

H.624

An act relating to supporting creative sector businesses and cultural organizations

It is hereby enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Vermont:

Sec. 1. FINDINGS; PURPOSE

(a) Findings. The General Assembly finds:

(1) The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly jeopardized the economic viability of creative sector businesses, museums, theaters, galleries, studios, performing arts venues, and other cultural organizations.

(2) Creative sector businesses and nonprofits are important to Vermont's economic growth and community vitality, attracting tourists, boosting local sales, and generating more than nine percent of Vermont's jobs.

(3) These businesses and organizations were among the first to close to protect public health and are also among the last to fully reopen.

(4) Even as performances and cultural activities slowly return to operation, they are often are not able to operate at pre-pandemic capacity, and the public remains trepidatious to gather in close proximity with others, even if masked.

(5) Past financial support for creative sector businesses, performing arts venues, and other cultural organizations has provided a bridge to this point, but

these entities continue to have significant need until vaccinations and other public health measures allow them to return to economic health.

(b) Purpose. The purpose of this act is to provide \$17.5 million in additional financial assistance to creative sector businesses and cultural organizations as follows:

(1) to provide direct financial assistance for COVID-19-safe equipment, marketing and re-engaging audiences, and covering operating costs;

(2) to support statewide promotion and marketing of Vermont's creative economy;

(3) to provide funding for the Vermont Arts Council to implement the CreateVT Action Plan; and

(4) to support both creative sector businesses and downtown growth and revitalization by expanding access to affordable studio, housing, performance, and exhibition space and opportunities for artists and other creative sector businesses.

Sec. 2. CREATIVE ECONOMY RECOVERY PROGRAM

In fiscal year 2022, of the amounts remaining in the Economic Recovery Grant Program, the Agency of Commerce and Community Development shall subgrant the amount of \$17,500,000.00 to the Vermont Arts Council to administer consistent with the provisions of this section.

(1) Creative economy grants. The Council shall allocate funding for creative economy grants to theaters, community arts centers, galleries, museums, dance studios, and similarly situated entities as follows:

(A) \$10,000,000.00 to cover a portion of monthly operating costs for businesses and organizations that have sustained substantial losses due to the pandemic, including rent, mortgage, utilities, and insurance;

(B) \$2,000,000.00 for public health-related business and programming adaptations, including to purchase and implement touchless ticketing, online sales platforms, and COVID-19-related health and safety protocols; and

(C) \$4,000,000.00 for public health-related facility adaptations, including the purchase of air purification systems, hand-sanitizer dispensers, expanded outdoor seating, and HVAC assessments and upgrades.

(2) Statewide promotion and marketing of Vermont's creative sector. The Council shall allocate \$500,000.00 to support statewide and regional marketing of arts and cultural events, venues, and creative sector businesses that are essential to revive consumer confidence and spending.

(3) Vermont Creative Network Coordinator and network support. The Council shall allocate \$250,000.00 to hire the Vermont Creative Network Coordinator and Zone Leader positions for two years to implement the CreateVT Action Plan.

(4) Creative sector space in vacant downtown storefronts. The Council shall allocate \$750,000.00 for creative spaces grants to restore vitality to vacant downtown buildings and other retail spaces and provide expanded access to affordable studio, housing, exhibition, and performance space for the creative sector.

(A) A creative sector business may apply for a grant to lease vacant downtown retail space for not more than three years.

(B) A grantee may also use funds to lease residential space in the same building.

(C) The Council shall pay grant funds directly to a landlord after the execution of a lease agreement.

Sec. 3. FARMERS' NIGHT CONCERT SERIES; APPROPRIATION

In fiscal year 2022, the Office of the Sergeant at Arms is authorized to use not more than \$10,000.00 from resources available within the General Assembly's budget to provide honoraria to speakers and performing groups who are invited to participate in the 2023 Farmers' Night Concert Series and who are not otherwise sponsored or compensated for their participation.

Sec. 4. EFFECTIVE DATE

This act shall take effect on passage.