

The Florida governor's historic \$32 million grant veto exposes systemic problems in the state's arts-and-culture economy—prompting local organizations to search for new solutions

WRITTEN BY JOHN THOMASON

GRANT VETO

By its nature, the Florida Division of Arts & Culture is an uncontroversial agency. It's not supposed to make news. But when Gov. Ron DeSantis vetoed some \$32 million in arts and culture grants in Florida's 2024-2025 state budget last June, its work captured the public's attention for all the wrong reasons. Six hundred and forty organizations statewide lost funding in the veto, including 51 organizations in Palm Beach County.

These organizations were expecting—and had budgeted for—state grants of \$10,000 and up, with many of the larger nonprofits set to receive more than \$70,000. DeSantis' historic and unexpected veto sent instant shockwaves through Florida's arts world. The affected organizations sent panicked emails, brimming with anger and disbelief, urging their supporters to help make up the unexpected shortfalls through private donations. The local arts leaders I interviewed months later for this feature were still reeling from the impact and shared similar sentiments.

When she read the news, "I was just staggered—speechless," recalls Annabel Russell, executive director of the Symphonia, which would have earned \$42,300 through the grant. "I had to read it twice. It didn't make any sense; it still doesn't make any sense, to be honest."

"I was shocked and disappointed and frankly worried about how we were going to proceed," says Stephanie Owitz, vice president of arts, culture and learning for Lewis JCC in west Boca, which was slated to receive \$60,865, plus an additional \$500,000 Cultural Facilities Grant, a line item designed to support the renovation, construction or acquisition of facilities for arts organizations. "We've received this grant since 2017, so we've become quite reliant on it."

"I was in denial that this could possibly have happened," adds Marjorie Waldo, president and CEO of Arts Garage in Delray Beach, which was itemized for \$70,500. "We have not seen it happen in the time I've been here, all eight years of receiving this grant. ... I was stunned by the decision. It was just out of nowhere."

Getting from the Division of Arts & Culture's



funding recommendations to the governor's pen is a process that is usually boilerplate and bipartisan and boring, in the ways much good governance is boring. Part of Florida's Department of State, the division collects grant requests from nonprofit arts and culture organizations throughout the state, vets and scores and ranks the requests through a rigorous process, and decides which organizations are most deserving of state funds. It then submits its funding recommendations to the state legislature for approval.

Lawmakers then adjust the numbers, and send their final allocation to the governor for his signature. As a requirement, all of the funding—from a 10-year low of \$6.6 million in the 2018-2019 legislative session to a 10-year high of \$58.7 million in the 2022-2023 session—is matched dollar-by-dollar by the recipient organizations. The grants have been a critical element of many cultural nonprofits' budgets since 1977.

More than two weeks after the veto, in response to the deluge of media and arts-organization inquiries, DeSantis explained his decision, citing a single production at the

Tampa International Fringe Festival that he deemed sexually inappropriate and unworthy of state funds. (Tampa Fringe would have received \$7,369; its organizers later penned an unsuccessful open letter to DeSantis urging him to sacrifice their portion of the state funding so that the rest of the monies could be restored.)

"I know plenty of people who have reached out and called their representatives," says Matt Stabile, executive director of Theatre Lab, a professional theatre company based at FAU. "But unfortunately, the decision is kind of insulated, because the governor made what seems to have been a solo decision. He is not able to run for reelection as governor, so it cost him nothing."

The governor's office did not respond to a request for comment.

"For whatever reason, the arts always seem to be the political football," says Dave Lawrence, president and CEO of the Cultural Council for Palm Beach County, which advocates for cultural funding. "For the life of me, I can't understand why. I believe that there is a place for public funding in the arts, for what it does for our economy, for



Stephanie Owitz of Levis JCC

what it does for our communities, for education, for our quality of life. There is a role for government to play in funding the arts.

“There are some that will not share that sentiment. And unfortunately, we get caught in the middle of this a lot of times. That is a real concern, but I think it’s up to us to show just how deep and wide the impact is, and that government funding can spur so

many other investments and contributions in the arts. It’s an important piece of the pie to have that public support, to make sure that our organizations are thriving and serving the public good.”

MAKING CUTS

The organizations felt the pinch of the depleted funding immediately. In the wake of the governor’s veto, the Florida Cultural Alliance, a statewide nonpartisan advocacy network, surveyed 120 Florida cultural organizations, asking, “Because of the elimination of funding, we will be forced to ...” The majority, 81%, answered “make adjustments and continue with our plans.” Forty-eight percent said they would have to cancel events for the public; 34% responded that they would have to reduce staff or eliminate a position; and so on. Five percent would “discontinue our operations.”

“We have heard through direct and indirect conversations about programs that are going to have to be shelved for the year, or layoffs have had to happen at some organizations,” Lawrence says. “The impact is greater, the smaller the organization’s budget size. We heard from one of the applicants that their grant was \$13,000 on a \$50,000 budget. So that is a significant piece of their operating revenue that is going to be very difficult for them to come by. The effects are wide-reaching and pretty severe for some organizations.”

Arts Garage quickly shortened its theatre season from four plays to three, reduced its box-office hours, and shelved a software tool to begin to recoup the shortfall.

As for the JCC, “We have made some minor staff adjustments,” says Owitz. “We’re already a small staff. The goal is to still present the full season, but it’s more work on fewer people.”

Nearly everyone I spoke to for this feature stressed the punishing timing of the veto, landing a few years after the existential damage nearly wrought by the COVID pandemic. Palm Beach County arts patrons skew older, and many were just beginning to return to the performing arts after years of caution.

“We’re all just building back from a horrific pandemic,” says Russell, of the Symphonia. “We really didn’t need this, because we’ve all been working so hard for the past two or three years to get back to full running. This was going to be the season where we’re fully back to normal, and then suddenly, it’s taken away from us again.”

“Here we are, just after organizations were emerging from the last few years of the hell that was COVID,” adds Lawrence, of the Cultural Council. “So this was precisely not the time for another huge setback like this. The organizations were just coming back to full steam, the excitement and the energy and the plans were all there, and now we’re dealt this huge blow.”

THE ARTS AND CULTURE ECONOMY BY THE NUMBERS

\$335.3 MILLION

Economic impact of arts and culture in Palm Beach County

4,360

Jobs created by the arts in Palm Beach County

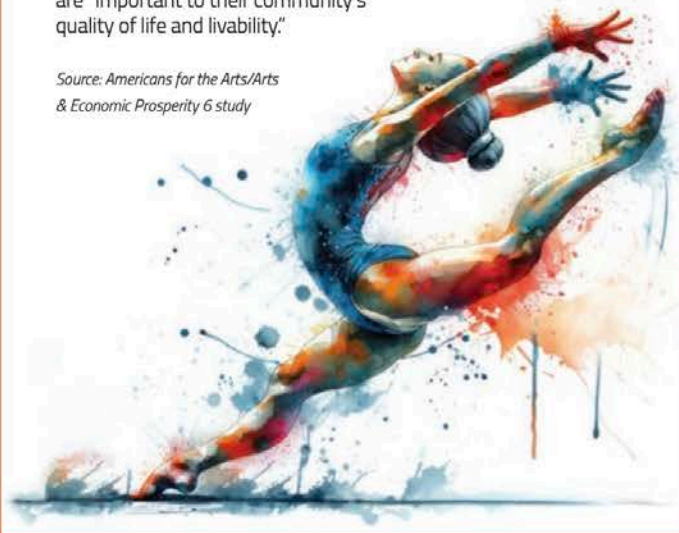
\$57.2 MILLION

Tax revenues to local, state and federal governments generated by the arts in Palm Beach County

87%

Percentage of Americans that believes arts and culture are “important to their community’s quality of life and livability.”

Source: Americans for the Arts/Arts & Economic Prosperity 6 study



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—ANNABEL RUSSELL, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE SYMPHONIA



Annabel Russell

The veto even has downstream effects beyond the organizations directly affected. As the head of an organization that did not seek funding through the Division of Arts & Culture, Theatre Lab’s Matt Stabile is concerned about donor fatigue. “Suddenly you have every organization that that donor supports coming out hat in hand, saying, ‘we need to make this up,’” he says. “I use the Morikami as an example, because one of our supporters at Theatre Lab is also a big supporter of the Morikami. I know for a fact that Morikami lost \$74,000 they thought was going to be granted by the state this season. So they’re going to go to their donors to make that up. And if that donor has to look and go, I only had *x* amount of dollars to give this year anyway; now how do I divvy that up between these multiple organizations who are all coming to me, asking me to help make up what they used to get from the state?”

THE ART OF FUNDING

To grasp why this \$32 million is so significant is to understand the byzantine world of cultural arts funding. Organizations survive through a patchwork of public grants and private donations, with a budget that is naturally inconsistent year over year, dictated by donors’ whims, by the state of the economy, by major news events. (The

low of \$6.6 million in funding for the 2018-2019 year resulted from a confluence of factors, from inaccurate revenue projections to the Hurricane Irma recovery.)

Arts Garage’s Waldo described the funding vagaries as a “roller coaster. It is a systemic problem, and that problem existed long before the governor’s veto. Grant funding is incredibly fragile. You can take a large granting organization that the pitch you make in one year rewards you with a grant, and then two years later their funding priorities have changed. The view on which organizations receive assistance from the city or CRA, or how much, is a constant conversation.”

Lawrence says that a better way for arts funding may be on the horizon, one disentangled from politics. “There have already been conversations about, is there an ongoing funding mechanism where this is moved out of that political, every-year cycle that would save it from these threats of vetoes? ... A dedicated funding source for the arts has always been something that is a very attractive thing to look at, because it would remove us from the political whims.”

Of course, ticket sales are a source of revenue as well, but their portion of the pie is seldom as significant as the

GIVE BACK TO THE ARTS

To support the organizations featured in this story, contact them below. For the entire list of organizations that lost funding through the veto, visit palm-beachculture.com/impact/arts-advocacy/state-of-florida-arts-funding-qa.

ARTS GARAGE

561/450-6357
artsgarage.org/donate

THE SYMPHONIA

561/376-3848
thesymphonia.org

THE SANDLER CENTER AT LEVIS JCC

561/852-3200
levisjcc.org/culture

THEATRE LAB AT FAU

561/297-2337
fau.edu/artsandletters/theatrelab/donate/alliance



FUNDS LOST IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

Adolph & Rose Levis Jewish Community Center, **\$60,865**
 Adolph & Rose Levis Jewish Community Center, **\$500,000** Cultural Facilities Grant
 Aequalis, **\$18,800**
 Ann Norton Sculpture Gardens, **\$51,724**
 Ballet Palm Beach, **\$23,500**
 Benzaiten Center for Creative Arts, **\$42,300**
 Boca Ballet Theatre Company, **\$58,750**
 Boca Raton Historical Society, **\$42,300**
 Boca Raton Museum of Art, **\$70,500**
 Boca Raton Philharmonic Symphonia, **\$42,300**
 Boynton Cultural Centre, **\$37,835**
 Busch Wildlife Sanctuary, **\$70,500**
 Center for Creative Education, **\$70,500**
 Centre for the Arts at Mizner Park, **\$11,750**
 City of Riviera Beach, **\$70,500**
 Cox Science Center and Aquarium, **\$70,500**
 Creative City Collaborative of Delray Beach
 (Arts Garage), **\$70,500**
 Cultural Council for Palm Beach County, **\$70,500**
 Digital VibeZ, **\$16,450**
 Palm Beach State College, **\$70,500**
 Florida Atlantic University, **\$29,140**
 Friends of Mounts Botanical Garden, **\$70,423**
 Historical Society of Palm Beach County, **\$57,270**
 Lake Worth Cultural Renaissance Foundation, **\$5,640**
 Lighthouse ArtCenter, **\$70,500**
 Loggerhead Marinelife Center, **\$70,500**
 Loxahatchee River Historical Society, **\$70,500**
 Lynn Conservatory of Music, **\$70,500**
 Maltz Jupiter Theatre, **\$70,500**
 Memory Trees, **\$11,750**
 Norton Museum of Art, **\$70,500**
 Palm Beach Dramaworks, **\$70,500**
 Palm Beach Opera, **\$70,500**
 Palm Beach Shakespeare Festival, **\$9,400**
 Raymond F. Kravis Center for the Performing Arts, **\$70,500**
 Resource Depot, **\$11,750**
 School of the Arts Foundation, **\$70,280**
 Society for Preservation and Encouragement of
 Barbershop Quartet Singing America, **\$9,494**
 Spady Cultural Heritage Museum, **\$27,244**
 Sunfest of Palm Beach County, **\$70,500**
 The Armory Art Center, **\$70,500**
 The Chamber Music Society of Palm Beach, **\$2,300**
 The Henry Morrison Flagler Museum, **\$70,500**
 The Lake Worth Playhouse, **\$60,364**
 The Masterworks Chorus of the Palm Beaches, **\$6,359**
 The Morikami, **\$70,500**
 The Palm Beach Symphony Society, **\$70,500**
 The Zoological Society of the Palm Beaches, **\$70,500**
 Village of Royal Palm Beach, **\$70,500**
 Village of Wellington, **\$70,500**
 Young Singers of the Palm Beaches, **\$42,300**



Marjorie Waldo of Arts Garage

average audience member might assume. No arts organization, up to behemoths like the Metropolitan Opera, can run on ticket sales alone. For Theatre Lab, whose individual tickets run \$32 to \$45, ticket sales are responsible for less than 20% of its budget.

"I joke in some of my curtain speeches that if not for our donors, an average ticket at a theater would have to cost over \$200 to just sustain what we do," Stabile says. "And that's absurd. We don't have a great history in this country, in the last 50 years-plus, of funding the arts appropriately, especially when compared to Europe.

"And we operate under this capitalist market idea that people will pay for the things they want. And that's probably true with goods and services. But I don't think that's true for culture and the arts. I think those things are more of a way to demonstrate an advanced society than they are something that's commodified. Because as soon as you commodify it, you're going to get what people complain about with movies and Broadway today, where all we're seeing is rehashing of things we've already seen, or big glitz and glamour."

For the Symphonia, ticket sales cover 25% of the operating budget—a drop in the bucket for a company whose investments include first-rate orchestral musicians and world-class guest conductors and soloists. "Live art is expensive," the Symphonia's Russell says. "End of story. For all of us, at whatever level—if you look at an opera company or a ballet company, they've got massive sets, massive costuming. The productions cost a huge amount of money. Even for us, for our orchestra, to put on one concert, it costs us roughly \$45,000 to \$50,000. You cannot recoup it in ticket sales.

"But then again, there's nothing like a live performance. You cannot replicate it sitting on your sofa watching a performance on television. It's not the same as sitting in a dark house, watching or listening."



Matt Stabile of Theatre Lab

MOVING FORWARD

If there's a silver lining to the funding veto, it's been the response from the organizations and their donors. The Symphonia organized a campaign called Step Into the Breach to urge its supporters to chip in a little extra money to make up the shortfall. Arts Garage's similar campaign, Call to Action, has enjoyed success that surprised even Waldo. "People came out in droves—anything from \$5 donations, to the highest was \$20,000," she says.

As Stabile reminds us, though, should private donors make up the shortfall, it risks sending a message that government funding is unnecessary. "It's a dangerous approach for any organization to take right now, to ask the donors, be they individuals or corporations, to make up this difference," he says. "Because what terrifies me is that when that happens, it's the easiest thing for the state to come back and say, 'see, you never needed this anyway.' So it's not just about this year's budget; it's like ... how is that money ever going to get put back in? That's really concerning to me."

Waldo is concerned, too, but she has a different take. "Rather than the fact that the [state] money 'wasn't needed,' I hope that it shows the governor and the legislature at the state level, and the city and county—all political interests—how important the community feels about arts and culture. Because it crosses political lines. It doesn't matter if they're Republicans or Democrats or independents, or anywhere around that circle. All of those who donated believe it's an important part of our community and our world and our lives. I'm hoping that [DeSantis] and his team see that the donations don't mean that those dollars weren't needed, but instead, that our work is valuable and is needed, and that it should be supported."

Lawrence hopes the veto will serve as a wake-up call for arts organizations to increase engagement with decision-makers at the local and state levels. "There are

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"THE ARTS ARE A WAY THAT WE AS HUMANS CAN COME TOGETHER."

—DAVE LAWRENCE, PRESIDENT AND CEO OF THE CULTURAL COUNCIL FOR PALM BEACH COUNTY



Dave Lawrence of the Cultural Council

probably a lot of organizations, if I asked the question to them, 'have you invited a legislator to one of your events this year?,' there might not be many hands that go up in the room. Something like this shows that it's important for them to reach out to the legislators and have them see all of the good things that the cultural organizations are doing to help our communities."

The Cultural Council will continue to do its part to advocate funding for grant programs by, among other initiatives, traveling to Tallahassee and meeting with House and Senate members on the key appropriation committees. Lawrence and his team will convey that "arts and culture do so much for our community, around education, around preventing crime, and city beautification, and proving property values, and economic impact, and tourism. If you pull back even further, the arts are a way that we as humans can come together. A perfect example of this is right after 9-11. The very next day, those legislators came out on the steps of the Capitol, and together they sang. That was their first reaction.

"The arts help us come together and share our challenges, our successes and our grief, and right now in this world, at this particular time, we need the arts so that we can share our common humanity with each other," he adds. "I know that gets a little touchy-feely, but at the end of the day, on top of all of those reasons, the arts are a way that humans can communicate on a base level and share their joys and concerns." **b**