



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

New State Budget Concerns Local Arts Organizations

BARTOW, FL (June 17, 2024) -

The 2025 State of Florida Budget that was recently signed into effect has a significant impact on Polk County's arts and cultural organizations. All funding for Cultural Museum Grants, Culture Builds Florida, and Cultural Endowments was eliminated, resulting in 14 unfunded grants from Polk – totaling nearly \$1.3 million.

Jennifer Jones, the President/CEO of the Florida Cultural Alliance noted that this was “unprecedented in the history of the grants program...zero dollars for the state arts and culture grants.”

Organizations whose requests were not funded include the Polk Museum of Art, the Florida Children's Museum, Lakeland Community Theatre, The Imperial Symphony Orchestra, and the Lake Wales Arts Council among others. Kerry Falwell, the CEO of the Florida Children's Museum called the cuts “devastating,” noting that these requests were part of a rigorous grant process as opposed to requests made directly through legislators.

Dan Chesnicka, the Producing Director of Theatre Winter Haven, is concerned about the vetoed funding. “These grants help fund things like Theatre Winter Haven's Penguin Project (theatre for kids with physical and developmental disabilities), our in-school programs, Arts after School, and dozens of other programs that are completely free to Winter Haven participants,” Chesnicka said.

Lack of available funds via direct state support also impacts major Polk tourist destinations such as Bok Tower Gardens. David Price, CEO of Bok Tower, expressed his disappointment with losing nearly \$300,000 in requested program support. “It is sad to see the arts take a step back in the priority of the State's budget. We will need to trim from other programs and eliminate other initiatives to support the overall budget,” Price noted. Cynthia Haffey, the executive director of the nonprofit public art organization, Platform Art, echoed Price's concerns. “Loss of grant funding can sometimes cripple the projects/programs, impacting the outcome and public benefit,” Haffey said.

Daryl Ward, Executive Director of the Polk Arts & Cultural Alliance, recognizes the implications that this loss of funding may have on programs and services for citizens. “We know that our state leaders make budget decisions as to what they feel is the best stewardship of Florida taxpayer's dollars,” Ward said. “However, having no funding allotted for the arts and cultural sector can have severe consequences for these organizations.”

Ward does note, however, that local support for arts and culture is robust. “The Polk County Board of County Commissioners and many local municipalities do offer both grant and direct funding opportunities for arts and cultural nonprofits,” he said. “We’re fortunate that they appreciate how arts and cultural experiences enhance Polk’s quality of life.”

Ward encourages those who value local arts and cultural experiences to get more involved with their local arts and cultural organizations as the next year will prove difficult financially. “I hope our local community will step up and support these groups by attending events, purchasing memberships, making donations, and increasing volunteer hours,” Ward said. “It’s important that now more than ever we work towards getting this funding restored at the legislative level as well as doing our part at the local level to assist our arts and cultural organizations.”

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About Polk Arts & Cultural Alliance

The Polk Arts & Cultural Alliance is the designated Local Arts Agency for Polk County, Florida. As such, PACA advocates for all the cultural arts organizations in Polk County and promotes the impact of the Cultural Arts Sector as integral to the quality-of-life in Polk County. PACA actively represents Polk County’s arts and cultural interests to agencies, governments, chambers of commerce and the business community on a national, state, and local level, and markets Polk County as a “Destination for the Arts.”