

Alberta Foundation for the Arts (AFA)

Engagement Report

April 2021 stakeholder engagement





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Introduction

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts (AFA) is a public agency and a provincial corporation of the Government of Alberta with a mandate to support and contribute to the development of the not-for-profit arts in Alberta. The AFA Board reports to Alberta's Minister of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women and is guided by the objectives found in the *Alberta Foundation for the Arts Act* (1991).

Every year, after the Government of Alberta announces its annual allocation to support the AFA, the Board of Directors must use this amount to develop and approve a spending plan that allocates resources towards AFA programs and services. On February 25, the Alberta government announced details of its 2021-22 budget, which included a budget allocation of \$25.6 million to support the AFA.

The AFA spending plan allocates annual funding amounts towards operational and project grant opportunities for organizations, project grant and scholarship opportunities for individuals, and associated administration costs. The AFA is also responsible for managing the AFA Art Collection, which is the largest collection of visual artworks by Albertan artists in the world. The AFA is also mandated to foster development of the arts through research, communication, and promotion of the arts. The spending plan is a forecast, and program allocations can change throughout the year as the AFA retains flexibility to respond to emerging issues and community needs.

Annual spending decisions are typically developed by the board based on existing resources and are guided by the AFA's mandate and strategic plan. This year, however, the AFA sought to broaden its decision-making lens in recognition of the significant fiscal pressures and stress the arts community continues to endure during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In April 2021, the AFA hosted stakeholder engagement sessions to gather input and feedback that could be used to inform the AFA's 2021-22 spending plan and potential arts sector relaunch communications following the pandemic. The AFA sought input from arts organizations, individual artists, and Indigenous artists and arts workers.

The AFA recognizes the investment individual artists make throughout their careers to develop expertise in their fields, and we value these perspectives when consulting the sector. Art is work. Individual artists invited to participate in engagement sessions were offered compensation for their time, perspectives, and expert advice.

By seeking stakeholder input on the arts community's challenges, needs, and expectations, the AFA seeks to make funding decisions that both fulfil our mandate and are as responsive to the current situation as possible. To increase transparency and to help fulfill the AFA's commitment to evidence-based planning, below is a summary of what the AFA heard from this engagement process.

The AFA respectfully acknowledges that it operates on and supports artistic activity throughout Indigenous lands in Alberta: home to Blackfoot, Cree, Dene, Salteaux, Nakota Sioux, and other First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples, who all share a deep connection with these territories included in Treaty 6, Treaty 7 and Treaty 8, and the Métis Settlements.



Scope of engagement

Seven virtual engagement sessions were held:

- Four sessions with representatives from Alberta arts organizations;
- Two sessions with individual Albertan artists; and
- One session with Indigenous artists and representatives of Indigenous-led arts organizations.

Overall, 91 stakeholders attended from across Alberta, including:

- 59 representatives from Alberta arts organizations; and
- 32 individual artists.

Engagement was hosted by the AFA, and were attended and moderated by the AFA Chair, board members, and staff.

Stakeholders invited to attend represented a variety of disciplines and perspectives, including the performing arts, visual arts, literary arts, and film and video, as well as organizations that host festivals, operate facilities, provide arts and education programming, and representatives from provincial arts service organizations and regional arts councils. A focus was also included on inviting representatives from underrepresented groups.

Stakeholders were selected based on capturing a range of perspectives from different disciplines, organization sizes and types, geographic areas, and communities of practice. Due to time constraints related to approving the AFA's 2021-22 spending plan, widespread engagement was not possible at this time.

The engagement sessions focused on two key questions:

1. Considering both the current fiscal environment as well as the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery, how can the AFA best support the arts sector during the coming year? What types of support are needed or would you consider most beneficial?
2. Aside from a financial resource, how do you see the AFA supporting COVID-19 recovery and relaunch in the arts sector?

While considering these questions, the AFA reminded stakeholders that it has received a reduction to its annual allocation in 2021-22, and has less resources to develop its spending plan as compared to the previous fiscal year. The AFA will not have capacity to pursue all ideas raised during engagement, and stakeholders' perspectives would help inform spending priorities.

Overall Themes from Engagement

The AFA heard several consistent overall themes during the engagement. Stakeholders highlighted their views and concerns related to:

- Funding and support for grant writing;
- Relaunch and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Digital capacity;
- Communication and advocacy they would like to see from the AFA; and
- Artistic practice supports and professional development opportunities.

This summary includes input from all of the stakeholders who attended the engagement, including feedback from arts organizations, individual artists, and Indigenous artists and Indigenous-led arts organizations relating to their specific challenges. While not all comments were applicable to every stakeholder group and some input was out of scope of the purpose of the engagement, all feedback was considered for this summary.

Arts Organization Specific Themes

Funding

Stakeholders felt it was important that the AFA fund as many arts organizations and artists as possible. Arts organizations consistently suggested that flexible, stable, and predictable funding is most needed so that they can best respond to the uncertainty and unpredictability of the COVID-19 pandemic. While many also indicated that there was a need for additional recovery and resiliency funding to help offset losses from the pandemic, certainty of continued financial support and a commitment to current funding levels were prioritized.

Specific funding issues raised included:

- Stakeholders encouraged the AFA to review its Community Derived Revenue (CDR) model for any potential adjustments that would take into account a “COVID-19 year.” Potential revisions could be made to be more responsive to impacts of the pandemic, and to better align with the Canadian Arts Data/Données sur les arts au Canada (CADAC) program. There was concern that organizations could receive operating grant reductions based on current CDR calculations, as many organizations have seen reduced revenue due to restrictions and closures.
- For organizations whose funding agreements are annual and calculated based on expenses, some organizations suggested a move to multi-year agreements could be beneficial. This may provide more certainty for these organizations and allow them to engage in a longer-term budgeting process and planning.
- Some stakeholders expressed concerns about how grants will be calculated in future years for organizations with annual grant agreements, as funding can often be dependent on operating expenses and some organizations’ expenses have gone down due to inactivity during the pandemic.
- The AFA was encouraged to consider that some organizations rely on project funding to subsidize their operational costs.
- The AFA was encouraged to consider easing grant reporting requirements.



In addition to maintaining current funding levels, some stakeholders identified the following specific areas for funding support:

- Increased and continued support for arts service organizations that are playing a greater role in the communities they serve as they support their membership through the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Continuing to fund community arts organizations and community arts practitioners.
- The need for continued regional support as many arts organizations and artists outside of urban centres have fewer local funding opportunities but still have to compete for the same pool of funds available federally and provincially.
- Continued support for the Artists and Education project grant program.
- Finding ways to respond to gaps in federal supports for organizations and artists that have not been able to access the Emergency Support Fund or Canada Emergency Response Benefit/Canada Recovery Benefit.
- Potentially finding ways to support for-profit venues, as many arts organizations and artists rely on them to present their events, performances, and festivals.
- Consider the possibility of matching funds from other arts funders and/or exploring creative partnerships to increase funding/revenue for Alberta's arts sector.
- Assistance with Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Access resources and training.

Relaunch and Recovery

Stakeholders discussed issues and potential ways the AFA could be involved and supportive of relaunch and recovery for the arts sector following the pandemic, while acknowledging that great uncertainty for these issues remain. The long-term impact of COVID-19 on the arts sector is still unknown and the timing of any potential relaunch is still unclear.

Some stakeholders suggested that arts sector will not return to the way things were before the COVID-19 pandemic. Questions remain as to how the arts sector will emerge and what it will look like after the pandemic is over. Some stakeholders suggested that artists and arts workers should lead the design of the post-pandemic future of the arts. Main points of discussion included:

Continuing capacity limits during the transition to relaunch:

- When venues are able to reopen, it is unknown for how long reduced capacity limits will be in place for artistic activities.
- It is unfeasible for many stakeholders to continue to offer programs at reduced capacity.
- Many venues cannot afford to rent out their spaces at reduced capacity.

New responsibilities while reopening:

- Once reopened, many stakeholders are anticipating extra pandemic-related costs like cleaning fees and PPE supplies.
- Many workers in the arts sector have found employment outside of the sector during the pandemic, and there is concern that this talent may have been lost and will not return.
- There will be a need to rebuild trust with volunteers who provide vital support to the operation of many organizations.

Encouraging audiences to return:

- Once venues are permitted to reopen, there are concerns about rebuilding trust with audiences and developing consumer confidence.
- Organizations may need more support in setting audience expectations and new behaviours. Stakeholders expressed a need for shared protocols that enforced consistency across the province.
- While it is expected that core, dedicated arts-going audiences will return once venues are permitted to reopen, organizations may need support in encouraging a wider audience to return.

Digital Capacity

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many arts organizations and artists have shifted to producing and sharing content online in order to continue creating and connecting with their audiences. Many stakeholders have experienced greater reach and increased accessibility through digital channels, and plan to continue to offer digital content and programming after the pandemic.

At the same time, many artists and arts organizations suggested increased capacity is required to start or continue producing online content and to ensure it is sustainable. Stakeholders shared the following challenges that they have experienced:

- Developing online content is often significantly more expensive than in-person performance.
- It is difficult to monetize online content and the cost of delivery is often borne by the content creators as audiences expect to access it for free.
- Digital technology changes very quickly and it is hard to keep up.
- While digital content does have a greater reach, many rural communities still do not have quality Internet access.

Some stakeholders noted that investing in more online content has the potential to change the core programs that many arts organizations offer, which could mean that there will not be less programming but that the programming will be different. Stakeholders provided the following suggestions to support digital creation:

- Funding for digital content should not supersede or detract from funding to support in-person experiences, once they are allowed to resume.
- Stakeholders expressed uncertainties over how digital statistics and virtual attendance should be reported to funding agencies.
- Many stakeholders are interested in partnership opportunities and connecting with film and TV production companies to create content, but need support in order to do so.
- Stakeholders advocated for greater access to proper equipment and skills development to produce online content. Equipment is costly to purchase or rent, and there are increased labour costs incurred to hire those with the expertise and experience to produce online content.



Communication and Advocacy

Stakeholders expressed the continued need for the AFA to be a voice for the arts in Alberta and to promote the arts and Alberta's arts organizations and artists, as well as advocate on behalf of the arts sector.

Stakeholders identified the following communication areas to prioritize:

- Encouraging audiences to return to in-person events once venues are permitted to re-open.
- Promote the economic impact of the arts sector.
- Promote the value of the arts to mental health and well-being, especially as many have turned to the arts and relied on them during the pandemic.
- Disseminating Alberta Health Services (AHS) information on how health orders affect what the sector is permitted to do during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Increased communication and support for accessing supports available to the arts sector, including those not provided by AFA.
- Increased consultation with the Provincial Arts Service Organizations.
- Assistance with reaching out to Deaf and disabled communities.

Stakeholders identified the following advocacy areas that AFA could prioritize:

- To assist the arts sector in engaging with AHS about what arts organizations and artists are able to safely do during the pandemic.
- Many arts organizations have described delays in accessing casino funding and would like to see a relaxation in rules of how these funds can be used. The AFA was encouraged to advocate for access to VLT proceeds on behalf of arts organizations in the absence of full casino funding.
- Access to funding across different levels of government.
- The importance of wage subsidy programs like the Summer Temporary Employment Program (STEP) and the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy.
- More rental supports and relief.
- With other ministries for supports for the arts sector.
- More tax incentives for supporting the arts.
- For Canada's Census Program to collect additional or more in-depth arts and culture data.



Artist Specific Themes

The AFA provides both indirect and direct supports to individual artists through its grants and other programming. AFA support for organizations is intended to increase employment, contract, and art purchase or commission opportunities for individual artists, and some grants have specific guidelines that ensure support for artists (for example, artists' wages are the only eligible expense for organizations in the Arts Presenting project grant opportunity).

AFA also provides direct funding to individual artists through project grants and scholarship opportunities, as well as art purchase opportunities through the AFA Art Collection. The AFA recognizes the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on individual artists, and it was a priority to ensure that individual artists were provided an opportunity to share their perspectives through engagement, as AFA spending decisions could affect both direct and indirect supports.

Financial supports

Individual artists provided suggestions on fiscal supports that were both in and out of scope of current AFA programs. The AFA was encouraged to consider that artists impacted most severely during the COVID-19 pandemic are the ones who did not already have access to supports.

Ideas that were specific to AFA programs that provide direct funding to artists included:

- Consider temporarily lowering the maximum eligible amount for project grants to ensure that more artists have access to funds. This was framed as a temporary response to the pandemic in order to increase the breadth of artists supported by AFA, rather than a long-term approach to project grant funding.
- Consider increasing the number of grant intake cycles (i.e. deadlines) in a year. Again, this idea was framed as a way to have existing funds potentially reach more artists.
- Find ways to reduce the amount of time to notify artists about grant results.
- Artists encouraged the AFA to find additional flexibility with how project grant funding can be used. Some ideas included reducing restrictions on how funds may be used, allowing for longer project timelines, and allowing for capital expenses.
- Artists encouraged the AFA to reconsider Principal Artists guidelines for project grants in order to provide more flexibility for recipients and to encourage collaboration.
- Consider allowing artists to submit more than one grant application during a deadline, and allowing artists to apply to multiple streams at the same time.
- Artists encouraged the AFA to consider and acknowledge the amount of unpaid work that artists do. Artists suggested that project grant amounts are often insufficient to cover the hours of work invested in a given project, and the grant writing itself is not covered.

Ideas related to general financial supports included:

- Find ways to provide funding to as many artists as possible as quickly as possible.
- Consider ways to provide emergency funding for cancelled projects that could offset artists' income losses.
- Find ways to offer additional opportunities for interdisciplinary funding.
- Consider ways to temporarily offer subsistence funding for artists, as well as funding for child care expenses and student debt.
- Consider dedicated funding for underrepresented minorities and equity-seeking groups and individuals.

- More funding for research and development for individual artists, as opposed to project-based funding.
- Dedicated programs for young and emerging artists, as well as more opportunities for awards and bursaries to help boost their careers.
- Increased outreach to underrepresented communities who do not know how to access AFA funding.
- Find ways to ensure arts organizations and venues are supported, including for-profit ones, but ensure funds allocated to venues come with a requirement for them to pay artist fees.

Grant Writing

The AFA was encouraged to find ways to reduce barriers or simplify application information and procedures so that artists could more easily access direct funding:

- Increased access to resources to improve grant writing. This could include training for young artists and artists still attending school/training.
- Artists suggested that the AFA's online application system (GATE) is difficult and can be particularly inaccessible for older artists. The AFA was encouraged to find ways to allow artists to apply outside of the online system when necessary.
- Some of the language used to describe grants is too technical and academic.

Artistic Practice Supports and Professional Development

Artists advocated for additional supports to increase digital capacity, including:

- Funding to digital or hybrid projects or for reimagining or transforming artwork into a digital form for online distribution;
- Access to online platforms and applications designed for artists;
- Supports to acquire skills to create digital content and maintain online audiences; and
- Access to the equipment and software needed to produce digital content.

Artists advocated for increased professional development opportunities, including:

- Networking opportunities with other artists and artists from other disciplines;
- Mentorship programs;
- Partnerships in other fields outside of the arts sector (such as ecology);
- Connect artists to meaningful contacts that could help move their careers forward; and
- Access to resources and training in Indigenous relations and anti-racism.

Communication and Advocacy

The AFA was encouraged to continue promoting Alberta artists and the value of arts, and to find more opportunities to showcase the work of Albertan artists, including through the AFA Art Collection. Additional suggestions related to AFA communication and advocacy included:

- Communication of other programs and supports available to artists outside of the AFA.
- Support for mental health and well-being, including dealing with the psychological impact of the pandemic.
- Advocate for a Universal Basic Income for artists, tax exemption on grant income, and tax exemptions for venues that support artists.

Indigenous Specific Themes

The AFA recognizes the vital role of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples in shaping the artistic landscape of Alberta. The AFA continues to seek to involve and support Indigenous peoples across the province to build relationships, better understand their diverse perspectives, and adapt to their needs.

Through this engagement process, the AFA set aside time and resources to create a sharing circle, led by an Indigenous facilitator, to engage with some of our Indigenous clients, grant recipients, and partners. Offering this session helps the AFA to fulfill its commitment to enhance its responsiveness to the needs of Indigenous peoples through learning, relationship building, and evaluation. What follows here are issues and ideas raised specifically during this session.

Financial supports

Participants stressed the need for the AFA to consider and build an intergenerational approach to funding that supports both youth and emerging artists, as well for experienced artists who have been working in their fields for over ten to twenty years. Participants encouraged the AFA to consider Indigenous perspectives and ways of working, for example:

- Programs may need to be adapted to meet artists' needs, as many artists are interdisciplinary and do not always fit into one category.
- Stakeholders encouraged more explicit recognition for artist collectives.

Additional recommendations included:

- Ensuring cultural expenses, protocols, and gift giving are eligible for support.
- Reconsider Principal Artists guidelines for project grants in order to provide more flexibility for recipients and to encourage collaboration.
- Consider allowing artists to submit more than one grant application during a deadline, and allowing artists to apply to multiple streams at the same time.
- The importance of supporting research and development was emphasized, as artistic work can often be process-driven and the outcome is not always known.
- Consider providing funding for equipment purchases, as the quality of rented equipment can be questionable, and investing in capital costs can be considered akin to investing in an artist's career.

Grant writing

During this session, participants shared their experience and perspectives on the process of applying for arts funding through the AFA. Artists expressed the weight and trauma they can experience while applying for grants and the difficulties of putting a monetary value on their lived experience. The AFA was encouraged to consider that this process can create perception among applicants that Indigenous artists both have to prove themselves as artists and as Indigenous people to qualify for funding.

Additional concerns and suggestions included:

- The AFA's online application system (GATE) is difficult to navigate and access.
- The AFA was encouraged to continue to allow alternative ways for artists to apply, like video submissions.



- The AFA was encouraged to increase access to feedback on unfunded grant applications for individual artists.

Artistic Practice Supports and Professional Development

The AFA was encouraged to continue and amplify its recognition and promotion of Indigenous artists and arts in Alberta. Additional ideas and suggestions included:

- Increasing access to cultural resources and networking opportunities to help build relationships with Indigenous and artistic communities.
- Increasing access to digital tools and skills, as well as Wi-Fi and Internet access.
- Incorporating support for the environmental aspect of Indigenous arts in funding programs.
- Offering access to build business skills, including those related to marketing and web design.
- Increasing access to spaces to practice, rehearse, and create, as well as support for venues.



Next Steps

Findings from these engagement sessions helped to inform the AFA's 2021-22 spending plan. The AFA shares an overview of its approved spending plan with the community through its website and Newswire e-newsletter. Program clients are notified by email about the status of their grants once the spending plan is approved.

These findings will further be utilized as the AFA develops its approach and communications to support the relaunch and recovery of the arts sector in Alberta. The AFA acknowledges its role in helping encourage arts patrons and audiences to return to the arts after the pandemic. These sessions will inform how AFA communicates about a "return to the arts" and any additional initiatives to support recovery.

Program staff will utilize this data to improve on the ongoing operation and administration of its programs and services throughout the year. The AFA will also use this report to help inform its strategic conversations with Alberta Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women, with its municipal and federal partners, with arts funders in other jurisdictions, and other organizations that could potentially address issues raised by our stakeholders considered out-of-scope of the AFA's mandate.

The AFA is committed to continue to engage and seek feedback from the arts community. We recognize that uncertainties remain about the pandemic and what the arts sector may require when the pandemic ends. We remain committed to stay in touch with our communities as much as possible in order to respond to emerging needs.

If you have any questions about this report, please contact us at afacontact@gov.ab.ca.