

Testimony
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San Francisco Arts Commission
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Personal Background

As president of the San Francisco Arts Commission (SFAC), it's my responsibility to ensure that our governance and committee duties operate in an open and transparent framework in support of our staff and our public and many constituencies throughout our city. The personal background that I bring to the SFAC includes academic training in art history, graduate education in city planning and law, years of commercial, hotel, retail and residential real estate development, non-profit leadership on museums and schools of art.

I am typical of members of the SFAC who bring their expertise to our work. By our charter, we are required to maintain clear bona fides that correlate with our committee work in civic design review, visual and public art, and grant making.

In the deck the Streamlining Task Force made public for today's meeting, you call attention to the fact that SFAC is unusual among civic arts agencies and commissions in its responsibilities surrounding civic design review. Thank you for highlighting that distinction. It is precisely one of the factors that differentiates us in the field. This is not a broken or redundant system. It is, in fact, what allows us to support the design of public buildings and to anticipate the opportunities for public art which are imbedded into the architecture, landscape and surrounding environments. We help to make our public spaces humanistic, beautiful and world-class.

We are a unique arts commission that by our charter, as reinforced by the Arts Element of our General Plan, bring about some of our greatest and award-winning attributes to our city.

As you make recommendations under this taskforce, I hope that you understand clearly that this system does not require changing but reinforcing within the existing framework and resources of the SFAC and NOT to move this function to the Planning Department.

Role in the City Charter

The San Francisco Arts Commission, established by Charter Section 5.103 in 1932, serves as the primary city agency to promote artistic awareness, participation, and expression while overseeing education in the arts and supporting independent local groups. It approves designs for public structures and private buildings extending into public spaces, manages the preservation of the city's Civic Art Collection, and supervises expenditures for visual, performing, and literary arts funded by the Board of Supervisors. Additionally, the

commission liaises with state and federal agencies to secure funding, advocates for artists' living and working spaces, and coordinates with other city units to maximize artistic potential among residents.

Role in the Arts Element of the General Plan

The Arts Element of the San Francisco General Plan, adopted in 1990, positions the Arts Commission as a central leader in fostering a thriving arts environment by integrating artistic considerations into city decision-making, such as urban planning and public infrastructure. It emphasizes goals like nurturing individual artists and organizations, promoting cultural equity across all population segments, and ensuring arts contribute to economic vitality and quality of life. The element mandates the commission to evaluate cultural program needs, allocate resources through grants like the Cultural Equity Initiatives Program, and advocate for arts education and media partnerships to protect and elevate arts amid challenges like housing scarcity.

Centering in Cultural Affairs and Government Structure

The charter and General Plan establish the Arts Commission at the heart of San Francisco's cultural affairs by mandating its oversight of public art, grantmaking, and policy innovation, making it indispensable to the city's governance as a mayoral-appointed body of 15 members, including arts professionals and ex-officio planning representatives. This structure ensures the commission shapes citywide cultural activities, from managing seven cultural centers to coordinating with nonprofits and philanthropy, thereby embedding arts into urban life and democratic processes. By championing equity and vitality, it reinforces the arts as essential to San Francisco's identity, influencing everything from neighborhood development to civic events.

Value as a Decision-Making Body

The commission's portfolio, including Civic Design Review, public art stewardship, and funding programs supporting individual artists and arts organizations, provides critical decision-making authority that sustains a diverse arts ecosystem, preventing cultural erosion and driving economic impact through artist employment and tourism. Its independent yet collaborative role allows for strategic evaluations of resource demands, ensuring equitable distribution and long-term vitality against political shifts. This positions the commission as a vital guardian of cultural policy, fostering innovation and community engagement that enhances San Francisco's global standing.

The San Francisco Arts Commission has managed numerous high-impact projects across the city, fostering public art, community identity, and economic support for artists.

Recent and Signature Public Art Projects

Dr. Maya Angelou Monument: In response to the Women’s Recognition Public Art Fund ordinance, the Commission installed a monument to Dr. Maya Angelou at the Main Public Library. The project sets a new precedent, requiring better gender representation in public monuments citywide. Its outcome is expected to inspire civic pride and promote the recognition of women’s contributions.

Chinatown Public Art Program: Over \$2.26 million is being invested in new public artworks as part of capital improvements at Portsmouth Square, the Chinatown Public Health Center, and the Him Mark Lai Branch Library. This initiative not only provides permanent artworks but also nurtures local artist participation through the Chinatown Artist Registry, directly contributing to neighborhood cultural vibrancy.

Potrero Gateway Project: The Commission added native plants and installed four major new sculptures (“Metamorphosis” by FUTUREFORMS) as part of a transformative public space and safety overhaul. The outcome is increased neighborhood connectivity and visually enhanced gateways, demonstrating the role of integrated public art in city infrastructure.

Neighborhood and Event-Based Initiatives

Shaping Legacy Program: Temporary public art projects such as “Home Without Borders” in public spaces encourage civic engagement and cultural dialogue. These sites—Civic Center, parks, plazas—activate the public realm and elevate underrepresented stories, promoting intersectional resilience and identity. Our groundbreaking work with the American Indian community is grounded in this program.

Murals and Community Art in Bayview-Hunters Point: Projects—like those led by Afatasi, Nancy Cato, and Malik Seneferu—reflect community history and aspirations and have brought recognition to local artists while strengthening social cohesion.

Funding and Community Impact

Grantmaking and Cultural Centers: In 2025, the Commission awarded \$10.4 million in grants to 145 individual artists, nonprofits, and cultural centers, targeting economic recovery and equity. High levels of first-time awardees and support for underserved communities indicate that the Commission’s grantmaking fosters resilience, diversity, and artistic access across San Francisco.

Outcomes

These projects and programs result in:

Greater diversity and equity in public art representation.

Increased visibility for neighborhood identity and history.

Stimulus for local economies and artist livelihoods.

Enhanced quality of civic infrastructure and public spaces.

Ongoing support and revitalization of cultural institutions and community life.

The Arts Commission's portfolio extends across virtually every major city department, including the airport, Public Works, Recreation and Parks, and the public safety and utilities agencies, through its authority over art on City property and "2%-for-art" capital projects. This creates a web of long-term collaborations that embed cultural values in core infrastructure, safety, and environmental systems.

San Francisco International Airport (SFO)

The Arts Commission administers SFO's public art program through the City's 2%-for-art ordinance, curating more than 100 permanent works and new commissions integrated into terminals, parking, the AirTrain, and the Grand Hyatt, with recent additions in Harvey Milk Terminal 1 and pre-security areas. These artworks create a distinctive arrival experience, communicate San Francisco's values, and have helped position SFO as a model for art-rich airports worldwide.

All major SFO art commissions, such as the Harvey Milk Terminal 1 atrium and Terminal 3 West projects, pass through SFAC's Visual Arts Committee and full Commission for artist selection and design approval, ensuring artistic quality, transparency, community voice, and alignment with both the Airport Commission and citywide cultural policy.

Public Works and Streets/Right-of-Way

San Francisco Public Works has jurisdiction over sidewalks and public rights-of-way, but any art (sculpture, murals, streetscape installations) in these spaces requires Arts Commission review and approval under its temporary and permanent public art guidelines. This ensures that streetscape and infrastructure projects integrate art that meets safety standards, enhances the public realm, and reflects local communities.

Through the Art Enrichment Ordinance, major Public Works capital projects (bridges, streetscapes, plazas) typically trigger new art commissions, giving SFAC a decision-making role in how visual culture is woven into everyday civic infrastructure.

Recreation and Parks System

The Recreation and Parks Department controls parks and open space, but any art installed - park statues, monuments, playground artworks, or major park renovations—must be reviewed and approved by the Arts Commission. This shared jurisdiction centers the Commission as steward of artistic and historic integrity in iconic sites like Civic Center Plaza, neighborhood parks, and larger open-space improvements.

Park-related projects often use the 2%-for-art requirement to fund integrated artworks, giving SFAC a say in how park revitalizations express neighborhood identity and cultural memory.

Fire and Police Departments

When the Fire Department or Police Department undertakes new or renovated facilities (training centers, stations, district offices), associated capital budgets can trigger public art commissions overseen by SFAC. For example, the Fire Department Division of Training project uses a selection panel and Arts Commission approvals for site-specific work that must address public safety, accessibility, and community relevance.

These collaborations produce artworks that interpret public safety missions, honor service and sacrifice, and strengthen community trust through transparent, public review of designs.

Water, Power, and Utilities (SFPUC)

The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC) dedicates 2% of above-ground capital project costs to public art, partnering with SFAC to commission works at water, sewer, and power facilities and in impacted neighborhoods. Artworks are designed to reflect SFPUC's environmental mission and make often-invisible infrastructure—water flows, energy systems, wastewater treatment—legible and meaningful to communities.

Projects like SFPUC's treatment facilities and the 2000 Marin Street Water Department site integrate large-scale artworks selected through SFAC panels, reinforcing environmental stewardship narratives and creating visible symbols of investment in public health and climate resilience.

Conclusion

Together, these cross-departmental projects show that the Arts Commission is not just an “arts” agency but a core decision-making body that shapes how San Francisco's physical systems, public safety infrastructure, parks, and airport embody the city's cultural values and collective story.

I urge you to recommend maintaining the core responsibilities and functions of the SFAC under its existing commission structure as defined in our charter and reinforced in the Arts Element of our General Plan.