Subject: Ordinance 123-23 (AS) Please Vote NO

Dear Mayor and Members of City Council,

In 1999, the City of Cleveland Heights led a year-and-a-half long, exhaustive visioning process that involved hundreds of community members. One of the key findings of the resulting report was that Cleveland Heights was home to more artists, musicians, and arts professionals than any other community in our region—yet this richness of artistic talent and experience was not correspondingly evident in the daily life of our city. One of the strongest assets of Cleveland Heights was under-appreciated and under-utilized: the city needed more and better artistic venues, more opportunities for local artists to share their work, and more art in public spaces.

Heights Arts was formed in 2000 specifically to address that vision of a city infused with creativity and providing broad public access to the arts. Because the city government had little history of sustained funding or leadership around the arts, the strongest idea was to create a freestanding nonprofit collaborative organization whose mission was to provide opportunities for artists to meet audiences and for the full range of the community to have access to rich artistic experiences. This organization, founded as a 501(c)(3) corporation as the Heights Arts Collaborative, would work together with government at all levels and with artists and other arts organizations to enrich the creative life of the community. Being an independent nonprofit, this entity would be somewhat insulated from the inevitable fluctuations in city budgets and from shifting priorities.

For almost 25 years, Heights Arts has served the Cleveland Heights area by providing venues for artistic display and performance and by supporting hundreds of local artists. Pursuing its public-spirited mission, Heights Arts has facilitated public art projects (including a major temporary installation of sculptures around the ring road at Severance Town Center, the Coventry benches and fences, the Coventry Arch, Cedar Lee Mural, Heights Youth Club mural, and Cedar-Fairmount murals), engaged local visual artists, musicians, and poets (including creating Ohio’s first poet laureateship) for arts programming, worked with local schools to implement internship programs, and much more. In short, our organization has worked tirelessly since the year 2000 to help Cleveland Heights blossom into a *home to the arts* for all. In effect, Heights Arts has operated as a mission-driven arts commission for the Heights community for more than two decades, always centering the community itself and engaging continuing input from Heights residents.

The introduction of Ordinance 123-2023 (AS), which aims to create an official arts commission for Cleveland Heights, is an encouraging sign that the city is at last coming to understand the value of its own creative community (indeed, a natural time to do this would have been 24 years ago with the release of the visioning report). However, we feel there have been many missed opportunities in the way this ordinance has been hastily crafted and rushed toward a vote. First, it was developed without consulting any of the city’s hard-working and effective arts organizations, nor any of its artists, musicians, or arts professionals. Second, its role is nebulously defined and again ignores the very deep resource available through organizations like Heights Arts, which already has a long history of successful collaboration with the city and other nonprofit and for-profit entities. Third, while the ambition to have an arts commission is admirable, neither the city government nor any of its individual employees have shown any track record of leadership or significant participation in the arts. If we want Cleveland Heights to be its best, we need to tap its creative talent in the way Heights Arts has sought to do since its inception. There is a real danger that the proposed arts commission could do the opposite—actually harm Heights Arts and other longtime arts champions by diverting and diluting funding and energy.

Therefore, we respectfully suggest that more time and consideration be given to this idea of a Cleveland Heights arts commission. If indeed there is actually any need for such an entity, given the leadership and track record already provided by Heights Arts and other energetic local arts organizations, it should not necessarily be a body hand-picked by whoever happens to be mayor at a given time (future leaders may see less value in the arts than our current leadership), but rather it should be an entity designed so that it integrally draws upon the wisdom, experience, and creativity of our unique artistic community, no matter who is in city leadership. One way to attain this might be to establish the city’s first-ever Office for the Arts, a dedicated working group within city government tasked with communicating and collaborating with the community’s existing arts organizations and professionals; the new Office could address the same goals as a commission of hand-picked unpaid volunteers, but do so with more teeth and more buy-in from the arts community. Now is the time to get it right, not to rush. The arts are that important to the character and future of Cleveland Heights.

We applaud the concept of centering the arts in Cleveland Heights, but Ordinance 123-2023 (AS) as written is not satisfactory. If it comes before Council for a formal vote, please vote NO, and THANK YOU for your continued service to Cleveland Heights.

Sincerely,

YOUR NAME HERE

YOUR ADDRESS HERE