



STAFF REPORT

AGENDA NO: 11a

MEETING DATE: January 20, 2026

To: Honorable Mayor and City Council

Date: January 20, 2026

From: Brad McCulley, City Librarian – (650) 558-7401

Subject: Consideration of Arts Commission Task Force Findings

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the City Council review the following recommendations from the ad hoc Arts Commission Task Force – Leslie Holzman (Chair), Preeti Deb, and Janet Martin – and give guidance regarding next steps.

BACKGROUND

At the August 19, 2024, City Council meeting, the Parks and Recreation Director, City Librarian, and Community Development Director submitted a staff report recommending the establishment of a City Arts Liaison Committee in order to give the process of considering public art a more professional review. This Arts Liaison Committee would, in turn, work with the relevant commission or board to accept or refuse art donations. This Arts Liaison Committee was intended to be a stopgap measure until an actual Arts Commission was feasible.

At the December 16, 2024, City Council meeting, staff recommended foregoing the Arts Liaison Committee and forming an ad hoc Art Commission Task Force to explore the feasibility of a permanent Arts Commission, in place of arts liaisons, to provide guidance on the following topics:

- Inventory and assessment of current public art
- Processes for acquiring art
- Funding sources for future public art
- Community & Public art engagement
- Art Commission make-up, staffing, and experience

The City Council subsequently appointed Preeti Deb, Leslie Holtzman (Chair), and Janet Martin as task force members.

DISCUSSION

Working with the City Librarian, this Task Force met regularly over the past year to provide feedback and recommendations on the five Arts Commission topics requested by the City Council. The group also discussed the need for and benefits of art in a public setting and how art can benefit the Burlingame community. Some examples of topics discussed included:

- *Building a Sense of Place* – Art reflects a community's history, values, and diversity, creating unique landmarks and a stronger sense of belonging.
- *Fostering Social Cohesion* – Shared art experiences connect people, encourage interaction, and build social bonds, turning public areas into community centers.
- *Promoting Dialogue* – Public art sparks conversations, raises awareness about social issues, and challenges assumptions, giving voice to communities.
- *Driving Local Economy* – Vibrant public art attracts visitors, supports local businesses, revitalizes neglected areas, increases property values, and contributes to economic growth.
- *Enhancing the Visual Environment* – Art transforms dull spaces into engaging, user-friendly environments, improving walkability and aesthetic appeal.
- *Increasing Accessibility* – Art democratizes by bringing it out of galleries and into everyday life, making it accessible to all, regardless of background.
- *Improving Mental Health* – Art provides therapeutic benefits, reduces stress, sparks joy, and offers moments of hope and contemplation.
- *Stimulating Creativity & Learning* – Art inspires critical thinking, problem-solving, and new ideas, enriching educational and personal development.

Art Inventory

At the City Council's suggestion, a college intern was brought on board to assist with an art inventory. Leo Liu, a student at UC Santa Barbara, began work in mid-April and continued until the end of August. Much of this work involved visiting each piece of art, researching its history, and adding metadata for the cataloging process.

There are currently 38 cataloged pieces of art listed in the [Burlingame Art Visual Map 2025](#). Not all pieces come under the heading of "public art" in the sense that the City of Burlingame is responsible for their maintenance. Some are privately owned but visible to the public. This map will continue to be a work in progress, but currently, the basic framework is a Google map created by a previous intern in the City Clerk's office.

One of the intern's additional goals was to research other possible art cataloging databases or software that may be useful in the future. As public art increases and as the need for more robust cataloging of the City's art progresses, the amount of data recorded will require a more formal database or software to encompass all the information needed, such as appraisals, provenance documents, and maintenance schedules. The following software was reviewed and may be appropriate for this purpose: CollectiveAccess (<https://www.collectiveaccess.org/>), CollectionSpace (<https://collectionspace.org/>), and Artlogic (<https://artlogic.net/>).

Processes for Art Acquisition

Over the years, the City has received donations of many interesting pieces of art. After losing their

rented space in North Burlingame, for example, the former Peninsula Museum of Art donated the iconic Benny Buffano owl sculpture located at the entrance of the Main Library and known locally as Owlbert. Lance Fung, a consultant the City hired to help with the Anson Burlingame piece in Washington Park, donated the art installation “Words” by artist Robert Barry. The installation is situated on a hillside on Airport Boulevard, facing the Bay. Even rarer but just as interesting is the 17th-century Flemish tapestry depicting scenes from the Crusades found in a Hillsborough basement in the 1960s and now hanging in the Main Library foyer.

There are many other options for acquiring public art that the City could consider in the future, including:

- Direct commissioning – The City could directly engage a specific artist to create a custom, new work of art according to negotiated specifications, rather than purchase an existing piece. Depending on the agreement with the artist, the City could give input on the piece at different levels, such as selecting the subject or even the style. Meanwhile, the artist provides their expertise and artistic vision to bring this request to life in a personalized piece. Some cities maintain art registries or rosters of pre-qualified artists to streamline the art commissioning process.
- Partnerships with developers – The following City codes, regulations, and policies encourage partnerships with developers or mandate the inclusion of public art in projects:
 - *Burlingame Municipal Code § 25.12.070 Design Principles for the Innovative Industrial Zoning District. Art and Murals.* Subdivision C: Use of murals, artwork, sculptures, special paving, and fountains is encouraged to be incorporated into building design to provide interest and excitement to the district.
 - *North Rollins Road Specific Plan (5.10 Art in Public Spaces)*: The North Rollins Road Specific Plan requires commercial development over 2,000 square feet and residential development over 10 units to install public art as part of the project or pay a 0.5 percent in-lieu fee. The Community Benefit Development Incentive allows projects that must provide a community benefit to provide additional public art, above the 0.5 percent minimum, as a community benefit at a total valuation of 0.7 percent of the project.
 - *Downtown Specific Plan*: The Downtown Specific Plan has a variety of policies to encourage the installation of public art within open spaces and in the streetscape design.
 - *Zoning Code Update (DRAFT)*: The Zoning Code Update the City Council will be considering in February 2026 includes the addition of public art as a community benefit option in the high-density residential, industrial, commercial and mixed-use zoning districts (R-3, R-4, BFC, I-I, NBMU, and RRMU zones). A project can receive additional height, density, or Floor Area Ratio (FAR) with the incorporation of community benefits. The Public Art Community Benefit option requires the installation of public art with a valuation of 1.0 percent of the project construction costs with the project.
- Loan programs with Bay Area artists and museums – Art loan programs involve formal agreements for artists, collectors, or other museums to lend artworks to a borrowing institution (like a museum) for specific periods, allowing display, research, or broader public access, often with strict insurance, handling, and documentation, while benefiting lenders with visibility and museums with richer collections. These range from short-term exhibition loans to long-term

loans (years), extended loans (decades), and even "permanent loans" (intended gifts for tax benefits).

- Art residencies and competitions – Art residencies and competitions are structured programs to engage artists in the creation of public art, foster community engagement, and enhance civic cultural landscapes. These programs are typically governed by clear policies and managed through a formal selection process to ensure transparency and artistic merit.
- Donations and gifts – Art can and has been donated to the City of Burlingame many times over the years. If donated or loaned, artwork should meet the criteria for selection or acceptance, placement or site selection, and funding for projected maintenance.

Proposed Funding for Burlingame Public Art Program/Arts Commission

Any of the following funding recommendations could be relevant for a viable Arts Commission to be successful. The Council may want to consider more than one option or choose one and build a funding framework over a period of time with a combination of funding sources. Once one or more of these programs is in place, then funds will accrue in a more substantial way that can be used for ongoing maintenance, conservation and repairs, arts and cultural programming, and permanent or temporary artwork commissions, rather than relying on a budget allocation from the General Fund.

- Percent-for-Art Program: This type of program would necessitate the passage of an ordinance requiring developers to contribute a small percentage of their new building or large-scale renovation project costs towards public art. The funds are usually earmarked for on-site public art projects or contributed to an in-lieu fund. Such a fund can be used for commissioning artwork, artwork maintenance and conservation, or arts programming. Percent-for-Art programs are a common way to enrich public spaces and enhance the community's cultural environment. The Task Force recommends a Burlingame Percent-for-Art Program that requires private developers of non-residential buildings over \$500,000 to allocate 1% of project costs for on-site public art or contribute 1% of project costs to the City of Burlingame Public Art Fund. Residential projects over 10 units would be required to allocate 0.5% of project costs for on-site public art or contribute the equivalent to the Public Art Fund. To implement a percent-for-art requirement would necessitate a nexus study, which is recommended to be undertaken as soon as feasible. Without this funding mechanism, very little public art in Burlingame will be realized, but it is also recognized that this will take time to complete. The following Percent-for-Art programs are in place in nearby cities:

San Francisco

- *Private development*: requires 1% of the construction cost for qualifying projects, typically in downtown C-3 zones and other districts, to provide public art or pay an in-lieu fee to the Public Art Trust Fund.
- *Civic projects*: require 2% of the total gross estimated construction cost for public projects.

Peninsula/South Bay

- *Belmont*: Developers must provide visible on-site public art worth 1% of the construction valuation or pay an in-lieu fee of 1.1% of the building valuation.

- *Palo Alto*: Private developers must provide on-site public art equal to 1% of the first \$100 million of construction valuation. For municipal projects, the City allocates 1% of its annual Capital Improvement Program budget.
- *Redwood City*: Developers of certain projects are required to allocate 1% of the construction cost to public art or pay an in-lieu fee.
- *San Jose*: The City's ordinance sets aside 1% of the annual budget for capital improvement projects. Private developers can either dedicate 1% of project costs to on-site artwork or pay 0.6% of project costs into a public art trust fund.
- Maintenance Fund: Until a dedicated funding source is established, the Task Force recommends that, in the first year, a \$50,000 budget be earmarked for the Arts Commission to undertake an initial conservation/maintenance assessment of existing public artwork in the City collection. Because the City owns and is responsible for the care of many pieces of artwork, the identification of appropriate ongoing maintenance needs and any immediate repairs or conservation measures should be a priority. Once the needs are understood, and until such time as other funding mechanisms contribute to a workable fund, the Arts Commission would request funding from the City Council for a small budget for specifically identified conservation and repair projects.
- Arts Activation Fund: Additionally, the Task Force recommends that the Arts Commission receive a \$50,000 programming budget to activate arts and cultural activities in the community (see community engagement section).
- CIP Budget Percent: The Task Force also recommends that 1% of the City of Burlingame's annual capital improvement program CIP budget be allocated to on-site public art or contributed to the Public Art Fund.
- Grants: An Arts Commission can pursue sponsorships and grant opportunities from the federal government, the state, private foundations, and corporations for arts and cultural programming.
- Voluntary Arts Contribution Fund: The City Council might also consider an opportunity for donation "crowdfunding," such as the San Francisco County model of annually including a flyer promoting its Voluntary Arts Contribution Art Fund with the property tax bill. (see attachment)
- TOT Percentage: In the future, the City Council might consider a measure to increase the transient occupancy tax (TOT) to be more in line with neighboring cities. If so, a small percentage of the TOT could be allocated to arts and cultural uses in Burlingame. (Note that TOTs are usually levied as general taxes. Any specific promise to the voters to spend a certain percentage of the TOT on arts and cultural uses would turn the tax into a specific tax, requiring a 2/3 vote in favor.) In San Francisco, for example, Proposition E, passed in 2018, ensures that 1.5% of San Francisco's 14% hotel tax is directed to arts and culture initiatives. TOT rates in nearby cities range from 2% in Burlingame and Redwood City to 14% in Millbrae, San Mateo, and San Francisco, to 15.5% in Palo Alto.

Public Art Engagement

The Task Force envisions a Burlingame where engaging, vibrant, and diverse public art strengthens the community, fosters a sense of place and belonging, and catalyzes positive social change. A universal sentiment among the Task Force members was that art in Burlingame should illuminate the local human experience and inspire connection and inclusion. The following attempts to articulate this sentiment:

An Arts Commission values:

- **Responsiveness to Community Needs:** Dedicated to evaluating local issues and needs when commissioning/accepting art.
- **Cultural and Racial Diversity and Inclusion:** Celebrates the rich tapestry of cultures within the community and actively promotes artistic expressions that reflect this diversity.
- **Accessibility:** Believes that public art should exist in hubs throughout the communities and geographies of our city (Downtown Burlingame, Broadway, and in the parks across the city). And be dedicated to developing programs that funnel art created by the community into our public spaces.
- **Collaboration and Partnerships:** Supporting local organizations and artists.
- **Education and Enrichment:** Recognizing the transformative power of arts education and its ability to enhance learning, creativity, and critical thinking.
- **Accessibility and Equity:** Public Art in Burlingame should invite everyone to participate in the conversation. Public art should exist in hubs throughout the communities and geographies of our city. Examples: Downtown Burlingame, Broadway District, and the parks across the city.
- **Place Making and Place Keeping:** Art should help create the “feeling of Burlingame” - a place where residents feel seen and experience a sense of belonging.

The Task Force developed the following examples of proposed initiatives and timelines:

Quick Initiatives – Year 1

- **Free Vendor Artist Booth at the Fresh Market:** Create a dedicated space where local artists and artisans can sell their work, building visibility and economic opportunity for Burlingame's creative community.
- **Community Input:** Community members can provide direct input on arts projects, funding priorities, and vision for public art in Burlingame.
- **Student-Led Beautification Projects:** Collaborate with schools to allocate small grants for students to transform overlooked local spaces, such as electrical boxes, fire hydrants, trash cans, and water utilities, into works of art.

Foundational Programs – Years 1-2

- **Annual Community-Centered Public Art Grants:** Award five grants of \$5-\$10K each to fund temporary, community-centered public art projects that activate underused spaces and respond to local priorities such as climate resilience, equity, and cultural awareness.
- **Cultural Ambassadors Program:** Appoint Cultural Ambassadors from diverse backgrounds to connect with local artists and arts organizations. These ambassadors will inform the community about grants, promote informational sessions, and ensure resources reach artists on the ground.
- **Burlingame Mural Project:** Similar to the SF StreetSmARTS Mural Program, pair artists with property owners and local businesses to paint murals that beautify neighborhoods and deter

graffiti, bringing vibrancy to commercial corridors and residential areas (e.g. Broadway/Burlingame Plaza).

Longer-Term Vision – Years 2-3

- Creative City Making Initiative: Include local artists in City development projects, integrating artistic perspectives into urban planning and infrastructure improvements. Example: Minneapolis Creative CityMaking
- Artist in Residence (AIR) Program: Partner artists with City departments to create art that strengthens civic dialogue and community engagement. This would be open to Bay Area artists, with priority given to Burlingame residents.
- Community Arts Festival: Launch an annual arts festival featuring live art-making contests, mural competitions, performances, and exhibitions that celebrate local talent and bring the community together.
- Central Cultural Hub: Support the development of a low-cost community arts center that provides studio space, performance venues, classes, and resources to democratize access to arts programming.

Art Commission Make-up, Experience, Potential Duties, and Staffing

The Task Force recommends that the Arts Commission be made up of five members appointed by the City Council who have demonstrated a “deep interest in and appreciation of artistic and cultural matters.” Similar to most of the City’s other Commissions, the terms would be three years each. At least four of the members should be persons active in and representative of one or more of the following fields: architecture, art, design, video/film, literary arts, marketing/advertising, music, public relations, theater, or visual arts. Commissioners must be at least 18 years of age, although the City Council could also consider appointing a non-voting 16 – 18 year old student interested in the arts and City government to the commission.

The Task Force further recommends that the City Council consider allowing one or two members of this Commission to reside in Hillsborough. As with the Library Board, many Hillsborough residents consider the Burlingame downtown area and business districts an extension of their community.

The Commission’s potential duties include:

- Advisory Role: Advise City Council, City staff, and other Boards and Commissions on matters relating to culture, the arts, and, in some cases, historical preservation.
- Public Art Management: Oversee the acquisition, installation, maintenance, and, if necessary, removal of artwork in public spaces.
- Policy Development: Develop and recommend policies, guidelines, and strategic plans for arts facilities, public art, and cultural programming.
- Community Engagement & Advocacy: Promote the arts, increase public access to cultural events, and foster relationships with local arts organizations and artists.
- Financial Oversight: Review and recommend the allocation of City funds for arts, culture, and special events.
- Project Review: Working with different City departments, evaluate proposals for new art projects, including reviewing the artist, site, and design.

The Library will provide staff support to the Arts Commission.

FISCAL IMPACT

The fiscal impact will vary based on Council decisions related to recommended funding sources described above.

Exhibit:

- San Francisco Voluntary Art Contribution Flyer