, of the program and thought it, it would
25 and I'm sure it's the case for so many. Um, and I'm

2 glad you've been able to do those seven outdoor
3 concerts. And those were, you did, those were free
4 performances?

5 FRAN GARBER-COHEN: Yes.

6 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Uh,
7 right.

8 FRAN GARBER-COHEN: We gave seven
9 totally free 90 minute operatic performances using,
10 featuring our opera stars from Regina Opera.

11 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Wow
12 that's a wonderful gift to the people of, um, were
13 they all in Brooklyn? Yes, right? All in Brooklyn?

14 FRAN GARBER-COHEN: Yes.

15 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Yes,
16 that's great.

17 FRAN GARBER-COHEN: Yes. In the Sunset
18 Park and Bay ridge Sections of Brooklyn. We limited
19 ourselves mostly to those sections because the City
20 Councilmen Mr. Brannon and Mr. Menchaca supported us
21 and included in their funding for us was performances
22 that were free and accessible to the public and
23 that's what we did.

24 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: That's
25 great, uh, great to hear that my colleagues are, are

2 so supportive as well. Um, Council Members Menchaca
3 and Brannon. And Ballet Hispanico of course we know
4 and love and you do amazing work. And, um, you
5 know, you're, you have a bit more structure and, and
6 resources than some and are you able to help others
7 who maybe are attempting to do something like this
8 and partner with them or, or provide assistance. Are
9 you doing any of that?

10 EMILY MATHIS CORONA: Yeah, absolutely.
11 I think one of the biggest lessons this year, you
12 know, we learned with our Band Together Dance
13 Festival at Lincoln Center in August, is that we, we
14 stand in solidarity with our fellow arts leaders with
15 other arts and nonprofits no matter what their size,
16 across the City. Um, moving forward, you know, of
17 course our block party will be including other Line-X
18 dance organizations in this. It's something you know
19 that we want to continue making a center point of
20 our, of our work and our mission. So, programs like
21 this are absolutely instrumental in helping make that
22 happen and making art more accessible for everyone.

23 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: I would
24 love to see one of your performances outdoor and I
25 would love to hear Opera. I love opera and I've

2 certainly seen several dance programs in Queens as
3 part of Open Culture and as I mentioned we also had a
4 Drag Queen Story Hour as part of Open Culture which
5 was great on one of our streets but would love to
6 hear opera coming from a local neighborhood street.
7 I think that would be tremendous so hopefully we'll
8 have one, um, but, uh. Thank you both for being
9 here. Any other suggestions on how we can do this
10 better?

11 FRAN GARBER-COHEN: Yes. I must admit
12 that we got a lot of push back from the place, the
13 stores that we were placed. Most of the places that
14 we performed we were placed there by the local bids
15 or the 3rd Avenue Merchants Association in Bay Ridge.
16 When I, I met with the owners and the managers of the
17 stores that we were placed in front of and they
18 donated their electricity but I met with, I went
19 there in person to check out the location and to meet
20 with the managers or owners, I spoke to people on the
21 phone. We got a lot of push back, oh you're blocking
22 the street, you're taking away our business. They
23 did not see any benefit for their stores at all. I,
24 it's a mystery to me. They were getting all kinds of
25 new people into the area but I guess I they didn't

2 see extra cash register activity right away so the,
3 the publicity that they received didn't seem to make
4 any difference to the management of the stores. And
5 some of the places that we were put near, they seem
6 to say, oh, we didn't even know you were coming. We
7 got some phone calls we told them we never heard of
8 you. So, we were a little surprised at that. We had
9 over 300 people, we had over 300 people we did in
10 Marine Park that we did through State Senator
11 Goundardes' office. We had over 300 people that's
12 just my count and for all the other locations we had
13 between 100 and 200 people who came, they brought
14 their folding chairs because that's the publicity
15 that Regina Opera did through our mailing lists,
16 email and paper mailing. We said bring your chairs
17 or bring a blanket and we had people sitting on the
18 ground because they just passed by and said, look
19 free opera We did distribute paper programs so
20 people knew exactly who we were and what we were
21 performing.

22 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Okay.

23 FRAN GARBER-COHEN: And we have more
24 coming up.

25 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Right.

2 FRAN GARBER-COHEN: We have another 5th
3 Avenue and Bay Ridge coming up on September, um, 24.
4 Another freebie.

5 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: It
6 sounds, you, the issues that I think you experienced
7 I think are, are not unlike some of the others who
8 have experienced similar issues. I think the
9 communication and promotion and amplification of, of
10 these events is part of that if we are able to do
11 perhaps better and partner with folks with NYC and
12 Company then maybe some folks would be more aware
13 that this was coming and happening, but, I also
14 suspect human nature being what it is there will
15 always be some folks who are less than thrilled or,
16 or surprised by an event but hopefully once they
17 start to hear the music or the dancing, they see the
18 dancing or they hear the opera their, their hearts
19 and minds are changed and into supporters of the
20 program, so. Um. Thank you both, uh, for being
21 here. For the work that you do on behalf of all New
22 Yorkers. I appreciate you being here today in person
23 to be a part of this hearing.

24 EMILY MATHIS CORONA: Thank you for the
25 opportunity. Thank you so much.

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2 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Thank you
3 and our last panel is Juliana Cope and Sarah Cecilia
4 Bukowski.

5 JULIANA COPE: Thank you. Okay. Thank
6 you. Good afternoon.

7 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Good
8 afternoon.

9 JULIANA COPE: Thank you for having all
10 of us. I'm Juliana Cope I'm the Assistant Executive
11 Director for Development and External Affairs at
12 Mind-Builders Creative Art Center in the northeast
13 Bronx and I'm really happy to be here in your
14 presence.

15 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Thank
16 you.

17 JULIANA COPE: And grateful for the
18 incredible support of DCOA and the City Council and
19 the Mayor's Office for our programs. Mind-Builders
20 has been around for 43 years. We are a multi-service
21 agency but primarily offering music and dance
22 programs as well as a full day pre-K program,
23 theatre, visual arts, anime, and multiple art forms
24 for ages 3 to, well we haven't 103 but I would love
25 to see that happen, serving over 700 students a week

2 in good times and in spring of 2020, we had some of
3 the highest COVID rates in, in the entire City and
4 subsequently this year have been in a assembly
5 district with some of the lowest vaccination rates.
6 Our audience is predominantly African American,
7 African Caribbean, Latin-X with a large and growing
8 African and Middle Eastern Community and our staff
9 and board and founder are very much reflective of
10 this. So I'm here fully, we are fully in support of
11 the Open Culture Program. We were beneficiaries of a
12 permit and we are thrilled this week we are going to
13 be having our open house, annual open house street
14 festival this coming weekend and it was a relief vale
15 to know that we, if needed, could be programming on
16 our street, on the street outside our building on
17 Olenville Avenue if needed but we were actually able
18 to offer hybrid programs throughout this past summer
19 and, and we're hoping to fully re-open this fall but
20 we are going to continue offering both virtual and in
21 person options. Our programs have served community
22 members from all five boroughs of New York City
23 historically but we did, we have found that, of
24 course, the impacts of COVID continue to roll in and
25 out, I would say our, our income in this past year

2 was heavily hit. Most of our programs are, or
3 actually all of our programs were subsidized. Many
4 of the are free but our, our income from tuition is
5 about 1/4 of what it previously was and our student
6 body also was reduced. We had over 45% of our
7 families have at least one essential worker in, in
8 their households and we are, we are currently finding
9 that vaccine hesitancy is going to really impact,
10 particularly our young people who are 12 and up who
11 may not have the choice of whether they, uh, whether
12 they get vaccinated or not. So, I just wanted to
13 share with you. Sorry, I'm over time but I just
14 wanted to share with you, for example, this coming
15 weekend we have our incredible music, excuse me and
16 dance ensemble, students, a number of whom are going
17 to be able to perform outside and then they are not
18 going to continue in the program and, I'm sorry, I'm
19 sorry.

20 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Take your
21 time. Um it's great to see that you, you're a
22 recipient of Coalition of Theatres of Color.

23 JULIANA COPE: Yes. Yes. It's
24 incredible.

25

2 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Which is
3 great. You know we increased that initiative by \$2
4 million this year so.

5 JULIANA COPE: Yes. Thank you.

6 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Hopefully
7 you'll be seeing an increase in, uh, in the CTC
8 support and, uh, perhaps some of the other ways in
9 which you, you draw down funding from DCLA.

10 JULIANA COPE: Yes.

11 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: And, uh,
12 the City of New York which is great to see. Um, and
13 it sounds like the open, the open house or the open
14 streets is happening.

15 JULIANA COPE: It is happening, we are,
16 we are doing our open house inside and outside. We
17 are thrilled to be able to do that, um, I did also
18 want to mention that we, you know thanks to your
19 advocacy and so many other City Officials we were
20 also, we were able to retain our entire staff
21 throughout the last year and a half and it just
22 simply would not have happened, um, without your
23 support.

24 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: That's
25 great to hear.

2 JULIANA COPE: Lastly, I just want to
3 say for institutions like ours its, where it's
4 because we have a Pre-K program but we also fall
5 under the key to the city mandates we are, it's just
6 continued complexity for us to 1) understand where we
7 fall, how we implement those protocols and then we
8 are also finding that we are, the weight is, the
9 burden is very much on us as an institution and some
10 of the anger about the mandates and the impact on the
11 young people.

12 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Yeah.

13 JULIANA COPE: And we are doing all we
14 can. We are going to have a vaccination event. We
15 are doing outreach, etc., etc. but as you continue to
16 do your work we hope that.

17 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: I wish it
18 weren't going to continue to be complicated as I'm
19 sure we all do. Um, hopefully it gets less
20 complicated but certainly we are grateful for all the
21 work that you and Mind-Builders does for the
22 communities that you work with and serve. So thank
23 you, thank you for being here. Thank you for that.
24 And Dance NYC would you to like to, Sarah, begin your
25 testimony. Yep.

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2 SARAH CECILIA BUKOWSKI: Good
3 afternoon.

4 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Good
5 afternoon.

6 SARAH CECILIA BUKOWSKI: I'm Sarah
7 Cecilia Bukowski. I'm the research and advocacy
8 assistant at Dance NYC. Um, we are grateful for the
9 opportunity to speak in support of the Open Culture
10 program and thank you for your support as well. Um,
11 the enduring cost of this pandemic is significant
12 both for independent arts workers and for arts
13 organizations and groups and it's disproportionately
14 impacting communities of color as well as immigrant
15 and disabled artist communities. Open Culture has
16 shown his potential to help support arts and cultural
17 workers as we continue to adapt to the realities of
18 the pandemic and moving forward with this as a
19 permanency city program is a substantial investment
20 in the resilience and long-term recovery of the arts
21 and culture sector. With gratitude, we believe there
22 is some comprehensive improvements to be made to the
23 program in order for it to be financially,
24 logistically and administratively beneficial and
25 accessible to arts workers, particularly those

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2 operating with small budgets. First, to make Open
3 Culture a permanent city program with designated
4 funding, oversight and a program review and
5 evaluation processes including site evaluations with
6 specific considerations for structural elements, use
7 of amplified sound, logistical limitations and
8 seasonal variations which will more effectively meet
9 the needs of Arts workers with the selection of sites
10 and in the implementation of appropriate and
11 necessary accessibility and health and safety
12 measures. Second, the current monthly event limit
13 for Open Culture participants stands at 4 days per
14 month. We recommend designating separate monthly
15 event limits for eligible participant groups knowing
16 that the eligibility is expanding in this proposed
17 bill and that no limitations be placed on sponsor
18 organizations. Designating these separate limits for
19 each qualifying group would allow for my equitable
20 opportunities for program participation, particularly
21 for small groups and independent arts workers who are
22 seeking sponsorship. Third and final, to provide
23 specific guidelines and templates for entities
24 operating Open Culture events to comply at minimum
25 with ADA regulations and local, state and federal

2 mandates regarding COVID 19. This would greatly
3 facilitate compliance with the ever changing COVID 19
4 safety regulations and allow equitable access to and
5 standardized implementation of Open Culture Events.
6 So, taken together these measures could stand to make
7 Open Culture more accessible, equitable and
8 sustainable for arts workers and for the communities
9 they serve. Thanks for your consideration and we
10 commend your ongoing efforts to support Arts and
11 Culture through this program.

12 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Thank you
13 very much. Um, Sarah, very nice to have you here in
14 person, um, testifying and to obviously we are big
15 fans of Dance NYC and Alejandra and even some of her
16 predecessors who we have worked with very closely,
17 um, over the years. And not surprising you come with
18 good suggestions and solid recommendations for how to
19 make the, the program better and I just want to
20 recognize Stefan has stayed here throughout the
21 entire hearing to, to listen to all of the
22 suggestions for the community because it is with
23 Stefan on behalf of the Administration that we will
24 be working to, uh, to pass this legislation among
25 other folks and entities. Um, so, really, really

2 helpful. Do we have any sense of how many or what
3 percentage of the programs are dance through Open
4 Culture and I don't know if you would have that
5 information obviously.

6 SARAH CECILIA BUKOWSKI: I don't have
7 data on that but I'd be curious.

8 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: I know,
9 Stefan is shaking his head no. But it would be
10 interesting to, um, to get that, uh, information just
11 because most of the ones that I've seen are dance and
12 it does seem ready made for dance performances but
13 hopefully we are getting a wide range. And Mind-
14 Builders has, has used the Open Culture Program but
15 not specifically but you do outdoor programming?

16 JULIANA COPE: We, we will in the
17 future. We have a permit for our street.

18 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Right.

19 JULIANA COPE: But we, ended up not
20 using it up util.

21 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Okay.

22 JULIANA COPE: Our festival permit is
23 through the, it SAPO.

24 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: Yeah,
25 Stefan is aware of it behind you there. Give a

2 thumbs up so that's at your Owensville Avenue
3 location?

4 JULIANA COPE: Off Gona Hill Road.

5 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: That's
6 great. Um, thank you. Well, we very much appreciate
7 you being here I was going to say waiting all the
8 while but given the relatively limited ways in which
9 we can take testimony today it was, um, hopefully not
10 that long of a wait but we are grateful for the work
11 that both of you do for the organizations that you
12 work for and of course all of the folks who benefit
13 from the advocacy that you do, so, um, thank you very
14 much. All of the suggestions we are taking, we have
15 and will be helpful to us in passing this piece of
16 legislation hopefully very soon and making this
17 program better and more permanent and artists for
18 years and years will benefit from the work that we do
19 now and also the fact that you are here testifying so
20 thank you very, very much for being here.

21 JULIANA COPE: Thank you for your
22 service.

23 SARAH CECILIA BUKOWSKI: Thank you.

24 CHAIRPERSON JAMES VAN BRAMER: And with
25 that I think we are adjourned. (gavel pounding).

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2 SARAH CECILIA BUKOWSKI: Thank you
3 Chair.

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C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date October 29, 2021