

Vancouver Cultural Access Plan Policy

Introduction

On December 2, 2024, the Vancouver City Council adopted Ordinance M-4481, a landmark decision that established the Vancouver Cultural Access Program (VCAP) and authorized the collection of a 0.1% sales tax to fund it. This dedicated revenue stream is estimated to generate up to \$7 million annually over a seven-year period and will dramatically expand public access to cultural, artistic, heritage and scientific experiences across Vancouver.

Tax collection began on April 1, 2025, with the possibility of program renewal in 2031. The ordinance reflects the City's long-term commitment to equity in cultural participation and builds upon the 2018 Vancouver Culture, Arts & Heritage Plan.

In response to the ordinance's adoption, the City's Culture, Arts and Heritage Commission (CAHC), in partnership with City staff, was charged with developing a comprehensive policy proposal to guide the administration and distribution of VCAP funds. The CAHC assembled a task force with expertise and diverse perspectives to ensure that the program is inclusive, equitable, and responsive to community needs.

The policy proposal is required to include the following, as outlined in the ordinance:

- **Public Benefits:** A description of clearly identifiable and measurable public benefits that will result from the VCAP over the program's seven-year lifespan.
- **Categories and Allocations:** Establish programmatic funding categories and define key considerations for the annual allocation of program funds ensuring strategic investment in both ongoing support and project-based opportunities.
- **Administrative Costs:** Recommendations for the portion of funds to be allocated toward the City's and/or CAHC's administrative responsibilities.
- **Award Criteria:** Standards for awarding funds, including how proposed projects will deliver meaningful public benefits.
- **Eligibility Guidelines:** Criteria necessary to determine which cultural organizations are eligible to receive funding.
- **Award Procedures:** A framework for how CAHC will distribute funds to other eligible organizations, which may include competitive application processes.
- **Performance Standards:** Baseline performance guidelines for ensuring cultural organizations continuously deliver public benefits, including notification procedures for organizations at risk of losing eligibility and steps to maintain or restore it.

This policy proposal was created by a task force composed of CAHC commissioners, school district representatives, nonprofit leaders, and City staff. It has been reviewed and recommended by the Culture, Arts and Heritage Commission.

Task Force Members

- Ricky Gaspar, Commissioner
- Linda Reid, Commissioner
- Carinn Eckis Ormson, Evergreen Public Schools
- Traci Young, Vancouver Public Schools
- Cheri Jamison, Arts & Culture Consultant and Executive Director of Alberta Abbey
- Jenny Thompson, Lovett's Productions & Consulting
- Ach' Sheila Davis, Fire Circle Consulting
- Jeanne Bennett, Columbia Play Project
- David Perlick, Parks, Recreation and Cultural Services Director
- Stacey Donovan, Cultural Services Manager
- Kirsten Hull, Support Specialist 3
- Melody Burton, Communications Specialist 3

Next Steps

In August, City Council will provide feedback on this policy proposal to the task force and CAHC during a scheduled work session. The task force will then work to implement changes from the Council and present a final proposal. Upon acceptance of the policy, it will be scheduled for reading and adoption by resolution in September.

A final policy must be adopted by resolution no later than October 1, 2025, per the ordinance. This adopted policy will guide the equitable and transparent distribution of funds under the VCAP, bringing Vancouver closer to a future where arts, culture, and heritage are accessible to all.

Vancouver Cultural Access Program Public Benefits

The City of Vancouver, Washington, recognizes the importance of enhancing access to arts, culture, heritage and science as a fundamental public benefit. Drawing inspiration from successful programs across the state, Vancouver seeks to create more equitable opportunities for all residents to engage in cultural experiences.

Public benefit in Vancouver will focus on making arts, culture, heritage and science accessible to everyone, particularly those often excluded due to barriers such as cost, transportation, and accessibility. By supporting programs in public schools and investing in community-based initiatives, Vancouver's Cultural Access Program aims to ensure that all residents can engage with and benefit from vibrant cultural activities, educational programs, and public performances.

Additionally, this initiative positions Vancouver as a cultural leader in the region, drawing visitors and residents alike to experience the city's growing cultural scene. By investing in cultural infrastructure and a thriving creative economy, Vancouver will foster innovation, attract creative talent, and strengthen its reputation as a leading destination for arts and culture.

Increased Educational Engagement for K-12 Students

- **Access to Arts, Culture, Science, and Heritage Programs:** Ensuring that students in Vancouver Public Schools and Evergreen Public Schools districts (K-12) have greater access to arts, culture, science, and heritage organizations through in-school, after-school and summer programs.
- **Improved Academic Outcomes:** Greater engagement in the classroom, improved educational attainment and expanding learning beyond the classroom supports better student performance, social and emotional growth, and higher graduation rates.

Support for School Transportation to Cultural Activities

- **Eliminating Transportation Barriers:** Non-supplanting funding transportation to arts, culture, science, and heritage programs for school-age children, particularly those in underserved communities, to overcome barriers to participation.
- **Ensuring Equitable Access:** Providing transportation support ensures that all students, regardless of socioeconomic status, can access enriching cultural experiences.

Community-Centric Arts, Culture, Heritage, and Science Programming

- **Neighborhood Engagement:** Creating new resources and funding for local neighborhoods to support or promote cultural activities, events, or projects that reflect diverse cultural backgrounds, lifestyles, and interests.
- **Strengthening Cultural Identity:** Empowering communities to celebrate and reflect their unique cultural, historical, and social narratives through arts and heritage projects.

Equitable Access for Underserved Populations

- **Support for Economically and Geographically Underserved Communities:** Ensuring that all community members, including seniors, students, and low-income populations, have access to cultural events, performances, exhibits, and other related programs.
- **Inclusive Programs:** Offering specialized opportunities for people on fixed incomes and those in underserved areas to participate in community cultural life, fostering inclusivity and diversity.

Economic Growth and Cultural Tourism

- **Boosting Local Economy:** Enhancing the local economy by fostering a vibrant cultural community, which will drive increased tourism and attract visitors to cultural events and activities, benefiting local businesses.
- **Job Creation:** Supporting creative jobs within the arts, culture, science, and heritage sectors, contributing to the broader economy and workforce development.

Strengthening the Financial Health of Cultural Organizations

- **Sustaining Local Arts and Heritage Organizations:** Providing consistent funding to ensure the financial stability of arts, culture, science and heritage organizations, enabling them to offer high-quality public programs and services year-round.
- **Fostering Long-Term Sustainability:** Strengthening the capacity of these organizations to expand access to their facilities and outreach programs, especially in underserved areas.

Civic Engagement and Community Building

- **Encouraging Civic Participation:** By increasing access to arts and culture, the program will foster a greater sense of community pride, connection, and civic engagement, leading to a healthier, more vibrant community.
- **Promoting Shared Experiences:** Creating opportunities for residents from diverse backgrounds to come together through cultural festivals, performances, and exhibits, encouraging mutual respect and understanding.

Enriching Public Programs and Services

- **Expanding Access to Cultural Institutions:** Ensuring that arts, culture, science, and heritage organizations remain accessible to all, providing free or discounted admission to cultural institutions for public school students, seniors, and economically disadvantaged groups.
- **Public Programming Outreach:** Enabling organizations to take their programs and exhibits beyond their facilities to reach more people in communities, schools, and public spaces.

Fostering Creativity and Innovation

- **Supporting Creativity and Personal Development:** Providing individuals of all ages with the opportunity to explore personal creativity, through arts programs, science exhibitions, and heritage education, fostering individual growth and lifelong learning.
- **Building Creative Communities:** Promoting environments where individuals and communities can creatively engage with arts and culture, leading to innovative community-driven solutions and artistic expressions.

Strengthened Partnerships

- **Collaboration Between City Government and Cultural Institutions:** Encouraging partnerships between the City of Vancouver, schools, and local cultural institutions to maximize the impact of cultural access programs.
- **Shared Resources and Networks:** Facilitating the sharing of resources and information among different municipalities to create a coordinated and equitable cultural access program across the region.

Capital Investments in Arts and Culture

- **Creating Accessible Cultural Venues:** Fund the development or renovation of economical and accessible spaces to host performances, art exhibitions, workshops, and educational programs, enriching the community's cultural life and providing ongoing opportunities for learning and creative expression.

Vancouver Cultural Access Program Categories and Allocations

To ensure responsiveness to evolving community needs and priorities over the seven-year span of the program, funding allocations across program categories have been established as minimums rather than fixed amounts. This flexible structure allows for strategic adjustments in investment levels within each category—Impact, Innovation, Comprehensive, Capital, and School—while maintaining a strong foundation of support. Administration is set at a flat 10%, which includes initial start-up funding in the first year. In total, 60% of program revenue is earmarked across these categories, while 40% remains flexible to be distributed based on annual review.

The CAHC will provide annual guidance by setting general allocation goals that reflect current community needs, available funds, and emerging priorities. While these goals are not binding beyond the established minimums, they serve a valuable purpose by giving applicant organizations a general sense of how much funding may be available in each category during a given cycle. This clarity helps applicants make informed decisions about which grant opportunities to pursue.

Allocations

Impact Grants: Minimum 10% Allocation

- Award: \$10,000-\$75,000
- Purpose: Unrestricted funding for nonprofit programming
- Audience: Eligible nonprofits of all sizes and experience levels, plus individuals working with an eligible fiscal sponsor
- Timing: Applications open on an annual cycle with a one-year project window

Innovation Grants: Minimum 5% Allocation

- Award: \$5,000-\$25,000
- Purpose: Funding that allows nonprofits to take on opportunities with more uncertainty like new collaborations, innovations, or experimental programming
- Audience: Eligible nonprofits of all sizes and experience levels, plus individuals working with an eligible fiscal sponsor
- Timing: Applications open on an annual cycle with a one-year project window

Comprehensive Grants: Minimum 10% Allocation

- Award: \$100,000-\$300,000
- Purpose: Unrestricted multi-year funding for nonprofit operations and/or programming with a focus on organizational strengthening and capacity growth
- Audience: Eligible nonprofits of all sizes with established history plus individuals working with an eligible fiscal sponsor
- Timing: Applications for multi-year grants open on an annual cycle

Capital Grants: Minimum 15% Allocation

- Award: \$300,000 and up
- Purpose: Seed or match funding to build new space, remodel or make accessibility enhancements
- Audience: Eligible non-profits in Vancouver with established history within city limits
- Timing: Applications open on a two-year cycle and allow for multi-year projects

School Grants: Minimum 10% Allocation

- Purpose: Funding that supports access for school age youth which could include funding school districts to support field trip transportation and admissions costs, funding nonprofits to host in-school programming, or funding for youth programs operating outside of the public school system. VCAP will work with school districts to prioritize a program that maximizes benefit and supports existing curriculum strategies.
- Audience: All public schools in VPS and EPS districts plus eligible nonprofits seeking funding to directly support school programs.

Program Administration: 10% Allocation

- Purpose: Dedicated resources that ensure the program is administered effectively and equitably.

Evaluation Criteria Themes

The categories above describe the grant format and audience for each category. Specific scoring criteria that will make a program or project competitive for funding in each category will be established during the implementation phase, after the policy is adopted. However, common themes have surfaced during the work completed to date. These themes, along with the stated public benefits, will provide the framework for scoring criteria.

- Geographic diversity and public access, ensuring funding reaches all parts of Vancouver, especially neighborhoods that have historically had less access to cultural resources.
- Creative and culture variety, ensuring that grants support a full spectrum of disciplines, traditions and community identities.
- Collaboration and innovation that empowers new partnerships, experimental projects and programs that take bold, creative risks.
- Capital impacts that improve cultural infrastructure, expand access and create lasting, sustainable public benefit within Vancouver city limits.

Vancouver Cultural Access Program Eligibility Requirements

Primary Purpose of the Organization

Your organization's primary purpose, meaning the overall mission and majority of your activities, must be to advance and/or preserve arts, culture, heritage, and/or science. Organizations with primary purposes focused on areas other than arts, culture, heritage or science, such as education, social services, health, or youth development, are not eligible for Impact Grant or Innovation Grant funding, even if they offer programs related to arts, culture, heritage, or science.

Non-Profit Status and Fiscal Sponsorship

Your organization must be a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation, incorporated under the laws of Washington State and recognized by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS).

Organization Location

Your organization's official business address must be within Vancouver city limits.

Program Delivery

Your organization must directly provide cultural programming or experiences to the people who live within Vancouver city limits. This includes events, performances, exhibits, educational programs or other public-facing cultural activities.

Exclusions from Eligibility

Organizations that are excluded from eligibility for cultural access program funding include:

- Any agency of the state or political subdivisions
- A municipal corporation
- Any organization that raises funds for redistribution to multiple cultural organizations
- Radio or television broadcasting networks or stations, cable communications systems, internet-based communications ventures or services, newspapers, or magazines

Eligibility Provisions for Impact, Innovation, Comprehensive and School Grants

- If you/your organization does not have 501(c)(3) status, you may apply for Impact, Innovation, Comprehensive or School Grant funding using a non-profit Fiscal Sponsor. The Fiscal Sponsor must have a mission aligned with advancing or preserving arts, culture, heritage, or science. You must submit a letter of commitment from your Fiscal Sponsor to apply.
- If your organization is located outside Vancouver but provides at least 55% of its public programming within Vancouver, you are eligible to apply for Impact, Innovation, Comprehensive or School Grant funding.

Additional Eligibility Requirement for Comprehensive and Capital Grants

- Your organization must have at least two years of experience providing cultural programming or experiences to the public within Vancouver city limits.

Eligibility Information about School Grants

VCAP prioritizes equitable access for all residents, including our youngest. A dedicated portion of program funding is set aside to expand arts, culture, science, and heritage opportunities for school-aged youth. Recognizing the importance of educational alignment and logistical coordination, this work will be done in close collaboration with Vancouver and Evergreen Public Schools to ensure programming supports curriculum goals and maximizes impact.

This policy recommends allocating school funding equally between the two districts. Although Vancouver and Evergreen school districts have schools located both inside and outside the city limits, a legal review has confirmed that the program may treat schools consistently across each district. However, the policy proposes a strong preference for experiences hosted within the city or by organizations based in Vancouver, to reinforce local cultural investment.

School grants will represent 10% of the total VCAP funding pool, allocated as follows:

- 10% will be distributed directly to the Vancouver and Evergreen school districts to support field trip transportation and admission costs. These funds will be divided evenly between the two districts, allowing them to supplement existing resources and increase access for all students.
- Any additional funding directed toward schools will be available through a competitive grant process for eligible nonprofit organizations offering in-school programming or youth-focused cultural activities that serve students outside the traditional public school setting.

This proposal represents an ambitious and inclusive approach to cultural access for K–12 students, with a strong foundation for future development. While certain implementation details such as eligibility for non-public schools are still being refined, this category affirms the City's commitment to ensuring every Vancouver student can participate in enriching, high-quality cultural learning experiences.

Vancouver Cultural Access Program Award Procedures

To ensure transparency, equity and community priorities in the distribution of VCAP funds, the following procedures will guide the awarding of grants:

Open Application Period and Outreach

Each funding cycle will begin with a widely publicized open application period. The City and the CAHC will lead a robust community campaign to promote funding opportunities and encourage applications from a broad and diverse range of cultural organizations. Outreach efforts will prioritize accessibility and equity, with specific attention given to historically underrepresented communities.

Application Support and Training

During the application period, the City will offer grant application training and technical assistance to prospective applicants. These support services may include workshops, one-on-one consultations, and online resources designed to help applicants understand eligibility criteria, develop compelling proposals and navigate the submission process.

Competitive Review Process

All eligible applications will undergo a structured and competitive review process. A Grant Review Committee, or committees, depending on volume and category—will be appointed by the CAHC and composed of a diverse group of individuals who live within Vancouver city limits. Reviewers will assess applications based on published criteria, including alignment with VCAP goals, delivery of public benefits, organizational capacity, and community impact.

Recommendations and Final Selection

Following the competitive review, the Grant Review Committee(s) will submit funding recommendations to the Culture, Arts and Heritage Commission. The CAHC will make final determinations on grant awards through a public decision-making process. All decisions will be documented and made available for public review.

Disbursement of Funds

- For **single-year grants**, funds will be disbursed in one installment as detailed in the grant agreement.
- For **multi-year grants**, funds will be disbursed in two to three installments depending on the size and scope of the grant. Payment schedules will be detailed in the grant agreement and may be contingent on satisfactory performance and reporting.

Reporting and Accountability

All grant recipients will be required to submit an annual report detailing program activities, use of funds, public benefits delivered, and outcomes achieved. These reports will be used to evaluate program effectiveness, ensure accountability, and inform future funding decisions. Multi-year grantees must demonstrate progress and compliance in order to receive continued funding.

Vancouver Cultural Access Program Performance Standards

Purpose

This section outlines the procedures and standards for addressing instances in which a grantee under the Cultural Access Program is determined to be at risk of failing to meet the baseline performance expectations necessary to maintain eligibility for continued funding. These provisions ensure transparency, accountability and fair opportunities for improvement while supporting the continuous delivery of public benefit.

Performance Monitoring and Risk Identification

The City of Vancouver's Cultural Access Program staff shall conduct ongoing monitoring of all funded organizations to assess compliance with grant agreement terms and alignment with program goals. Monitoring may include review of required reports, site visits, performance data, and financial or community impact evaluations.

An organization shall be considered at risk of losing eligibility if it:

- Fails to provide the agreed-upon public benefits defined in the application in a continuous or meaningful way
- Substantially deviates from the approved scope of work without prior written approval
- Fails to meet reporting requirements or respond to requests for information
- Experiences operational or financial instability that compromises public benefit delivery

Annual Reporting Requirement

All grant recipients, regardless of funding cycle, grant size, or performance status, are required to submit an annual report summarizing:

- Program activities and outcomes
- Audience engagement and public benefit delivered
- Financial use of grant funds
- Any barriers or challenges experienced during the grant period
- Other pertinent information related to that year's grant award

Failure to submit an annual report may result in a Notice of Concern and/or ineligibility for future grant cycles.

Notice of Concern

The City is committed to supporting all grantees in achieving their stated goals and objectives. If an organization is identified as at risk, the City shall issue a Formal Notice of Concern with:

- A summary of the specific performance deficiencies or compliance issues
- Relevant provisions of the grant agreement or program policy
- A description and timeline of required next steps, including whether a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) is needed
- A deadline to confirm receipt of the notice, typically within 15 business days
- Contact information for the designated staff liaison

Performance Improvement Plan (PIP)

Grantees that receive a Notice of Concern may be required to submit a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) within 30 calendar days. The PIP must:

- Identify the root cause(s) of the issue(s)
- Describe planned improvement measures with clear, measurable outcomes
- Provide a timeline for implementation, typically not to exceed 90 calendar days
- Indicate any need for technical assistance or program support
- City staff will review submitted PIPs and may approve, request revisions or provide guidance as needed to support successful implementation

Multi-Year Grant Considerations

For multi-year grants, the City recognizes that organizations may need time to adjust to program expectations or scale public benefit delivery, especially during the first grant year. Therefore:

- The first year of a multi-year grant may serve as a transitional or developmental year, with greater flexibility granted to support organizational learning and capacity-building
- Rather than requiring immediate remedies, the City may issue a Performance Advisory Letter outlining expectations and required improvements for the following year
- If deficiencies persist in the second year, the full PIP process will apply

Monitoring Performance Improvements

Once a PIP is approved:

- City staff will monitor progress against the stated milestones and outcomes

- Progress meetings or check-ins may be scheduled during the implementation period
- Technical assistance may be provided based on the grantee's needs and request
- The City may request recurring meetings to discuss and review progress

If the organization fails to make satisfactory progress or address identified issues, funding may be reduced, suspended or terminated.

Reinstatement of Eligibility

Organizations that lose eligibility may apply for reinstatement at the discretion of the Culture, Arts and Heritage Commission from the date of ineligibility, unless otherwise specified by the City. The reinstatement request must include:

- Evidence that the root causes of prior issues have been resolved
- Updated plans for public benefit delivery and accountability
- Documentation of current capacity and financial or organizational stability

All reinstatement determinations are at the discretion of the Culture, Arts and Heritage Commission.

Appeals

Grantees may appeal a Notice of Concern, PIP requirements, or eligibility determinations by submitting a written request within 30 business days of notice. Appeals will be reviewed by the Culture, Arts and Heritage Commission, with a final decision issued within 60 business days.

Appendix A: Vancouver Cultural Access Program

DEFINITIONS

"Arts" means the creation, performance, or exhibition of works in visual arts, performing arts, music, theater, dance, literature, and other creative expressions that contribute to the enrichment of public life and provide opportunities for artistic engagement, education, and appreciation.

"Arts organization" means an organization that provides programming across one or more of the following artistic fields: creative place-making, dance, design, folk and traditional arts, literary arts, multi-disciplinary arts, music, media arts, theater, and visual arts.

"Administrative Costs" means all overhead, administrative, outreach, evaluation, technology and maintenance expenses related to the operation and implementation of the cultural access program within Vancouver, Washington.

"Capacity Building" means investing in the effectiveness and future sustainability of an organization. This can include using resources for operations or program improvements, staff training, upgrades to physical spaces or technology, or anything that advances an organization's ability to achieve its mission.

"Culture" means the shared practices, traditions, customs, languages, values, and creative expressions of a community, including those that reflect historical, social, and ethnic identities, which contribute to the collective identity and well-being of a community.

"Cultural Center" means a geographic area within Vancouver city limits where cultural organizations and facilities are concentrated, offering a range of cultural activities and drawing attendance and participation from surrounding municipalities and beyond.

"Cultural Facility" means a building, structure, space, or property that is owned or operated by a cultural organization within Vancouver, or by the City of Vancouver to host cultural events, programs, and community activities.

"Cultural Organization" means a nonprofit corporation incorporated under Washington state law and recognized by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) organization, whose primary purpose is to advance and preserve arts, culture, heritage, science, or other cultural disciplines, and provides programming or experiences to the Vancouver public.

"Cultural Access Program" means the program created by this ordinance to provide financial support for cultural organizations, enhance access to cultural activities, and promote community engagement through arts, culture, and heritage programming in Vancouver.

"Equity" means minimizing historical, systematic, and institutional disparities and maximizing opportunities for all people. Equity takes into account context: history, current realities, and future outcomes. The purpose of equity in the Vancouver Cultural Access Program is to foster

greater inclusiveness, increase diversity, and broaden participation in arts, culture, heritage, and science experiences.

"Fiscal Sponsor" means a cultural organization that is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit recognized by the IRS, which receives funds on behalf of a sponsored cultural entity and manages the financial and administrative responsibilities for specific cultural projects, ensuring compliance with the terms and conditions outlined in this ordinance and the cultural access program guidelines.

"Heritage" means the history, traditions, and cultural expressions passed down through generations, including historical landmarks, indigenous and ethnic histories, folklore, customs, artifacts, and the preservation and promotion of Vancouver's cultural, historical, ethnic, indigenous, and traditional resources. This also includes historic and archaeological sites, which contribute to the collective identity, understanding of the past, and well-being of the community.

"Heritage organization" means an organization that provides programming that focuses on the identification, documentation, exhibition, interpretation, and/or preservation of the past, including the people, places, events, and physical spaces of any community of people.

"Historic Preservation" means the effort to protect, maintain, and rehabilitate historically significant buildings, structures, and sites within Vancouver.

"Placemaking" refers to creative efforts that strengthen connections between people and the places they share. Placemaking involves collaboration and community engagement, drawing on community assets and identities and advancing economic, physical, and/or social change.

"Public Benefits" means the discernable public benefits that are derived from cultural access programs, including general public benefits, equity and inclusion public benefits, and geographic inclusion public benefits.

"Sponsored Cultural Entity" means a non-tax-exempt cultural entity that contracts with a fiscal sponsor for a specific cultural project that provides public benefit in accordance with the terms of this ordinance and the cultural access program guidelines.

"Start-Up Funding" means the administrative and operational costs incurred in the initial stages of the cultural access program's implementation, including legal costs, overhead, and other necessary expenses before cultural access program funding distribution begins, with the expectation that such funds will be reimbursed.