The Palo Alto Public Art program delivers tangible, community-building benefits to the city. In the recent past, it has brought street-traffic to commercial districts, messages of resilience to traffic corridors, and the material of imagination to residential areas. It has brought us together, challenged us, and encouraged us to think differently. Because of these efforts, the public art program is nationally recognized.

Now it is time to look forward. The Council has made clear the city’s dedication to recovering from Covid-19 and to promoting a more equitable city. This difficult moment comes with difficult budgetary decisions. The Public Art Program provides the Council and the city a valuable instrument through which to pursue priority goals. Reducing the program will reduce the ability of the city to deliver – often in wonderful, creative ways – those shared goals.

Public Art Delivers

While a case may be made for arts and artistic endeavors for their own sake, the public art program is focused on enriching life in Palo Alto, and it has flourished by doing so. Code Art, for example, a temporary art public art event held downtown in June 2017, drew thousands of people to the downtown area over the course of a weekend. As people visit Palo Alto to view and visit public art pieces, they spend money in restaurants, coffee houses, bars, shopping and parking. The money spent contributes to the economy and well-being of Palo Alto.

More recently, the City Council charged the Public Art Commission (PAC) with working with artists and the community to develop a mural in support of Black Lives Matter (BLM). The BLM project was sent to the PAC on June 15, 2020. The PAC voted to move forward on the project on June 18, 2020, and the BLM mural was completed on June 30, 2020. A panel held in conjunction with the mural gave contributing artists the opportunity to explore with the public, their contributions. The mural and panel provoked important discussion, reflection and learning, was heartily received by the community, and received national attention.

Wider evidence supports these arguments for public art programs. Art and public art are a proven way to boost morale during shelter-in-place. A study by Americans for the Arts puts such local programs in wider, national and historical context:

Art in public spaces plays a distinguishing role in our country’s history and culture. It reflects and reveals our society, enhances meaning in our civic spaces, and adds uniqueness to our communities. Public art humanizes the built environment. It provides an intersection between past, present, and future between disciplines and ideas. Public art matters because our communities gain cultural, social, and economic value through public art.

Funding Matters

Funding is a key issue for the public art program. Funds are derived from the percent for art for capital improvement projects. A few details are key here:

First, the 2020-2021 fiscal year funding of $1 million was an abnormality for funding of the public art program. The public safety building and associated parking garage contributed to an extremely atypical amount of money for the public art program. Normal funding is approximately between $30,000 to $50,000 a year for public art. For these two projects, artists have been selected and are under contract (funds have been allocated to cover contract costs) to produce the artworks. The normal process is to select artists for a project and have them collaborate with the architects to seamlessly integrate public art into the building.

Second, as Council Member Kniss argued during an earlier hearing, a suspension in funding will be difficult to undo or rollback. The loss of staff risks the loss of expertise and dedicated service. If staff is laid off and they find new jobs, a vast wealth of experience will be lost.
Third, and most importantly, any suspension in the funding “percent-for-art” funding will limit the ability of the program to respond to current events. It will reduce the development of art that draws visitors to commercial corridors. It will reduce the opportunities for city residents and visitors to gather, at safe distance, and to celebrate our shared resilience and space.

**Palo Alto Public Art is Focused on Delivering Now**

The PAC recently approved three priorities for the new twelve months. These priorities align with those of the Council and the city:

1. Develop public art that aids in Palo Alto’s recovery from the Covid-19 crisis by supporting projects that encourage pedestrian traffic and the use of pedestrian-friendly streets, that are located near Palo Alto neighborhoods, as well as commercial corridors and storefronts, and that advance PAMP goals;
   - Opportunities include: microgrants for temporary public art; Code ART2.

2. Develop public art projects that will continue to advance cultural inclusion and social and racial equity;
   - Opportunities include: transportations gateways; widening network of artists as with the BLM mural.

3. Widen and strengthen education and advocacy for public art, including through the adoption, roll-out and implementation of the California Ave District Master Plan and the Baylands Art Plan;
   - Other opportunities include: position paper; infographic; outreach to all Council members.

And the PAC is moving rapidly to deliver for our city, by recently approving a microgrants-pilot program to enliven the downtown, mid-town and neighborhood areas. Up to 40 grants will enable sculptures, pictures, posters, murals and even musical performances that help us rebuild.

The two papers below offer insights into covid-19 response and public art:

Art and public art during the covid-19 pandemic are a way to boost the morale of people that have been in quarantine for months at a time. One paper - [Culture & Community in Time of Crisis](https://s28475.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CCTC-Key-Findings-from-Wave-1_final.pdf) is a national online survey of audience behaviors, attitudes, motivations, and barriers to cultural participation during the current pandemic. A follow-up study will be published after the pandemic ends.


The Public Art Program has thrived as a result of the City Council, the PAC, city residents and visitors, and, expert and dedicated staff. It is focused on promoting joy, reflection, equity, resilience and creativity – any severe reduction in its funding based on the details of anomalous year, will have effects for years to come.

Palo Alto Public Art Commission
Ben Miyaji – Chair  Loren Gordon – Vice Chair  Ian Klaus – Member
Nia Taylor – Member  Hsyina Shen - Member