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Norwich arts groups must work together to apply for COVID-19 recovery grants

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Norwich — It's not often the local arts community is infused with a \$500,000 grant, so they must make sure the money has lasting impacts, according to Wendy Bury, head of the agency in charge of the grant.

The Norwich City Council **late Tuesday approved** (<https://www.theday.com/local-news/20210908/long-norwich-city-council-debate-preceded-votes-on-covid-19-relief-grants>) City Manager John Salomone's proposal to allocate \$500,000 of the city's first-year \$14.4 million American Rescue Plan grant to the Cultural Coalition of Southeastern Connecticut. The money will be reserved for Norwich arts projects and programs.

Bury, executive director of the cultural coalition, said Thursday the coalition will host twice monthly online meetings, beginning with one at noon on Sept. 29, for participants to share ideas. The coalition expects to seek grant applications by December.

Interested parties are asked to sign up for email notifications of the online meetings at the **Norwich page** (<http://culturesect.org/city-of-norwich-arp/>) of the coalition's website, **www.culturesect.org** (<http://www.culturesect.org>).

The coalition's proposal presented to Salomone stated the funds would be used "to address the negative impacts of COVID-19, speed the recovery of an industry severely hard-hit, and contribute to the City's vibrancy and economy."

Bury said Thursday all grant applications must include collaborations among at least three entities, meeting the coalition's long-term goal of fostering cooperation and to ensure the money has broader impact.

Bury also will bring ideas back to the city for possible collaboration with city projects. A city plan for neighborhood improvements could include a public arts component. A transportation project could include a uniquely sculptured bicycle rack, she said.

The artists and performers would be paid, she stressed.

"If you are an artist, how can you help beautify an area?" Bury said. "We're not asking to do things for free. This is the recovery. If you are a musician, we want you to perform and get paid for it. Part of economic recovery is to pay for the products and services you can provide."

Bury's proposal to the city for the \$500,000 included \$300,000 for grants, ranging from small "relief and support" for artists and performers to larger "transformative" grants. Another \$100,000 will support programs and events, coordinate venues and "help speed recovery of arts & cultural community."

The final \$100,000 will fund a two-year part-time arts and cultural coordinator.

"That person is going to be the face for all organizations to talk to," Bury said, "for events coming up, to help coordinate and get communication channels open."

Faye Ringel, vice president of the Norwich Arts Center board of directors and chairman of programming and planning, said the paid coordinator might be the best component of the ARP grant. Norwich Arts Center has not had a paid director for years, and most local organizations rely on volunteers. Having someone to coordinate events and foster collaboration is much needed, she said.

NAC is working on programs that could qualify for ARP funding, including an ongoing collaboration with the nonprofit Blooming into Greatness, founded and directed by LaShawn Cunningham. The group, which brings art to the city's underserved populations, used NAC's Donald Oat Theater for a Juneteenth performance and plans a showcase event Sept. 24 and 25.

NAC also hopes to expand its popular Miss Lottie's Café music series and the Blues on Broadway series. Ringel said NAC would like to work with the Greater Norwich Area Chamber of Commerce to expand the summer Rock the Docks concerts to other Norwich neighborhoods and to invigorate the First Fridays arts nights downtown.

"I think the first (applications) will be for programs we have some control over, like what we offer for First Fridays, collaborating with other entities that do First Friday events," Ringel said. "We hope to have the summer programs in place and be ready to apply for grants in December."

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