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August 7, 2023

RE: Ordinance 123-2023 (AS)

Dear Mayor Seren and Members of City Council,

I am respectfully submitting this letter to address the proposal referenced above for discussion prior to the vote. In June I presented Heights Arts' proposal for the allocation of ARPA funding for the purpose of reinvigorating our city through public art – something that is at the core of our mission. Also, in July of 2022 I had the opportunity to meet with Mayor Seren to discuss Heights Arts and its role in the community. At that time, we discussed the idea of an arts council and I gave my opinion. This letter officially expresses Heights Arts' position and rationale against this ordinance. It makes the case for why we think the ordinance is 1) not necessary and 2) could jeopardize the work that we are already doing in the community.

Since our inception in 2000 celebrating the region's artists, musicians, poets, and general community, Heights Arts has contributed over \$1.5 million to more than 600 artists in varied disciplines in support of our creative economy through payments to artists. We are grateful to have the City's recent support for the first time for our renown Poet Laureateship – the longest running in the state. This encourages us to hope that we can work to identify new opportunities for a partnership between our two entities which can serve to build strength and move forward together, rather than dividing us by creating a redundant entity which replaces and even competes with an already proven asset born from the City's visioning process almost twenty-five years ago. By that, I refer to the fact that Heights Arts was formed in the year 2000 in response to a comprehensive citizen-driven visioning process organized by the City of Cleveland Heights.

Argument 1 - Why an Arts Commission is not necessary

The number-one tenant when considering creating a new organization in the non-profit world is to first determine if there is a need, and whether there is an organization already doing the work. To address the first statement in the ordinance, I would argue that Heights Arts itself is "*the mechanism to judge and recommend public art projects, and to facilitate the funding, creation, and enjoyment of the arts in Cleveland Heights*" and has a respected track record of accomplishing this. True to its mission, Heights Arts currently supports a de facto "Arts Commission" and goes one step further in that our structure invites community members who are experienced in many areas of the arts to create, produce, and also present our

programming. New members are vetted by current team members and evaluated for their expertise in areas that complement each team's makeup. I would be surprised to find any other organization in our region that has this kind of intentional and rigorous structure – most, if not all, employ individuals to make those decisions within the organization with very little or no community input. Our structure ensures that as many voices as possible are heard.

How we ensure the community is represented

We have over thirty people who volunteer their valuable time and expertise on our Board and three (Music, Literary and Visual Arts) community teams. Our structure is intentional. We specifically define terms of service, and have goals for representation - including expertise, age, demographics, and values, which ensure our programming reflects our community. Our team members are expected to meet according to a specific schedule, and we clearly state our expectations when a member is voted in by current team members. Our teams create all exhibitions, outreach activities, and ongoing programs. This includes nine exhibitions a year of varying disciplines to showcase emerging and accomplished professional artists; between four and eight poetry programs (both on and offsite) a year, along with the longest-running poet laureateship in the state; and between five and ten music events from new music to classical to Jazz and other genres each year. One such example is the relationship we have cultivated with the Cleveland Orchestra to present our Close Encounters series, now in its 17th season, or our Random Acts of Arts LIVE lawn concerts. We also partner with other organizations outside of Cleveland Heights, like sharing our Ekphrastic poetry readings and artist talks with other arts organizations and our new "Heights Poet Laureate" with University Heights.

Community team skills

Historically, the Exhibition Community Team (visual and public art) and its predecessor committees at Heights Arts have embodied a wide range of skills and backgrounds related to the visual arts—working artists in many media, arts administrators, educators, public art experts, and gallery installation professionals. The current ECT membership similarly covers a lot of bases:

Greg Donley (team chair): working artist, designer, and writer, 30+ years at the Cleveland Museum of Art, co-founder of Heights Arts

Amber Ford: in-demand working professional photographer, graduate of Cleveland Institute of Art

Helen Liggett, PhD: working artist, longtime professor in urban planning and design at CSU and KSU

Linda Nickman: 25+ years as a high school art instructor and curriculum developer, extensive student exhibition experience, art therapist

Dante Rodriguez: art installer and custom mount-maker, Cleveland Museum of Art; former gallery director, working artist

Kate Snow: working artist, educator and arts leader experienced running small arts organizations including Zygote Press

Jack Stinedurf: arts advocate and fundraising professional with tenures at the Cleveland Museum of Art and Cleveland Play House

Michael Weil, PhD: adjunct professor (CIA, CWRU), working artist, gallery director, former development roles at R&R Hall of Fame and Cleveland Museum of Art

To learn in-depth about our mission and community team structure, please visit heightsarts.org/volunteer-community-teams/, or view more qualifications and skills of our board, staff, and all three community teams heightsarts.org/our-people/

Public art projects and the creative economy

Heights Arts is responsible for most of the public art in Cleveland Heights, including the Coventry benches and fences, Coventry Arch, Cedar Lee Mural, Heights Youth Club mural, and Cedar-Fairmount murals. With our proposal, we hope to now serve, in partnership with the City, other areas which have been historically underserved.

I disagree with the second assertion of the ordinance that “*the lack of such an established mechanism has led to a lack of intentional and proactive support for the arts in Cleveland Heights*”. Public Art and Place-Making is important to the public vitality of the community. However, it can only happen when there is money to support the effort to make it happen. If there is a lack of public art in the City, it is because of a historic lack of funding and collaboration, not the lack of having an arts commission to direct the funding. This is exactly why I presented to Council in June to advocate for the allocation of \$250K ARPA funding to this very issue.

Argument 2 – How another arts commission could jeopardize our work

Cleveland Heights is not a big city with large institutions and big business. As I stated before, Heights Arts is already operating a de facto arts commission. At the very least, another arts commission would create yet another layer for accomplishing our goals, and another time-commitment for us and other arts professionals, who are already working at maximum to deliver programming. At the very worst, another arts commission could divert the minimal resources and dollars available which we and other arts organizations struggle to raise - causing our work to be diminished, diluted, or even extinguished.

I ask that you, our elected officials, put your faith toward the organization which was born and formed from the City’s own visioning process for the purpose of elevating the arts in our community - where more artists reside and work than any other city. We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to work together through the allocation of ARPA funds for this purpose (see Heights Arts’ proposal presented to Council on June 7, 2023) – which will add to our legacy in the form of lasting public markers which will demonstrate the City’s commitment to its name – *Home to the Arts*.

Respectfully submitted for consideration,



Rachel Bernstein, Executive Director