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'It's bad': In Florida state budget, arts groups get short shrift



Jennifer Evins, president and CEO of United Arts of Central Florida, is pictured at the entrance of the CityArts art galleries on S. Magnolia Ave. in downtown Orlando on Thursday, March 14, 2024. (Rich Pope, Orlando Sentinel)



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The state budget approved by the Florida Legislature last week paints a grim picture for cultural organizations. Jennifer Evins, president and CEO of [United Arts of Central Florida](#), doesn't mince words: "It's bad for the arts."

Arts organizations approved for general support funding will receive less than half of their eligible allowances. A [program for specific cultural projects](#) went completely unfunded — leaving multiple Central Florida organizations empty-handed. Among them is the [Howey Music Series](#), a concert and educational organization in the rural Lake County town of Howey-in-the-Hills. It had been recommended to receive \$20,500.

"With this grant, we aimed to collaborate with local professional AV companies, improve artist compensation and broaden our programming, including introducing valuable educational initiatives that are much needed in Lake County," said Emily Heumann, the organization's executive and artistic director. "This investment would have been transformative for our organization."

She said she and her staff will now scramble to find other possible funding sources. "Alternatively, we may be forced to postpone our expansion plans."

More than a dozen Central Florida organizations and artists are in the same boat, including the [Asian Cultural Association](#), the [Florida Storytelling Association](#), the [Goldsboro West Side Community Historical Association](#) in Sanford, [Orlando's ME Dance](#), and organizations that help enliven downtown Orlando, such as the [D.T.O. Jazz Festival](#) and [Open Scene](#), a performing-arts nonprofit that stages an annual Latin American arts festival at [Fringe ArtSpace](#).

"It hurts," said [Open Scene](#) executive director Thamara Bejarano, "but we will keep working on diversifying our funding sources."

Open Scene's vanished \$25,000 grant would have been used as part of a state salary-support initiative that helps up-and-coming organizations add necessary employees.

What particularly frustrates arts leaders is the fact they qualify for the money through an intensive grant-writing process overseen by the state's own [Division of Arts & Culture](#) in which they are scored by experts and ranked. Those who don't score high enough don't receive any money. But all too often, as is the case this year, the Legislature declines to provide full, or any, funding to groups that have qualified — and have committed significant resources to applying in the first place.

"Our team invested over 40 hours of research and writing into our grant application, followed by a panel hearing with the state, to secure a passing score," said Heumann of the Howey Music Series. "It's incredibly disheartening."



The Howey Music Series includes outdoor concerts in front of the Howey Mansion in Howey-in-the-Hills. (Matthew J. Palm/Orlando Sentinel)

The uncertainty over the funding works against the very purpose of the grants — ensuring arts organizations have a measure of predictability in their budgets to improve their programming for residents, said Chris Brown, executive director of [Orlando Family Stage](#).

"It has become something you want to rely on, but you can't," Brown said. "It's unfortunate to go through the rigorous process, be scored and qualify — and then not get the money."

Orlando Family Stage had the eighth-highest score out of the 630 applicants statewide for general operating funding and qualified for \$150,000. Because the Legislature approved only 47% funding, it will receive \$70,500 instead.

“The grant process really wants to see stability and artistic merit, but those things are hard to do when you can’t plan,” Brown said. “That grant is for forward planning, so you make the plan — and then you scramble when you can’t do that plan.”



Alexander LaPlante (from left), Hannah Faith, Nala Price, Arius West and Allyson Elliott play young magicians in a competition in “Allie Kazan and the Magic Mansion” at Orlando Family Stage. (Courtesy Ashleigh Ann Gardner via Orlando Family Stage)

For his organization, Brown said, unless the money can be made up in some way, the reduced income will affect payments to actors and other employees — causing a ripple effect through the Central Florida economy.

That economic impact is what Evins, the United Arts leader, thinks legislators need to remember.

“It just shows there’s an absolute misunderstanding of the value the arts provide,” she said. “This affects jobs, education.”

Evins, whose advocacy agency runs the region’s largest fundraising campaign for cultural organizations, points to a U.S. Department of Commerce study that ranks the cultural sector as the No. 3 contributor to Florida’s economy, behind only retail and construction. The study estimated cultural activity contributed \$39 billion to the state economy.

Funding all the qualifying organizations at the recommended level would have cost about \$77 million in Florida’s \$114 billion budget. Instead, legislators allocated about \$32 million.

“It’s a shock because we’re such a small part of the billions of dollars in the budget, and there’s a surplus,” Evins said. “Seems very shortsighted by our Legislature.”

There are a few bright spots for local groups, in part because of the [United Arts fundraising campaign](#). Currently underway, that campaign has raised \$3.8 million out of a \$6 million goal. It's pacing about \$400,000 ahead of the same time last year, Evins said, with almost 5,000 donors contributing so far.

She's hopeful the roughly 2,000 donors from last year who haven't repledged money yet will do so, and the bad news from the state will prompt new contributors.

"The state has sent a clear message they don't care," Evins said. "It's important not to let local organizations struggle because of decisions made at the state level."

That message was echoed by [Orlando Philharmonic Orchestra](#) spokeswoman Cristina Venturini.

"Arts organizations can only serve the community through public and private support. This level of reduction of public support impacts not only our programs, but also access to the arts by the greater Central Florida community," she wrote in a statement. "We encourage arts supporters to increase their gift to local arts organizations during this time."

She pointed out another reason why the funding is critical to arts groups: A grant from the state can often be used to raise more money, creating a powerful multiplier effect.

"This support helps unlock additional funding from grants, foundations and individuals," especially helpful when pursuing grants that require guaranteed matching funds, Venturini wrote.

In other cultural funding categories, a program designed to bolster arts groups' endowments received no funding, as has been the case for years. The state's cultural facilities grants were funded at just 43%, meaning only the first 15 grants out of 38 recommendations will receive money. In another bright spot for Central Florida, all three local organizations in the category scored in the top 15.

With the top two scores in the state, the [Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts](#) and the [city of Orlando](#) each were approved for \$500,000. The downtown arts center's grant would go toward completing an outdoor music garden in conjunction with the recently opened Judson's Live. The city's grant would be used to replace the roof and HVAC system on the [Lowndes Shakespeare Center](#), which it owns.

The third grant, for \$76,821, will assist the [Ritz Theater](#) in Sanford with a new scene and design shop.

"The new indoor space will enhance our theatrical production capabilities, facilitate set and material storage, and foster collaboration by sharing complex set pieces with other community theaters," wrote Ritz board president and CEO Kathryn Townsend. The project has already received private support from the Wayne Densch Charitable Trust Foundation, Wharton-Smith Inc. and others.

Gov. Ron DeSantis still has the ability to veto line items in the budget before it is final, but it's unlikely he would eliminate the two partially funded cultural distributions at this point, said Jennifer Jones, president of [Florida Cultural Alliance](#), a Tallahassee-based advocacy agency for the arts.

Like Evins and other leaders, she went into this year's legislative session with high hopes. Two years ago, both the general support and [Culture Builds Florida](#) programs were funded at 100%. Last year, Culture Builds Florida was again fully funded, while the general-support grants were two-thirds funded.

Now she's pondering how one program dropped from 67% to 48% and the other from 100% to zero.

The answer might be found in some "big-ticket items" that were introduced to the budget process later in the game than usual, Jones said. She points to \$500 million in toll relief, \$400 million in land preservation and the millions put into the state's reserves.

"I think the sentiment was there for us," she said. "But when they started putting pen to paper, they started shaving away."

Discussions will begin shortly on strategies to "get our message across better" to legislators next time, she said.

Meanwhile, arts organizations will do what they're known for: Be creative.

Said Evins: "It's gonna hurt, but we've got to figure it out."

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