

Opinion: Jan Burton: A resounding ‘yes’ for arts and culture

By [JAN BURTON](#) | Jan.burton111@gmail.com | For the Camera

PUBLISHED: November 17, 2023 at 8:00 a.m. | UPDATED: November 24, 2023 at 5:13 p.m.

Last week, 75% of Boulder voters approved the 2A ballot measure, sending a strong message about the importance of arts and culture. This was a once-in-a-generation opportunity, and Boulder voters fully grasped it! As one of the organizers of the petition and ballot measure, I am humbled by the public support and very optimistic about Boulder’s future.

When the tax goes into effect in January 2025, the city will use half of the estimated \$7.5M annual sales tax for general fund purposes, including public safety, human services and other needs, to be determined by the City Council.

Boulder’s arts and culture sector will get the other half. Community involvement in next year’s Cultural Plan renewal will envision uses of the taxes, and monies will be distributed through a City Council-approved process administered by the City’s Office of Arts and Culture.

In my opinion, priority must be given to our numerous quality arts nonprofits that have struggled since the pandemic. Some of our largest cultural organizations, like the Dairy Arts Center, BMOCA and Chautauqua, housed in city buildings, compete against their peers for a small annual operating grant that they must use to maintain the city’s own buildings. Even those that don’t run facilities compete for city grants that supply a minimal portion of their operating budget.

Despite a multiyear effort by Create Boulder, a local arts advocacy organization, to get more budget support for the arts, the city currently spends \$17/resident vs. \$40/resident in similar-sized cities.

Seeing a window of opportunity with the transfer of \$10 million in library expenses over to the newly formed Library District, Create Boulder organized a ballot petition to dedicate the expiring sales tax to arts and culture. After five weeks of dedicated volunteer efforts, almost 4,000 Boulder voters had signed a petition to allocate a renewed sales tax to the arts, demonstrating a remarkable level of community interest. Thanks to those volunteers who petitioned for signatures at arts events, plant sales, hiking trails and wherever they could.

Once we were certified for November's ballot by meeting the required number of signatures, we began discussions with City Council members. Mayor Brockett assured us that, due to the Library District funding transition, there would be \$10M of funding available every year to cover any new tax for the arts. Despite this, city leaders were concerned about this tax being dedicated 100% for arts and culture. We arrived at a compromise with the City Council to split the tax, 50% to the general fund and 50% to the arts. The City Council voted 7-2 to support the 2A tax measure. Off we went to the ballot, to see how the voters felt!

After the inspiring "yes" vote by 75% of voters, Local Theater's Executive Producer Misha Zimmerman was effusive in her comments: "It's a new day in Boulder! I am so energized knowing that the people of Boulder showed up and said YES to the arts. This ballot measure will have such a profound impact on the artists who live and work in Boulder and on all of the people who call Boulder home. As one of those artists I am bursting with excitement about what the future holds."

Many other arts leaders and community supporters echo Misha's comments. There are so many benefits to a robust arts and culture sector: economic, social, educational, health and equity. These benefits have been communicated brilliantly in this paper and in other media by arts leaders and advocates in the past several months.

I'm most excited about the future because Boulder's arts leaders have learned to speak with one voice — and on behalf of the entire cultural community. They worked together to pass this measure. We have increased the community's awareness of our cultural blessings and the shortcomings we hope to address with more funding.

Though \$3.7 million/year is a substantial amount of money, it won't meet all of the needs for the artistic community. Businesses, foundations and individual donors must step up to match public investments so that our valued nonprofit organizations achieve solid financial footing, we develop more rehearsal, workspace and performing venues, and Boulder becomes a vibrant cultural center.

In summary, let's use this opportunity to coalesce around a vibrant arts and cultural scene. Let's have community conversations filled with vision and possibilities for our artists and cultural organizations. Thanks to the City of Boulder and our voters for an adrenaline shot to the arts!

Jan Burton is a former City Council member, Board Chair of Create Boulder, and an organizer for Ballot Measure 2A.