

What You Told Us



Community Consultations towards
Strategic Planning,
fall 2022

SK Arts

The arts are an important pillar of society. The arts enrich our communities by enhancing our quality of life, while they allow us to learn about ourselves and about others. A creative society nurtures innovation and imagination by exposing people to new ideas that stimulate positive change.

Vision

Saskatchewan arts thrive for the benefit of everyone at home and around the world.

Mission

To provide funding and support to the arts for the benefit of all people in Saskatchewan.

Land Acknowledgement

SK Arts acknowledges that the land currently known as the Province of Saskatchewan is comprised of portions of lands from Treaties 2, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 10, the territories of the Nêhiyawak, Anihšînāpēk, Dene, Dakota, Lakota and Nakota nations, and the homeland of the Métis.

We give thanks to the host Indigenous communities in this province, as we bear the collective responsibility to honour and respect their protocols and homes and to engage meaningfully with their knowledges in our work.

Commitment to Equity

SK Arts values an equitable, diverse and inclusive world, where all people have fair access to the tools and resources needed to realize creative and community endeavors. We are committed to action in an ongoing process of change, so individuals and communities have opportunities free from discrimination in any form or barriers created because of race, spiritual or religious beliefs, Deaf or hearing impairment, physical or mental disabilities, sex, transgender non-conforming identity, sexual orientation, age or geography. SK Arts acknowledges that this is a living statement, and we expect it to evolve as our work and learning develops.

BACKGROUND

It has been four years since SK Arts (legal name: Saskatchewan Arts Board) engaged in a full strategic planning process, and since that time, many things have changed for the world and for the arts community.

- The growth of technology has continued to change the way people experience the arts. Technology has shrunk the world – allowing us to enjoy cultural activities from around the world in the comfort of our own home. However, it has also increased the distance between people, replacing face-to-face relationships with digital interaction.
- The murder of George Floyd shone light on injustice and lack of equality in “civilized” countries. Closer to home, the discovery of unmarked graves at the sites of Residential Schools demonstrated how our own society upholds systems that marginalize Indigenous peoples and members of other equity-deserving communities. The arts community and arts funders have begun grappling with the ways in which our systems have disadvantaged artistic practices from marginalized communities.
- COVID-19 has had devastating consequences in this sector. Artists have lost opportunities and income, with some people leaving their practice to pursue less precarious work. Organizations have suffered through closures and uncertainty, losing both revenue and their relationships with the audiences. The public has found new pursuits, and many are reluctant to return to their pre-pandemic activities.

Simultaneously, the SK Arts budget has remained static. Our funding appropriation from the Government has not increased since 2015/16. Following a 10% decrease in 2017/18, our budget has remained stagnant. SK Arts has worked to protect artists from the effects of that flatline. Between 2017/18 and 2021/22, granting increased slightly, while the agency compensated for inflation through internal restructuring and savings.

As SK Arts enters a new strategic planning process, it is important that our new goals and ambitions reflect the concerns and desires of the sector. To do that, we need to hear from you. We invited members of the arts community to attend several public meetings – both in person and virtual – to tell us what their pressing issues are.

The public meetings were successful as well as enlightening and challenging. People were outspoken, but they were respectful of other opinions, and they addressed areas where they thought SK Arts needed to improve while being complimentary of our work in other areas. The results of those meetings – *What You Told Us* – are summarized in this document.

SK Arts thanks the people who make up the arts community and those that took the time to engage in this process with us. We value your creativity and the way you have addressed the challenges of recent years with ingenuity and resolve. We are proud to work among you as part of the arts community in Saskatchewan.

COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS

Between September 16 and October 4, 2022, Saskatchewan artists and representatives from arts and cultural organizations participated in five consultation meetings. More than 50 people participated in these sessions, which were facilitated by Carol Greyeyes, SK Arts' Program & Policy Advisor. Michael Jones, SK Arts' CEO, attended all of the meetings, where he listened and documented the discussions.

The meetings were structured around three basic questions:

- What do you feel, currently, are the important issues, concerns or opportunities for the arts community?
- If those are your issues, concerns and opportunities, what do you think SK Arts' priorities and goals should be?
- Complete the following sentence: "I would urge SK Arts to..."

The discussions were free-flowing, structured either as an open conversation (virtual sessions) or in a talking circle format (in-person meetings). Participants were open and honest with their responses to the questions. Numerous diverse perspectives and ideas were shared.

WHAT YOU TOLD US

Two topics were raised repeatedly during the consultations:

- Resources – People shared how SK Arts’ flatlined budget had impacted the artists and organizations that we support. We heard about the challenges of making a living as an independent artist and the need for resources in that area. People also spoke about other possible sources of funding and the value of the non-financial assistance provided by SK Arts to the community.
- Equity and Access – Participants spoke at length about the lack of equity with which resources have been distributed in the past. We heard similar comments from people both within and outside of traditionally marginalized communities.

We heard about a number of additional issues and concerns, including: recovery from COVID, lack of facilities, the challenges of establishing an artistic legacy, climate change, and the seeming lack of value placed on the arts by the general public.

The vast diversity of issues raised is reflected in this word cloud, generated from our meeting notes. The principal theme to which meeting participants kept returning was “people,” which is surrounded by other prominent terms like “arts,” “artists,” “organizations,”

“funding,” and “work.”

There is an interesting interplay between the word “need,” which is larger than the word “want.” The resolve of the community, however, is seen in the word “can,” which is much larger and more central than “can’t.”



“When there are times of change, pandemic situations, shifting economies, there are also a lot of opportunities to help us re-focus in different ways.”

[Throughout this document, direct quotes from meeting participants are provided in yellow text boxes.]

Resources

At all meetings, participants were conscious of the fact that the provincial budget for SK Arts had been flatlined for many years. This has made it challenging for SK Arts to address the changes in the sector and the needs of the arts community, but it has also been difficult for the artists and the arts organizations that SK Arts supports. With rising costs, how can they be expected to do the same amount – or even more – with less funding? How can they be creative?

“SK Arts is in a remarkable funding crisis, and if we don’t address that, there won’t be art in our communities. This must be a number one goal for this strategic plan, or we might as well play the strings as the Titanic sinks.”

“We can’t pay proper living wages, and we can’t afford to hire the staffing that would allow us to support the education and engagement activities that we want to do.

“With a finite pool of money, I’m scared that there is not a lot of room for innovation or growth – for new organizations to come in.”

“I need opportunities to be able to step back and give up work for a little bit to focus on my writing, on a book. The system exists, but there isn’t nearly enough money for this to happen.”

The impact of limited funding is not only felt by organizations. The inability of an artist to make a reasonable living from their practice or craft was a topic that was raised in every consultation. Participants stressed that this should be one of the values of SK Arts.

“We need to get into the mindset where SK Arts’ mission is that people should be sustained by their art, by their craft. Then they will create better work.”

“A lot of independent artists are having to take on the role of being arts administrators. We aren’t skilled for this, we’re not prepared for this, and we aren’t even being paid for doing this type of work.”

“Our work is not valued anywhere near the way it should be, and it would be more valued if we lived elsewhere. The only people who can actually get a decent amount of money for their work are people from here here who’ve been recognized somewhere else. That’s a tragedy!”

“There is a diminishing capacity of artists to make a creative work. This isn’t specific to Saskatchewan. It’s an international problem, but we could be a source for solutions.”

The flatlined budget has meant that the level of funding in our Professional Arts Organizations Program (PAOP) has not changed in over ten years. Companies are struggling with increased costs and expectations to do more programming with less funds. New companies find it almost impossible to access operational funding, and long-supported companies struggle against inequities in support.

“We are banging our heads against the walls trying to figure out how to exist as an organization.”

“The lack of resources is a key issue, especially organizations who are at the lowest funding level. There’s not enough room for growth and we end up plateaued.”

“We need to work on our sense of quality in assessment of funding. We’re too focused on [amount of] output and how long seasons are.”

“We already do more than just what we have to do, but it’s hard with the same continuous amount of funding. After ten years into it, how are we going to continue? I don’t see a sustainable future in it.”

The community believes that SK Arts should explore other opportunities for funding beyond our annual Government appropriation and the Sask Lotteries funding through our partnership with SaskCulture.

“Look for different government departments that could have funding for SK Arts, possibly program-related requests to the departments of health or justice.”

“Look for other sources of funding, like corporate funding. [Some corporations] funnel a large amount of money into the arts.”

“The corporate sector in Saskatchewan doesn’t do enough to support the arts.”

“Put more money in the hands of artists, but not dirty money. Think about ethical sources of funds.”

The arts community appreciates the services that SK Arts provides beyond our funding, and participants shared experiences highlighting the support they received from SK Arts staff. There were also ideas of other ways in which the sector could benefit from shared services.

“Being able to contact my Program Consultant is incredible, knowing I would get an answer from someone.”

“Expand access to subsidized services. Our accounting work [through the admin services at Sask Lotteries] is really inexpensive. Could there be a way to expand that service?”

“Maybe we could do strategic planning together. I can’t afford to hire a consultant myself, but if we found two or three other entrepreneurs who would do it together...”

“There is a lack of technical people and resources to do our work – this is a crisis across Canada, but we’re hardest hit in Saskatchewan.”

“If SK Arts could own and take care of a portable floor – or even a portable stage – that would be a real asset for the community.”

“Could SK Arts have insurance that was available to the community?”

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

Much of what we heard at the community consultations affirms SK Arts' beliefs about equity, diversity and inclusion. The arts create opportunities for different people to engage and interact, and engagement in the arts promotes empathy and understanding of diverse cultures. Welcoming and supporting artists from a variety of perspectives creates and contributes to a healthy arts community.

"It's important that everyone has the same opportunities."

"There is a big necessity for arts organizations to be more equitable in programming. These changes require resources – not just money, but emotional labour and human labour."

"We cannot build more diverse audiences with more diverse programming if we need to rely on being supported by conservative older subscribers."

In order to make real progress in decolonization, SK Arts needs to examine the structures in which we work and the ways in which unconscious bias impacts decision-making.

"How do we stop replicating the colonial structure of capitalism? Why are we being asked to replicate imbalance? Why are we building structures that replicate colonial lenses that we shouldn't be embracing?"

"Understand that art is not a commodity. Decolonize the system from the inception of the granting system, evaluation, juries – even the application deadline dates."

"There may be a lot of language about decolonization, but people don't recognize the 'temple of whiteness' that is reinforced in their discussions of 'excellence.'"

"Reconciliation is about partnership. There need to be more meaningful partnerships – that's where you get to know people."

SK Arts needs to find new opportunities to support artists from traditionally underserved communities. It is also important for us to continue challenging prejudices – real and perceived – against art forms of different cultures.

"It's important to bring out the voices that we haven't heard before."

"We probably need a specific pot of money to encourage new artists and new emerging organizations that represent underserved people."

"Who makes the decisions that immigrant art is 'decorative' or 'craft'? We need to provide guidance and support newcomers to continue their own traditions."

The community encouraged SK Arts to have greater outreach to immigrants, potentially working with the network of settlement services in the province.

“When I decided to immigrate to Canada, I worried that I was giving up who I was, my essence. I didn’t have a strategy to continue that, but I’ve found myself doing things I thought I would never do again. Seeing SK Arts as a sponsor of those events – not really knowing [even] how far that sponsorship goes – is a boost of confidence for newcomers.”

“Even receiving grants can be a barrier for people, particularly newcomers. Grants are not enough money to live on when people have no other resources available to them.”

The systems that SK Arts uses to award funding are still based on funding models developed many decades ago. The arts community is conscious these systems create barriers to access, particularly for people in marginalized communities.

“The language needs to be simpler in grant applications.”

“Sometimes applicants are discriminated against just because their resumé isn’t good enough. We need to look into the systems that let this happen.”

“We need to be flexible. It’s too easy if you’re making the rules – it doesn’t matter if there’s a person in front of you who needs something. The rules might not work in this situation. We’re human and every person is different.”

“We keep having a conversation around ‘boxes’: are we a presentation company or a development company? Artists look to have a holistic practice – sometimes you’re doing one and sometimes you’re doing another. We want to follow impulses through those categories and not just have to choose one.”

“Look at requirements for reporting. Funding has to trust – have people go and see the work, and let that check off [the boxes] that the work was done.”

Other Important Issues

The discussion of COVID at these community consultation meetings was interesting. It was a very important topic at two of the meetings, requiring a great deal of time for discussion. At other meetings, there was minimal mention of the issue. It is possible that participants in those meetings accepted the current situation as “a given” and did not feel the need to discuss it further. It is a safe assumption, however, that COVID and the impact of the pandemic on independent artists and companies have contributed to the feeling of burnout in the community.

“The pandemic has been hard on all of us, on our volunteers, on our funders, on our sponsors. At times, there is a spark of hope, but even that hope is hard to carry.”

“COVID has raised challenges for organizations, but the North American model for [art] was way overdue for an overhaul anyway.”

“Just when we think we’re getting out of the woods and things are getting back to normal, things happen again!”

“Through COVID, people have sunk into this ‘fast food’ place in art. We need to re-acquaint people with [the power of] real living art experiences.”

“We’re all dealing with what’s coming up in the future? How do we re-invent ourselves? How do we re-connect with our community?”

Even for artists living in our major cities, there is a lack of affordable space to pursue their craft. For people who live in smaller communities and rural areas and for newcomers to the province, this challenge is exacerbated. Many artists from these groups lack both space and the access to the tools they require to do their work.

“What it costs to just occupy space translates to more than most artists can afford. One of the criteria of a living city is how vibrant their arts community is, but as long as cities view art as something that has to be commercially viable, it’s not going to happen.”

“We need a space that can be an incubator. Just give it to people for five years.”

“Finding the space to do the projects is a very big issue.”

“Cities aren’t really motivated to help artists in this way, but maybe SK Arts could formulate a list of city-owned properties that were available working with the business community and with school boards.”

“We should be trying to get together and get some space. There’s a benefit to a community of people working together in different art forms in the same space. I would like to see more of that kind of thing.”

Although the need to support artists at all stages of their careers was affirmed, particular concerns were voiced about conserving the legacy of our senior artists. The recent passing of some notable individual artists contributed to this concern. We need to make sure that their history and work is available to inspire new generations of students and artists.

“I want to figure out how to create space to honour senior artists and their lifetime of work to ensure it is protected, acknowledged, and carries forth into the future.”

“There should be some money to allow public art to be maintained. That’s how we maintain the legacy we have.”

Artists also expressed concerns about climate change. There is a growing recognition that the way in which we work in the arts is contributing to this problem.

“Climate change is top of mind for me. We do some things the way we always have just because we always have. We need to look at how to do things differently since the world is different.”

There is a common perception that the general public does not understand the value of the arts community’s work. This concern was expressed differently throughout the meetings. Some people considered it more true in rural communities than in cities (while other participants believed the opposite), and some people considered it more true in Saskatchewan than elsewhere in Canada. In the community consultations, we heard that SK Arts needs to address this challenge – helping the public come to a greater understanding of the value of the arts.

“‘Why is art important? It’s just a picture on a wall.’ We need to stress the importance of creative and cultural interest in community-building. To talk to different types of people, we need different ways of expressing ourselves.”

“We need to stress the importance of arts education and arts literacy for young people in our province.”

“Having artists within community and building relationships is crucial to building support – particularly for more government support.”

“Talk about the arts as being a safe(r) place to have some challenging, important, and necessary conversations.”

WE URGE SK Arts TO...

Unsurprisingly, when asked specifically what actions SK Arts should take, they were parallel to the concerns raised above.

We urge SK Arts:

- “...to address the funding crisis in this province.”
- “...to consider your staff and consultants, really supporting them so that they can grow their relationships with the artists in the province.”
- “...to keep working on the fine balance between giving more money to artists and more money to staff and operations.”
- “...to think through what we consider success [in funded organizations], and what is a metric of that success.”
- “...to look at alternatives for governance structures [in funded organizations]. We spend a lot of time just engaging and continuing our board of directors.”
- “...to look into funding for capacity building – strategic development for organizations in alignment with SK Arts’ priorities.”
- “...to look for ways to provide adequate touring support in Saskatchewan.”
- “...to build opportunities to share resources between organizations.”
- “...to connect more with the universities – but also to remember that not all of the art is coming out of these institutions.”
- “...to be bold, particularly in your work around equity, diversity, and inclusion.”
- “...to question your definitions of ‘excellence’ and ‘professional.’”
- “...to incentivize organizations concentrating on equity, diversity, and inclusivity.”
- “...to keep committing to decolonization and to support companies in their practice of decolonization.”
- “...to connect with Indigenous Elders and make sure they are part of this strategic planning process.”
- “...to connect with newcomer information centres.”
- “...to continue to find ways to make the process more flexible, accessible, and friendly with fewer barriers.”
- “...to encourage people working outside of the system. Keep a projects-based template, but also explore other channels through which artists can engage with SK Arts.”
- “...to consider the environment of burnout that we can see in many, many organizations and arts administrators.”
- “...to make affordable spaces for different arts organizations to work together.”
- “...to invest in mentoring. We want to help, but we’re donating to do this, and we need to acknowledge this as work and support the people who do it.”
- “...to honour senior artists.”
- “...to do more promotion of the province’s artists.”
- “...to do more advocacy for arts education, both within schools and curriculum and to build our capacity in different types of learning models.”
- “...to help the province realize that we have really good artistic people and product here.”
- “...to remember that art is not a show. It’s people’s lives, it’s people’s identities.”

NEXT STEPS

SK Arts is grateful to the participants in these public consultations. The conversations were lively and engaging, and the comments and suggestions were both supportive and challenging.

Over the coming months, SK Arts will be continuing our strategic planning process.

- In early November, we will be launching a SurveyMonkey tool to receive feedback on this document and to hear more ideas that did not come out of these consultations.
- Early in the new year, our Board and staff will work with an external consultant to think about our new strategic plan. We are looking for other ways to include some community voices in that consultation process, so we may reach out individually to some of you.

The writing and revision process for the new strategic plan last through spring 2023. We anticipate the new strategic plan will be made public in the summer of 2023.



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