First to close and last to re-open when the pandemic hit, our cultural sector is amidst a rebuilding period that will take several years. It’s more important now than ever to elect officials who will be champions for the cultural sector. Hosting a candidate forum in your community is a great way to find your champions and start a dialogue between voters and candidates about the cultural sector.
WHY HOST A CANDIDATE FORUM OR EVENT?

- Inform your community about the economic, civic, educational, and social value of cultural programming (non-profit science, heritage, & the arts) and the broad creative industry.
- Educate candidates about the economic, civic, and educational value of culture.
- Encourage policy decisions to aid the cultural industry.
- Increase awareness of the current challenges facing the cultural sector.
- Promote voter participation in your community.
- Grow recognition for your organization and its mission.
- Build relationships with elected officials and community leaders.
- Expose the community to candidates for office in a nonpartisan way.
WHAT CAN CULTURAL-SECTOR-RELATED CANDIDATE FORUMS OR EVENTS PROVIDE THAT THE CANDIDATES WANT?

- Respected host cultural businesses to provide the opportunity.
- Time to meet informally and directly with voters.
- Information in advance about your programming and the issues to be covered.
- A nonpartisan event where they can be given an unbiased opportunity to be heard.
- A large audience of voters to hear their message.
- The opportunity to find supporters and build a voting base.
DO

- Keep your event nonpartisan and unbiased.
- Invite all candidates in the race. Check the official listing of candidates from your state or county election board and/or county political party offices.
- Make equal effort to encourage each candidate to attend.
- Treat all candidates equally in every way at all times.
- Limit the time each candidate can speak if hosting a Q&A or debate.
- Encourage attendees to vote on or before Election Day.
- Provide attendees with nonpartisan information about the election (voting locations, hours, absentee voting or mail-in voting, required materials like ID, ballot measures, etc.).

DON'T

- Endorse or oppose a candidate in any way whatsoever.
- Make contributions/expenditures towards candidates if you are a non-profit, tax exempt organization.
- Rank candidates on who is most favorable to your issues.
- Ask candidates to agree with specific positions of the sponsoring organization.
- Show favorability to a candidate in any way whatsoever.
- Tell attendees which candidate to support or which party to register under.
- Do anything for one candidate that you haven’t done for all the other candidates in the race.
Set a date and time for the event.

Decide whether the event will be in-person, virtual, or hybrid.

- See “Candidate Event Formats” on Pages 12-14.

Decide on an event format.

- See “Candidate Event Formats” on Pages 12-14.
Reach out to other organizations to partner or co-sponsor.

- This can help divide the work of planning and increase turnout at the event. This can be cultural organizations or other organizations within the community.
- Including additional issue areas (for example, Artists & Affordable Housing) to the event as part of a partnership with another organization may expand the reach of the event, but may also dilute the impact and shift focus from the cultural sector content.

Invite the candidates and brief them on the event.

- Get the official list of candidates from the State or County Election Board.
- Emphasize that the event will be nonpartisan.
- Follow up with candidates during the planning process to keep them informed.
- In your invitation, share some data about the impact of the cultural sector and creative economy in your community.
STEP 3 (ABOUT 8 WEEKS BEFORE EVENT)

Create a communications plan.

- Consider which media sources and outlets (TV, print, radio, online) to contact in order to promote the event. You may decide to create a press release for the event.
- Reach out to other cultural organizations to promote the event widely.

Create a plan for turnout.

- See "Marketing the Event" on Page 20.

Select a moderator.

- Using a well-known community leader can help increase turnout.
- Someone who is knowledgeable in your local cultural sector is helpful.

Create a 5-to-10-minute presentation (live and/or video) to share at the event.

- See "What Information Should Be Provided...?" on Page 16.
- Not only will this educate candidates and audience, but it will provide context for the event.
STEP 4 (ABOUT 4–6 WEEKS BEFORE EVENT)

Confirm candidates’ and moderator’s attendance.

Recruit volunteers.
- Volunteer tasks may include promoting the event, greeting participants and candidates, setting up and cleaning up, and informing audience about upcoming elections.
- Assemble team members and select district captains. See Pages 17-18.

Promote the event through your organization’s platforms.

Invite the press (TV, radio, print, online) and possibly send out a press release.
- If you need an example, we’ve provided the press release for Inspire Washington’s 2021 Cultural Candidate Forums. Click HERE to view.
STEP 5 (ABOUT 2 WEEKS BEFORE EVENT)

Determine set-up and day-of logistics.
Create a timeline for the run of the event.
Confirm volunteers’ attendance and duties (set-up, run of event, clean-up, etc.).
Select a timekeeper. (This is very important for candidate forums!)
Continue to promote the event through all outlets and networks.
Reissue the press release to the media.
Have district captains and team members finalize questions. See Page 18.
Send the candidates materials or video from the 5-to-10-minute presentation, especially if they will be asked questions about this information.
STEP 6 (DAY OF EVENT)

Complete set-up of in-person or virtual event space.
Have staff or volunteers greet the attendees.
Be sure to share election/voting information with the attendees.
Host the event.
Share the 5-to-10-minute presentation (live and/or video).
Be sure to stay on schedule. Candidates are very busy campaigning.
Be sure the event stays non-partisan, unbiased, and engaging.
Clean up after the event.
STEP 7 (WITHIN 1 WEEK OF EVENT)

Send all participants “thank you” messages.
  - Especially candidates, but also audience members, partner organizations, and volunteers.

Post images and narrative on social media, websites, and blogs.
If your event was live-streamed and/or recorded, distribute the recording with your networks after the event.

NOW, LET'S LOOK AT FORMATS...
Q&A (giving each candidate time to answer questions):

- If time allows, begin with an icebreaker question such as “What was the last event you attended in the Washington State cultural sector?”
- You may include audience questions as well (should be screened to maintain nonpartisanship).
- Be sure to provide science, heritage, and/or arts context in the phrasing of the questions or reference the culture-focused presentation.
- Can include follow-up questions if desired.

Debate:

- Works best with fewer candidates. Rules must be clearly established.
- Provide questions before the event and get rules approved by all candidates.
- Debates can allow candidates to engage each other.
- Debates are more difficult to manage or moderate than a timed Q&A.

Benefits to Online:

- No venue costs.
- No venue set-up/clean-up.
- No issues of parking or commuting.
- Easily accessible to those living further away or with busy schedules.
- If the event is recorded and shared, it can reach even more people.
Meet and Greet (allows candidates to meet with voters informally):

- Share stories about how the cultural sector has personally impacted you and the challenges the industry is facing.
- Should include an opportunity for candidates to introduce themselves.
- Presentation about the cultural sector will provide context for conversations.

Benefits of Hosting In-Person:

- Easier for candidates to meet individually with voters.
- Easier for attendees to mingle/network.
- Participants will likely be more engaged.
- Hosting in a galley, museum, arts center, theatre, aquarium, etc. may serve as a physical reminder of the importance of the cultural sector.
- Less chance of technological difficulties.

Q&A:
- See previous slide for Q&A info.

Debate:
- See previous slide for Q&A info.
Combining Online and In-Person:

- Broadcasting or recording all or part of a candidate event and sharing it (whether you’re posting it on your website, sending it to your email list, or sharing it on social media) allows it to reach more people that otherwise wouldn't be able to make it to an event in-person.
- Hybrid events work best in Q&A or debate formats rather than a meet and greet.
- If you only post or distribute portions of the event, be sure to do so equally so as not to show favor. For example, show every candidate’s response to the same question, not highlights.
THE 1-2 PUNCH

One of the best ways for your event to have the most impact on candidates and the community is to host two events: one inviting all the candidates in a race before the primary (when a broader field of candidates is looking to stand out), and another with the remaining candidates before the general election.

The second event may engage candidates for other offices as well. For example: the first event can feature a broad field of primary candidates for county commission and then the second event can feature the narrowed field for county commissioner as well as candidates for the state legislature from local districts. This is a great way to ensure candidates will have a comprehensive knowledge of the local creative economy so they will be more likely to support the arts once elected to office. This method also builds name recognition for your organization and develops stronger relationships with elected officials.
Many candidates will not have an extensive knowledge about the cultural sector in their local community. Providing this information at the beginning of the event will help them to thoughtfully (and favorably) speak about issues pertaining to culture. We strongly suggest creating a 5-to-10-minute presentation to share at the event including:

- The economic impact of the cultural sector in your community.
- The impact of the cultural sector on members of your community.
- The challenges facing the cultural sector (especially during and after pandemic recovery).
- Current public funding for the cultural sector and how an increase would be utilized.
- Current or future legislation influencing the cultural sector.
- Key programs and achievements of your organization.
- Ongoing science, heritage, or arts projects and grant programs in your community.
- Highlight at least one fact or cultural program for children’s education.
CANDIDATE FORUM TEAM ORGANIZERS

You’ll need a robust team to put on a successful forum. Consider finding a district captain and team members to represent each district, neighborhood, or region within your community.

What are district captains and what do they do?
- District captains are established or known leaders in a community or area of expertise. They have a network of community contacts and the confidence to find new ones.
- District captains create questions and/or directly ask questions to candidates at the forum.
- They should lend legitimacy to your event AND fearlessly search for new perspectives and voices.
- Whether most comfortable behind the scenes or in the spotlight, your captain should be reliable, responsive, and respected in the community.

What are team members and what do they do?
- Team members are people who promise to show up and spread the word.
- Team members give input to district captains when creating questions for candidates.
- They are eager to learn and willing to jump in to complete tasks.
- Depending on the size and scope of your event, these people can have a range of event and political experiences. Both experienced community members and eager newcomers can participate.
HOW TO BUILD YOUR TEAM

Before searching for district captains and team members, consider the following things:

1. The geography and political landscape of your election.
2. The racial and social demographics of your region. How can you represent all groups in your community?
3. Which people in your community are going to be most affected by the election’s outcome? Are there people who provide a unique and compelling perspective? They may be your captains.
4. How can you ensure that all areas of your community’s cultural sector are represented?

Always lead with equity when building your teams.

- People of all races, sexualities, abilities, ages, and cultural disciplines should be represented. Maximize those in support of the cultural sector, making sure everyone in each district is included and involved equally.
- As early as possible, identify which communities are often missing from discussions about the cultural sector. Head to these communities first to start building your team.
- Once you have a diverse team, ask them which issues matter to them most. These should be addressed in the questions asked of the candidates, and your team members will drive the effort to formulate the questions. Team members will participate more if the issues that matter to them are being addressed.
Creating questions for candidates should be a collaborative process between team members, district captains, and other folks organizing the event. Here are some things to keep in mind when deciding what to ask candidates:

- Consider which issues are most important in your cultural sector right now.
- Once you’ve determined the most important issues, have your team members and district captains do research on them.
- Ask candidates what they have done or what they plan to do about the issues your team has researched.
- Make your questions as specific as possible. For example, ask about a specific piece of legislation or specific actions a candidate could take to solve a problem if elected. It is easiest for voters to find their cultural champions when they walk away from your event knowing exactly where each candidate stands.
MARKETING THE EVENT

• Engage your networks.
  - Use your email list, website, and social media accounts to publicize the event.
  - Enlist other cultural organizations to do the same.

• Utilize local media sources.
  - Reach out to local blogs, newspapers, radio stations, and TV channels to promote your event.
  - Get your event date on published local calendars.

• Ask candidates to share their participation in the event publicly.

• Reach out to your county political party chairs.
  - They can promote the event among the local political community.
MORE TOOLS & ADVOCACY RESOURCES

Thank you to the American Alliance of Museums, Americans for the Arts, Nonprofit Votes, Bolder Advocacy, Northwest Harvest, and Washington Nonprofits for these excellent resources!

- All resources from the American Alliance of Museums (AAM): [Click Here]
- Advocacy Toolkit: [Click Here]
- Hosting a Candidate Forum: [Click Here]
- Ballot Measures Toolkit: [Click Here]
- Election Checklist for 501(c)(3) Public Charities: [Click Here]
- How 501(c)(3)s Can Talk to Candidates During an Election Year: [Click Here]
- Guide to Election Year Activities: [Click Here]
- Nonprofit Voter Resources – What You Can and Can't Do: [Click Here]
- Voter Engagement Guide: [Click Here]
- Voter Participation Starter Kit: [Click Here]
SOURCES

Special thanks to Arts North Carolina for providing inspiration and information for this toolkit. The sources that they used are:


Contributors from Inspire Washington include: Madeline Dalton, Manny Cawaling, Steve Sneed, and Andy Jensen