



# L.A. City Council working on turning developer fees for cultural events into arts relief fund



Councilman David Ryu at a City Council meeting in December. (Jason Armond / Los Angeles Times)

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For every private development project of \$500,000 or more in the city of Los Angeles, the developer must pay an [arts fee](#) to the city based on the square footage of the building or a percentage of the value of the permit. Those funds are then allocated to cultural events such as festivals and other public arts happenings.

But with dense public gatherings not possible for the foreseeable future, L.A. City Councilman David Ryu hopes to use those funds as relief grants for arts organizations. Earlier this month, the councilman made a motion to have the percent for arts funds for his own District 4 — the fees are distributed by council district — made available as a small-dollar grants program geared at small arts organizations.

“Hundreds — if not thousands — of small arts organizations are at risk of closing their doors for good because of this coronavirus pandemic,” Ryu said in an emailed statement to The Times. “I don’t want to see Los Angeles lose its creative heart.”

The motion went up for debate at Wednesday’s [City Council meeting](#). In that session, the council formally requested that the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA) propose a framework for distributing grants. The agency is expected to respond with a proposal next week.

As part of Ryu’s proposal, the grants would be distributed by Cultural Affairs and would be intended to support public art projects — albeit of the socially distant kind: “So if it’s a group that organizes a film festival, they can use the money to put on an online festival,” explains Mark Pampanin, who serves as Ryu’s communications director.

Early this month, more than 150 arts organizations around the city — including the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, East West Players, Lula Washington Dance Theatre, 826LA, NewFilmmakers LA, Self Help Graphics & Art and the Corita Art Center — signed an open letter to Mayor Eric Garcetti in support of the motion.

“All too often, survival can depend on a single paycheck or donation and COVID-19 has compounded this dire reality by bringing the industry to a complete standstill,” reads the letter. “Councilmember Ryu’s motion will allow artists and performers an opportunity to provide a tangible community benefit that the COVID-19 pandemic effectively decimated.”

In a response issued last week, Cultural Affairs showed support for the measure but suggested expanding the program to all City Council districts — making \$2 million in arts development fees available citywide for grants purposes.

“The nonprofit arts sector is essential to the cultural and economic vitality of our city,” stated DCA general manager Danielle Brazell via email. “Distributing these resources as soon as possible is a top priority of the Department.”

At the Wednesday session, the City Council approved converting a portion of District 4’s art development fees into small-dollar grants and requested that Cultural Affairs develop an application and distribution framework — one that could apply to all council districts.

Cultural Affairs had recommended that organizations be selected from a list of more than 300 arts organizations already pre-approved.

“All grantees are awarded funds based on a peer-review panel process that closely follows the National Endowment for the Arts model,” says Brazell. “Working with this pre-approved list will allow us to quickly disperse funds as efficiently as possible for the greatest impact on Los Angeles.”

Ryu’s office, however, would like to see the program geared specifically at small arts nonprofits, whether they are pre-approved or not. (Cultural Affairs’ list includes some mid-sized and large organizations too.) “Artists need a lifeline right now,” he said in his statement, “and that’s what this fund could do.”

For now, Cultural Affairs will examine the process of disbursing funds to organizations that are not preapproved.

A final vote on the measure will take place in the coming weeks.

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