



CITY OF OAKLAND

**Cultural Affairs Commission
Meeting Minutes
Monday, July 27, 2026
5:30 – 8:30 PM**

Members in Attendance:

- Vanessa Whang (Chair)
- Jim Santi Owen (Vice Chair)
- Miles Lassie
- Joti Singh
- Mandolyn Ludlum
- Jennifer Easton
- Ilana Lipsett
- Salim Shariff (arrived later)

Staff in Attendance:

- Lyz Luke, Cultural Affairs Division Manager
- Kristen Zarembo, Public Art Coordinator

1. Call to Order / Roll Call

The meeting was called to order by Chair Whang at **5:34 PM**. A quorum was established.

2. Welcome

Chair Whang welcomed commissioners, staff, community members, and guests attending the July 27, 2026 meeting.

3. Land Acknowledgement + Official City of Oakland Love Life Acknowledgement

Commissioner Miles Lassi delivered the Land Acknowledgement, honoring the Lisjan Ohlone territories. Vice Chair Jim Santi Owen delivered the Love Life Acknowledgement, reaffirming commitment to the City's motto and values of community care, nonviolence, inclusion, kindness, and civic responsibility.

4. Public Comment

Initial public comment period was opened. Comments were made regarding participation procedures and appreciation for the Commission's work.

5. Action Item: Approval of Minutes from Previous Meeting

Chair Whang requested a motion to approve minutes from the prior meeting.

- Motion to approve: Joti Singh
- Second: Commissioner Jennifer Easton
- Vote: Unanimous approval

The minutes were adopted.

6. Artist Spotlight: Bongo Sidibe

Vice Chair Santi Owen introduced guest artist Bongo Sidibe and described his background as a musician from Guinea, his role in West African traditional arts, and his work with schools, youth, and community groups in the Bay Area. Sidibe spoke about his experience as a traditional artist working in Oakland, the barriers faced by immigrant artists, and the impact of housing and cost-of-living pressures. He discussed the role of cultural practitioners and educators, shared information about communal traditions in Guinea and the origins of djembe music, and offered a drumming demonstration that included teaching a greeting song. Commissioners thanked Sidibe for his work and noted his influence on youth and community members in Oakland.

7. Special Orders of the Day

A. Introduction of New Commissioner

Chair Whang announced that Nia Jacobs had recently been approved by City Council to serve on the Cultural Affairs Commission. Jacobs will be the crossover Commissioner with the Public Art Advisory Committee as stipulated in the Commission's establishing ordinance.

B. Recognition of Commissioner Jennifer Easton

Chair Whang presented a Mayoral Proclamation recognizing Commissioner Easton for her work in public art, her long period of service on Oakland advisory bodies, her knowledge of policy and public administration, and her involvement in labor issues, mural licensing, and cultural strategy. She also noted Easton's guidance during periods of change within the City's cultural infrastructure. Following the presentation, commissioners spoke about Easton's institutional memory, her policy insight, her steady presence on the Commission, and her commitment to justice, equity, and artist rights. They also described her role in supporting the Commission's work and the broader cultural community.

C. Recognition of Chair Vanessa Whang

Commissioner Ilana Lipsett presented a Mayoral Proclamation recognizing Chair Whang's work on the 2018 Cultural Plan, her contributions to cultural equity, her role in advancing cultural strategy, and her advocacy for funding, staffing, and revenue and policy frameworks that support cultural work in Oakland. Following the presentation, commissioners and community members spoke about Chair Whang's mentorship, her accountability, her ability to bring people together, and the impact of her leadership on Oakland's cultural landscape and future.

8. Public Comment (Extended)

A significant portion of the meeting consisted of extensive tributes from community members including:

- Roberto Bedoya
- Natalia Neira

- Roni Stratton
- Diane Sanchez
- Mark Weiss
- Kev Choice
- Walter Wallace
- Additional written statements were submitted

Speakers expressed appreciation for the commissioners who were completing their service and reflected on ongoing work related to cultural equity. Commenters discussed the role of individuals who hold and transmit institutional and community memory, and noted the breadth of Oakland's cultural history along with current challenges faced by local artists and cultural workers. Many comments emphasized the need for continued advocacy to secure stable public investment in arts and culture.

9. Cultural Affairs Division Update

Presented by Division Manager Lyz Luke

Key areas of focus:

A. Arts & Wellness Pilot Program

- Early development of a social-prescribing model linking health providers with arts organizations
- Vision includes two health institutions, three to five Oakland arts organizations, and workforce training
- 3-year pilot; fundraising goal \$1M
- Roundtable series planned for stakeholder feedback
- Potential precedent-setting health indicator integration

B. Commission Structure Exploration

- Discussion to explore housing film, entertainment, nightlife, and festivals within the Commission
- Need to assess capacity, meeting frequency, public input, and funding protection
- Commissioners emphasized proactive planning and community inclusion

10. Public Art Program Update

Presented by Public Art Coordinator Kristen Zaremba

Updates included:

- “1-800-HAPPY-BIRTHDAY” installation at Latham Square
- New public artworks at Peralta Hacienda Historical Park
- Shepard Fairey x The Roots mural at Rainbow Recreation Center
- Lincoln Recreation Center public art committee moving forward
- Contracting barriers for artists being resolved
- Civic Art Collection assessment RFP underway

Commissioners praised staff for nimble coordination on major public art initiatives.

11. Chair’s Report

Chair Whang addressed:

- Support of advocacy around Coliseum Complex ticket revenue being dedicated to CAD
- Success in mobilizing community voices on short notice
- Importance of proactive relationships with councilmembers
- Ordinance changes enabling the Commission to elect its own chair
- Constraints from City Attorney requiring bylaws adjustments on our high bar regarding conflicts of interests with employees of elected official
- Her upcoming transition off the Commission and continued support during leadership handoff

12. Discussion Item: Commission Leadership Transition

Candidates for incoming Chair:

- Commissioner Jim Santi Owen
- Commissioner Ilana Lipsett

Commissioners discussed:

- Restoring cultural grantmaking
- Strengthening arts integration across city departments

- Onboarding new commissioners
- Public engagement strategies
- Sustainable revenue streams (including future ticket tax concepts)
- Committee structure and leadership models
- Community-driven policy development (“from the ground up”)
- Proactive advocacy vs. reactive crisis-driven mobilization

Election planned for September pending ordinance adoption.

13. Committee Updates

A. Policy & Revenue Streams Ad Hoc

Commissioner Ludlum reported on the Policy and Revenue Streams Ad Hoc Committee. She stated that the committee’s next meeting is scheduled for August 7, 2026 and will be held online. She noted that the meeting is open to community participants and that the committee will examine the potential use of ticket revenue, including the 6 percent Coliseum allocation. She added that advocacy work for this topic should be proactive and based on ongoing relationships with City leadership.

B. Communications & Advocacy Ad Hoc

Commissioner Lipsett reported on the Communications and Advocacy Ad Hoc Committee. She explained that recent rapid-response mobilization resulted in public support from two City Council members regarding the Coliseum Complex ticket revenue for arts and culture, and she encouraged community members to send follow-up thank-you messages. She stated that the newsletter will continue and that an events website prototype has been launched. She also noted that discussion of a broader social media strategy has been deferred to the next meeting. Finally, she clarified that commissioners may act individually (for themselves) on advocacy matters. However, to speak in the name of the Commission on a policy position requires an affirmative vote of a quorum of the Commission.

C. Commissioner Recruitment

During the recruitment update, Lyz Luke reported that the Cultural Affairs Division is reviewing a backlog of applications from individuals interested in serving on the

Commission. She stated that social media will be an important tool for outreach, helping more community members become aware of Commission openings. Lyz asked commissioners to share recruitment information within their networks to broaden awareness and encourage applicants.

14. Announcements & Acknowledgments

Commissioners acknowledged recent events:

- Artist Mary Lovelace O'Neal (passed May 10, 2026)
- Betty Reid Soskin, civil rights storyteller and the nation's oldest serving National Park Service ranger (passed Dec. 21, 2025)
- Visual artist & educator Raymond Saunders (July 19, 2025)
- EastSide Arts Alliance co-founder Elena Serrano retired (Dec. 2025)

Additional announcements:

- African Arts Festival (Oct 3, 2026)
- East Oakland Collective: Feed the Hood (Aug 22, 2026)
- Civic Assembly on activating vacant spaces
- Community arts events and performances shared by commissioners

15. Adjournment

Chair Whang offered closing remarks, thanking commissioners, staff, and community for their dedication and service.

Commissioner Whang moved to adjourn the meeting and commissioner Easton seconded. Meeting adjourned at 8:34PM.