INSPIRE WASHINGTON
Opening doors to science, heritage, and the arts.

In Response to the Mayor's proposed 2025-2026 budget

Seattle is an arts and culture capital not just for Washington State, but the entire Western region, the nation, and the world. Our sector is vital to the recovery of our communities, including the downtown and business districts, and is an economic driver of growth and innovation in neighborhoods across our city.

The city's Office of Arts and Culture (ARTS) plays a vital role in contributing to the health and growth of the cultural ecosystem of Seattle. ARTS has long-standing field expertise and has been a trusted distributor of public funds for over 50 years. For the last 15 years, the city has directed funds from the Admission Tax to the Arts and Culture Fund, which is allocated to ARTS. This means that when residents and visitors attend entertainment events, conventions, and tourist attractions, a portion of those taxes goes *right back into* supporting arts and culture in our city. Approximately, $9.5 million will be distributed in 2024 as direct grants for hundreds of artists and arts and culture organizations. Funding also supports the operation of three arts and culture facilities, staff positions, the maintenance of public art, arts education in Seattle Public Schools, free programming to underserved audiences, and space for arts and cultural organizations.

ARTS' Budget

In his proposed budget for 2025-2026, Mayor Harrell shares our perspective on the importance of cultural programs, made clear by his plan to increase the budget for ARTS. We are thrilled that he included $2 million of new funding per year for challenged arts and culture organizations in Seattle. There is an additional, one-time allocation of $2.5 million in the Mayor's budget for the Downtown Activation Plan initiatives that support several arts activations that showcase the cultural significance of downtown Seattle neighborhoods and highlight the talent of local artists.

Mayor Proposes Amendment to the Admission Tax

Currently, the city ordinance makes ARTS the only city department to administer Admission Tax funds. Historically, ARTS is the primary City agency that provides grants to artists and cultural organizations and works closest with the sector to understand and address its needs. Mayor Harrell directed $2.4 million of Admission Tax revenue to Seattle Center and the Parks Department for Festál, Folklife, Winterfest, Buskers, Arts in Parks, and staffing. For this allocation to take place, he has proposed an amendment to the city ordinance related to the Admission Tax.

The Mayor's amendment will:

1. Allow any city department to access Admission Tax funds for arts and culture purposes.
2. Remove the language that provides the ability for ARTS to develop policies as to how arts and culture funds are spent.

Inspire Washington is concerned about diluting this limited but valuable revenue source for broader programming administered by other departments. These two changes pose significant risk to the cultural sector by weakening ARTS ability to direct the Arts and Culture Fund and, therefore, support artists and cultural organizations. This change effectively removes a structured process of oversight and accountability, allows for changes and potential uncertainty from year to year, and provides no guarantee of how the funds can be spent and by whom. The arts and culture sector have weathered years of roller-coaster funding due to the recession and the pandemic. To fully recover and thrive, dependable and predictable public support is required. The amendment to the Admissions Tax would set the sector backwards, not forwards due to the precedent of spreading support too thin.

Doors Open

Inspire Washington have heard some policy makers express the view that the establishment of Doors Open, King County's cultural access program, and the new funding it provides, helps relieve cities of their burden and ongoing commitment to support arts and culture funding. This position would not only violate state laws prohibiting supplanting funds from other public sources (RCW 36.160.050) but would also fundamentally go against one of the key reasons for setting up the Doors Open program – which is to further leverage local, business and philanthropic support to grow resources for this sector. This is one more reason why the Admissions Tax ordinance should not be changed.

Recommendation

Inspire Washington recognizes the importance of programs like Festál and Arts in Parks for our city's cultural ecosystem. Therefore, it is our recommendation that the proposed $2.4 million be allocated from ARTS to Seattle Center and the Parks Department through a budget proviso for the 2025-2026 budget cycle without amendments to Admission Tax legislation. This would allow Admission Tax funds to be spent on those programs without making a long-term change to historic legislation. Changing the Admission Tax legislation is a long-term solution for a short-term problem that will bring insecurity to artists and cultural organizations and create uncertainly for our city's cultural future.

Thank you for your time and attention on this matter.
In Solidarity,

The Inspire Washington Team