

Dear Constituents,

The Legislature has been receiving lots of emails about funding the arts in Tompkins County. I share everyone's appreciation of and support for our arts and culture. And, as is the case with everything else the County must support, I know that there are never enough resources to fully fund our arts and cultural organizations.

Given the timing and content of these emails, I would guess that it was prompted by Legislator Klein's recently posted website, his communications to and through various arts and cultural organizations, and/or his 3/29 letter to the Ithaca Journal. Mr. Klein's concerns about arts funding levels are focused on the level of funding certain organizations receive through the Arts/Cultural Organizational Development grant program (ACOD). Unfortunately, as is so often the case, a tight focus on one aspect of an issue excludes the larger context in which the issue must be viewed in order to gain a complete and accurate understanding of what is actually going on. Please, bear with me as I try to clarify this particular issue in context.

ACOD is one of ten competitive, merit-based grant categories that are funded with hotel room tax revenues. **Under State law, these revenues must be used to promote local tourism.** The grant categories target various aspects of the tourism industry including arts and culture, celebrations and festivals, new tourism initiatives, marketing, and tourism infrastructure development. There are 81 entities that are funded through these various grant categories. Only 11 of them are eligible for funding under ACOD: these 11 are eligible to apply for grants – and often receive grant monies – in other categories as well.

The various tourism grant categories are administered by the Tompkins County Planning and Sustainability Department (PSD), the Community Arts Partnership (CAP), Cornell Cooperative Extension, the Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Downtown Ithaca Alliance, and/or the Tompkins County Strategic Tourism Planning Board (STPB). A greatly simplified description of my probably imperfect understanding of the process is that: (1) PSD sets a budget for tourism grants overall and grants in particular categories, consistent with our Strategic Tourism Plan 2020; (2) various agencies and specific grant-related committees of the STPB evaluate grant applications and recommend grant awards to the full STPB; (3) and the full STPB then makes recommendations for grant awards to the full Legislature.

The Legislature generally follows the grant award recommendations of the STPB. With the exception of one member who is a PSD employee, the STPB members are civically engaged volunteers, many of whom also work for and/or serve on the boards of the very organizations that receive tourism grants. These folks understand the challenges facing our arts, cultural, and other not-for-profit organizations in Tompkins County. They devote long hours and great diligence to administering a fair process for distributing grant funds which are never equal to everyone's needs. The Legislature respects these volunteers' expertise and dedication, and generally shares their respect for the fairness of the grant process.

The ACOD grant amounts that were approved at last week's Planning, Development, and Environmental Quality Committee meeting, and will be presented for approval by the full Legislature on April 2, are the grant amounts recommended by the STPB. ACOD grant requests for 2018 averaged 139% of the monies available to fund those requests (\$217,870), even though the amount available for ACOD funding has increased by 28% from 2012 to 2018. In fact, funding for ACOD grants has steadily increased every year but one since 2012 (it dropped by \$773 from 2013 to 2014), and ACOD is consistently enjoys one of the highest budgets (second only to Tourism Capital Grants) of any of the tourism grant categories.

ACOD has not been cut. However, it has become a more competitive category, as a result of a carefully considered decision in 2015 to make ACOD grants available to three additional organizations. At the time, it was understood, acknowledged, and accepted that this decision might result in decreased funding to some ACOD grant applicants. It was decided that this was a sacrifice worth making in order to expand the number and breadth of arts and cultural opportunities in Tompkins County. So how has this translated into actual dollars and cents distributed to arts and cultural organizations over the past six years?

Grant recipient	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018 Rec
Cayuga Chamber Orchestra	\$22,236	\$27,000	\$27,000	\$27,000	\$20,000	\$20,000	\$23,000
Cayuga Nature Center	\$25,000	merged	\$0				
Cinemapolis					\$13,500	\$13,500	\$18,370
CSMA					\$7,000	\$7,000	\$10,000
Hangar Theatre	\$23,513	\$27,000	\$27,000	\$27,000	\$24,500	\$24,500	\$20,000
History Center	\$22,325	\$27,000	\$27,000	\$27,000	\$22,000	\$22,000	\$24,000
Ithaca Shakespeare					\$5,000	\$5,000	
Kitchen Theatre	\$22,123	\$22,000	\$23,000	\$27,000	\$30,000	\$30,000	\$30,000
PRI/CNC	\$15,606	\$40,000	\$40,000	\$40,000	\$30,000	\$30,000	\$30,000
Sciencenter	\$16,646	\$17,000	\$17,000	\$17,000	\$20,000	\$20,000	\$20,000
State Theatre	\$23,307	\$11,887	\$27,000	\$27,000	\$25,000	\$25,000	\$27,500
Running to Places							\$15,000
Totals	\$170,756	\$171,887	\$188,000	\$192,000	\$197,000	\$197,000	\$217,870

And this is not the entire picture, because if you looked at what our original eight ACOD grantees have received in total grants between 2004 and 2016, you would find that they have received a total of 206 grants in multiple categories, totaling over \$3.5 million. This translates into average annual grant awards ranging from \$27,270 to \$55,264 over a 13-year period.

Now, if you're still with me and not sound asleep, let me assure you that I don't think our tourism grant system should be so complicated that it takes me three pages of text and a table to explain it – and I'm not the only Legislator who feels this way. So, I can promise you that we will be looking at ways to make the process simpler to administer and understand as we go forward into next year. Please stay tuned – and continue to love the arts and cultural organization of Tompkins County!

Deborah Dawson
Tompkins County Legislature, District 10