

# Summary of Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

## PSRC Arts and Culture Economic Recovery Strategy

---

BERK Consulting interviewed local leaders in government, arts and culture organizations, and corporations to understand trends, challenges, strengths, and tools for arts and cultural economic recovery. BERK also conducted two focus groups with cultural workers in follow-up to their participation in the Cultural Worker Survey.

- Becka Hawkins and Jennifer Bacon, IATSE 15
- Chelsea Most, Director of Programs and Events, Seattle Center
- Dan Eernisee, Economic Development Director, City of Everett
- Eben Pobe, President and Artistic Director, JHP Legacy
- Ellen Walker, Executive Director, Pacific Northwest Ballet
- Jake Prendez, Owner and Director, Nepantla Cultural Arts Gallery
- Jane Broom, Senior Director, Microsoft
- Jessie Kotarski, Economic Development Specialist, City of Renton
- Judy Tuohy, Executive Director, Schack Art Center
- Kari Rinn, Economic Development Specialist – Arts, Pierce County
- Kate Becker, Creative Economy & Recovery Director, King County
- Kathy Cocus, Business Development Director, Kitsap Economic Development Alliance
- Krishna Thiagarajan, President & CEO, Seattle Symphony
- Line Sandsmark, Executive Director, Shunpike
- Lorie Hoffman, Arts Community Manager, City of Bellevue
- Melissa Purcell, IATSE 488
- Robb Hunt, Executive Producer, Village Theater
- Tyler Chism, Tourism and Events Coordinator, City of Everett

The following themes emerged:

## Role of Arts and Culture in Communities and Economies

Most interviewees recognized and emphasized arts and culture as a core regional function and an integral part of health and wellbeing. As a major resource for community-building, arts and culture bring vitality to communities and serve as tools for social connection, self-expression, and mental health support. Because arts and culture are so vital to the human experience, it is imperative that they are accessible to all from an early age, and that people can see themselves represented in the resources that they engage with. Organizations like the Nepantla Cultural Arts Gallery, Shunpike, and JHP legacy particularly highlighted that the arts are an intangible resource with immense impact on peoples' lives, and

an essential support for personal wellbeing and alternative to violence. Similarly, the Seattle Symphony noted the critical importance of accessible arts, rather than the use of arts spaces to promote only “excellence.”

## Impact of COVID-19 on Cultural Economy

The arts and culture sector has been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and recovery will take years to accomplish, especially in the near future, as, the Schack Art Center explained, funding falls to pre-pandemic levels. Financial support in this sector is a major concern, and arts organizations rely heavily on federal funding and private donations to survive, especially due to the pandemic. Many interviewed organizations noted the importance of federal funding to their survival, such as the Village Theater, Pacific Northwest Ballet, Schack Art Center, Nepantla Cultural Arts Gallery, and Shunpike. While federal funding has been essential to the survival of many organizations, others have encountered issues with qualifications for federal funding, and thereby have not been able to leverage this resource. For example, the Nepantla Cultural Arts Gallery did not qualify for a great deal of federal funding because it experienced revenue increases, as a brand-new organization, from 2019 to 2020. Jurisdictions like the City of Bellevue also highlighted that its budget for arts and cultural activities has not changed in many years, while demand has increased significantly.

Besides federal and private financial resources, state and local public funding is scarce, and public funders often miss opportunities to support arts and culture, as noted by the City of Bellevue. Corporations also have a great deal of room to engage with arts and culture, both financially and generally in activity and support. Microsoft, for example, noted its commitment to giving in the arts, but also a recognition that employers generally don't prioritize supporting arts and culture on a large scale. Shunpike highlighted the dwindling of corporate and private support for the arts, even before the COVID-19 pandemic began.

The COVID-19 pandemic has additionally influenced the nature of arts and cultural activities, particularly with regard to in-person versus online programming. On a larger scale, in-person arts activities are slowly returning, while online endeavors remain a common supplemental strategy. In-person events, though, can be difficult to arrange, as, for example, the Seattle Symphony limits their events based on health and safety regulations.

For many arts and cultural organizations, online services are not feasible, due to content rights and union restrictions. At Pacific Northwest Ballet, online programming only makes up about 4% of their sales, and at the Village Theater, it can be difficult to pay for content rights, in order to deliver online performances. For programs that are able to use online services, impact has declined, as participants are widely experiencing online fatigue—for example, the Nepantla Cultural Arts gallery, over time, witnessed “Zoom fatigue,” as online program participants began to leave their cameras off, and programs suffered from decreased engagement and enthusiasm. Similarly, as JHP Legacy explained, online resources for arts programming usually does not carry the same impact as in-person events, for example, because participants cannot feel the beat of the music, or the energy in the room. While online arts and cultural services have many issues, they are also great ways to continue programming when in-person events are not feasible, and they provide the opportunity for voices outside the immediate geography to participate.

Many organizations—such as the Seattle Symphony, Village Theater, Pacific Northwest Ballet, and Schack Art Center—additionally experienced reduced staffing and compensation, and new hiring has been difficult, and has required out-of-town talent sourcing. At Seattle Center, pandemic recovery has been difficult because events aren't yet predictable enough to resume hiring. At the Schack Art Center, staffing has been a particular challenge because health benefits are not included in many jobs, so it is hard to attract prospective employees. Concurrently, participant activity significantly slowed. At the Pacific Northwest Ballet, students have lost momentum in training, due to interruptions, and have experienced a loss of community due to low enrollment.

## Desire for Regional Approach and Partnerships

Several tools can be invaluable to arts and cultural pursuits. For example, because consistency and connections are key in this industry, the City of Renton and Pierce County both see social media as a helpful way to maintain networks and engage with broad audiences. Similarly, the City of Bellevue expressed interest in a regional social media toolkit that could be used to help Cities move forward with their arts and culture strategies. Partnerships can also provide immense support to arts and cultural organizations, particularly for capacity-building, sponsorships, and mutual goal achievement. For example, the Nepantla Cultural Arts Gallery partnered with the Seattle Arts Museum to help elevate the voices of Latinx artists. The City of Renton, in efforts to focus more on the arts and encourage artists to move to the city, has partnered with local organizations and nearby Cities for marketing endeavors. Partnerships with libraries and school districts, as explained by the Kitsap Economic Development Alliance, can also serve as a strong tool to disseminate information. Smaller organization can additionally expand their capacity through partnerships, as proposed by JHP legacy. While partnerships are vital to engage in, however, it is important to recognize that they take time to create and solidify.

The arts and cultural sector also would benefit from expanding its strategies for success. On a large scale, a regional approach to arts and culture is generally preferable to other strategies, because collaboration is useful to sharing ideas and supporting peers, and unified messaging creates better communication of value. Within a regional approach, the sector can support specific strategies. For example, arts management skills are vital to the success of artists and cultural workers, and these skills could be better supported through workshops and trainings—strategies which have been employed by Shunpike and the Nepantla Cultural Arts Gallery. Additionally, as emphasized by King County and JHP Legacy, because physical space for arts and cultural events can be difficult to come by and very expensive, which can exclude participants and hinder the benefits of programming, the region could benefit from working towards creating and preserving more accessible and affordable arts spaces. The region could also benefit—as noted by King County—from a cataloguing of assets, because although the region does have a rich arts and culture landscape, assets are not well-known enough to be effectively shared.