

**New York City Council
Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup Relations
February 27, 2017 - Oversight - Cultural Plan - Next Steps**

**Testimony Presented by NYC Department of Cultural Affairs
Commissioner Tom Finkelpearl**

Good afternoon, Chair Van Bramer and members of the committee. I am Cultural Affairs Commissioner Tom Finkelpearl, here to present testimony on today's topic, the CreateNYC cultural plan. Thank you for the opportunity to highlight the work being done across the city in the process of developing the plan. I am joined today by a number of colleagues from the agency.

Of course the Council's collaboration has been critical to the entire process. The cultural plan is the result of legislation sponsored by you, Majority Leader Van Bramer, and Council Member Levin that the Mayor signed in May 2015. Last spring, after the law was signed, we issued an open RFP. The winning team is led by Hester Street Collaborative. Hester Street has extensive experience working in communities across the city on projects including the East Harlem Neighborhood Plan and the Neighborhoods First Fund. This background has made them an ideal partner for helping us to address unprecedented challenges and opportunities presented by developing the city's first-ever cultural plan. Once we secured City funding for the cultural plan in the FY 2017 budget, we moved quickly to get Hester Street under contract and get the process up and running.

Since the fall, we've had a whirlwind of public engagements of every stripe. It has been exhausting and exhilarating. More importantly, it has reminded us just how important culture is to the lives of New Yorkers. By showing up, hosting events, and helping engage constituents in all five boroughs, Council Members have helped make this process a meaningful way for New Yorkers to connect with their government on issues that matter to them. Here are just a few of the ways in which you in the Council have participated in our ongoing work: Chair Van Bramer addressed the audience gathered for the launch event last October at Hostos Community College in the Bronx. Council Member Ferreras-Copeland welcomed participants to the Queens borough workshop at New York Hall of Science in Corona. Council Member Cumbo welcomed the crowd at BRIC for the Brooklyn workshop. Council Members Andy King and Anabel Palma joined us at the Bronx Zoo for the Bronx workshop. We also have a number of upcoming meetings involving members of Council, which I will mention later in my testimony.

We are currently anticipating releasing the plan, on schedule, by June 30 of this year.

Along with Hester Street Collaborative, DCLA and the CreateNYC team have hosted or participated in more than 182 events to date:

- We've had five borough-wide workshops.
- We've tabled at 56 events across New York where we distributed fliers and conducted interviews and surveys.
- We've had one-on-one meetings and roundtables with 84 groups.
- We've had 16 focus groups and discussions to examine issues in depth.
- We've attended others' events in order to hear more voices.

In the Power Point you're seeing on the screen, and of which I'll leave copies behind, you can see a more complete list of these engagements.

Stakeholders from across the city have also used this opportunity to examine their own communities' cultural assets, and report to us with feedback that will inform the plan. They have hosted workshops, focus groups, meetings, office hours, consultations, and other events. Youth, seniors, people with disabilities, public housing residents, LGBTQ communities, artists, arts administrators, teaching artists, museum educators, business owners, organized labor, faith-based communities, freelancers, new immigrants, native communities, communities of color, and residents of neighborhoods across the city will have their voices reflected in the plan thanks to members of these communities who have stepped up and participated. To describe just a few of these in greater detail:

- We conducted interviews at a NYCHA Town Hall meeting through partnership with the Brooklyn Borough President's Office and at the Park Avenue Armory Youth Summit.
- We participated in self-organized convenings led by the Cultural Agenda Fund - a pooled fund led by NY Community Trust that supports cultural advocacy in NYC - at El Museo del Barrio.
- Our leadership team attended an all-afternoon symposium organized by the Disability/Arts/New York Task Force (DANT), at the New School discussing issues of diversity, inclusion, accessibility, and equity.
- We've held focus group discussions with artists and cultural organizations, affordable space developers and managers, service providers for seniors and LGBTQ communities, and cultural anchors in neighborhoods across New York City.

Digital engagement has also been a core strategy for the cultural plan. Our website's "Questions of the Week" have garnered hundreds of responses. These questions, such as "How do you find out about NYC arts & cultural events?" and "Where might increased arts and culture programs benefit your neighborhood?" provide simple, accessible entry points for people to consider the issues being addressed in the plan. Through our own social media assets and with the help of partners like Parks Department, NYC & Co, NYCEDC, and others, we've reached a vast audience and invited them to participate in the planning process. We've reached over 50K individuals just through DCLA's CreateNYC activities on Facebook. Last week we organized a convening at Google's NYC headquarters with 72 cultural organizations that started with a 90 minute discussion of the cultural plan and how technology might be able to contribute to our goals for the plan.

Starting today, we're hosting a weeklong series of Twitter chats where we'll be discussing equity, arts education, teen and youth cultural participation, LGBTQ programming and Queer art spaces. Another chat will focus on individual artists. For these conversations, we're asking how each issue is important for NYC and how it can be sustained, supported, and made more inclusive. To participate in the conversation, follow @NYCulture and tweet using hashtag #CreateNYC. I've also brought a stack of flyers that are available here today.

We knew from the start that capturing the full breadth of culture as it's experienced by millions of New Yorkers and visitors would be no easy task. But in addition to Council's support, we've had many active partners in spreading the message and getting people engaged.

- The CreateNYC Citizens' Advisory Committee has provided essential guidance and support throughout the process. As you remember, the CAC was appointed in November 2015 by the Mayor, City Council, and Borough Presidents. Chaired by Rockefeller Brothers Fund's Ben Rodriguez-Cubeñas, the CAC includes artists, administrators, labor representatives, community organizers, advocates, and more. This group's extensive expertise and connections have been

instrumental to the progress we've made to date. They have also been active partners in soliciting input, from organizing workshops, to writing thoughtful recommendations on behalf of their constituents.

- The Cultural Affairs Advisory Commission, an oversight body mandated by the City Charter, has also been an essential partner throughout the process. Led by Chair Susana Leval, former Director of El Museo del Barrio, the Commission includes cultural leaders from diverse disciplines and communities across New York. In regular meetings they offer guidance, support, and feedback that has enhanced the public engagement process. We have also held joint meetings with both the CAAC and the plan's Citizens' Advisory Committee, which provide opportunities to tap into the expertise of both groups.
- We are also pleased that other funders have stepped up to support the efforts of local groups to engage their communities. The New York Cultural Agenda Fund has provided support to 12 local organizations specifically to conduct engagement for the cultural plan. Grantees include the Asian American Arts Alliance, The Center for Arts Education along with the Alliance for Quality Education, King Manor Museum, Staten Island Arts, AMERINDA, and the Cultural Equity Coalition. The Rockefeller Brothers Fund also provided support to Hester Street to expand engagement capacity for the planning process.
- A number of groups and individuals have submitted formal feedback, lending their deep expertise of various topics for the benefit of the planning process. These include the ACRE (Artists Co-Creating Real Equity), Disability Arts Network of New York Taskforce (DANT), the Cultural Equity Group, and members of the city's DIY community.

The process itself has been helpful, and we have not waited for the finished plan to take some action. For one, we have concluded that we want to provide more opportunities to listen to residents going forward. We've seen an incredible appetite from people across backgrounds to show up and be heard. To provide one example, at the start of the process we inaugurated a series called "Office Hours with the Commissioner." The idea is that, on a regular schedule, anyone can join me and members of the DCLA staff for a face to face conversation about issues that are important to them. We've hosted six Office Hours so far on topics including public art, aging in the arts, and neighborhood change. One well attended meeting was with a group of DIY art spaces, which we hosted in the wake of the tragic Ghost Ship fire in Oakland. In anticipation of the meeting members of the DIY community drew up a list of formal recommendations to submit to me personally. They have continued to organize independently, inspired by the opportunity to come together and have an open dialogue about the unique issues facing them. I look forward to continuing to learn from and work with this vital community of artists and arts spaces. We envisioned these Office Hour meetings to be a roundtable with perhaps 20 participants. But they rapidly grew. The last couple have been in the range of 100 or so New Yorkers. People have a lot to tell us and we want to listen. These Office Hours have given us a great platform for this, and we are considering ways to continue having these conversations even after the plan is released.

We have also been committed to a close examination of how CreateNYC can help enhance issues of access and inclusion for people with disabilities. As I mentioned, DANT has been providing feedback pertinent to disability arts and disability access issues, and we've invested in a consultant expert who has helped guide our engagement. The Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities has also been an essential ally and resource. Last week, I participated in a Facebook Live conversation with Simi Linton, a member of our Advisory Commission and author of the book *Claiming Disability*. The plan is giving us an opportunity to examine our current practices in this regard, and to make changes where possible. For instance, our disability access coordinator has already made our public meetings and our RFP process more inclusive. Thanks in large part to

conversations we've had in the planning process, we are also creating a new position at the agency that will have disability arts and disability inclusion as an explicit part of the job description.

Another major advancement we've made through the planning process is cementing and growing our connections across other city agencies. We've long had strong partners in places like the Department of Education, Sanitation, Design and Construction, and the Department for the Aging. Recent collaborations have included Veterans Affairs, Immigrant Affairs, Small Business Services, the Administration for Children Services, and others. CreateNYC has given us the occasion to build new connections with staff from partners like the Center for Health Equity. The director and staff of this Department of Health and Mental Hygiene program have a deep appreciation for the role art and culture can play in the overall health of a community. This demonstrates what we mean when we say that CreateNYC isn't just a plan for the Department of Cultural Affairs. We're working with residents to build a comprehensive vision for how arts and culture can become a vital component of building healthy communities across the city. This means that art and culture can't be seen as a distinct element – the “extra” you support once things like safety, healthy, and transportation are taken care of. Culture is interconnected with all of these issues.

While we're still deeply engaged in the listening phase of this process, we have noticed patterns emerge. The topics that are written into the law include:

- The availability and distribution of cultural activities throughout the City.
- The relationships between cultural activities and social and economic health.
- The needs of artists regarding affordable housing and work space.
- Increasing arts education and cultural programming in schools and after school.
- How cultural activities can be incorporated into community development, economic development and land-use planning processes and policies.
- How city agencies will coordinate with respect to cultural activities.

These topics often serve as a starting point to frame the conversations we have with the public. But in our dialogue with any given group, new ideas, priorities, and interests soon emerge. For example:

- As mentioned earlier, we've heard of the need for more support for safety upgrades from the DIY community.
- We've heard of people's desire for more support in navigating government processes as they create and present art.
- We've heard the desire for greater investment in cultural organizations that are indigenous to low-income communities.
- We've heard diverse arts professionals express the desire to have investments focused on their professional advancement and growth.
- We've listened to the challenges artists face when they're weighed down by the triple burden of student debt, rent, and workspace costs.

This affordability crisis applies to organizations as well as individual artists. We have heard repeatedly that organizations are being priced out of certain areas, and that there are parts of New York that are lacking in cultural resources. We also hear that people have trouble accessing the resources that are present. And across the board, we have seen strong support more arts education for kids both in and out of school.

In addition to frank and open engagement around New Yorkers' concerns, ideas, and hopes for culture in their communities, we've heard plenty of feedback about the process of developing the plan itself. We have made a sustained effort to include groups of diverse sizes, disciplines, and geographies. But we know there are still more we can reach. We've heard from individual artists through the DIY Office Hours, borough workshops,

digital feedback and so on. But in other forums, artists have told us they feel left out. So we scheduled meetings specifically aimed at artists. We redoubled our efforts to listen more often and more carefully. We are always looking for ways to connect with additional groups. The good news is that we are still deeply engaged in the listening process. And we want to hear from as many people as we can

That is a summary of what we have done so far. Here is what is next.

The next big milestone will be releasing draft recommendations in April. We plan to provide an opportunity for people to respond to the drafts through public events and through an online portal. And we want to make sure we connect with as broad a spectrum of New Yorkers as we can to inform these recommendations. So please, help us to reach your constituents however you can: we have toolkits for hosting CreateNYC events, surveys for the general public and for cultural workers, and a range of upcoming events and ways people can participate in the conversation online. Just let us know what would be most effective, and we'll do everything we can to make it happen.

We look forward to seeing you at events on the near horizon. Council Member Koo, we are glad that you can join us at a discussion with Flushing's Mandarin-speaking community at Flushing Town Hall. Council Member Levin, we are grateful that your office is stepping up and hosting a public workshop in Greenpoint. And Chair Van Bramer, we are excited that you are co-hosting an upcoming workshop with the Museum of the Moving Image and NYCHA residents in your district. We are lucky to have your insight and support.

Additional upcoming engagements include:

- Through a partnership with the library systems, 35 library branches in all five boroughs will have on-site engagement with patrons and cultural program participants using CreateNYC survey materials. These will be available in English, Spanish, Chinese, Bangla, Russian, Arabic, and accessible via screen readers through the Braille and Talking Book Library.
- ReelAbilities Film Festival
- Carnegie Hall Neighborhood Concerts at LaGuardia Performing Arts Center
- Dance/NYC 2017 Symposium
- Council District 36: Bedford Stuyvesant "Working for Your Neighborhood" Town Hall
- CreateNYC Office Hours with the Commissioner - Disability and the Cultural Plan
- Staten Island Arts Spring Conference
- CreateNYC Town Hall: Immigrant Artists and Artists of Color
- The SHARE! Series with young people who live in NYCHA housing
- And many more.

For anyone who can't attend upcoming events, as I mentioned copies of the CreateNYC Public Survey and flyers for this week's series of Twitter chats are available today. Visit CreateNYC.org for more ways to participate; from sending a Tweet to hosting an event, we want everyone to participate at whatever level works for them.

We've connected with a huge range of New Yorkers in a short window of time. We also want to talk to many more before we're through. We are committed to working with you to make sure we hear from enough people to produce a vital, living document that can serve as a touchstone for everyone who cares about art and culture in New York City. Thank you for your support. I'm happy to answer any questions you have at this time.