



Downtown Columbia Arts and Culture Commission Annual Report 2016-17

Overview

The Downtown Columbia Arts and Culture Commission was formed in 2013 with a mission to preserve the cultural significance of Merriweather Post Pavilion and promote expanded artistic, civic, cultural, and educational programming throughout Downtown Columbia. It currently operates with five citizen and two *ex-officio* directors, with the support of one full-time executive director and paid professional services, including legal, accounting, and construction management. Operational and construction funding for the Commission has come in the form of grants from Howard County Government and the State of Maryland.

Since its founding, the Commission has steadily grown its organizational capacity and reach through partnerships and collaboration, and it looks to continue this growth in the year ahead. It is well-positioned for growth following the successful transfer of Merriweather Post Pavilion's ownership from the Howard Hughes Corporation to the Commission at the end of 2016. With this new ownership structure and a long-term lease signed with It's My Amphitheater, Inc. to operate the venue, Merriweather will provide a consistent, sustainable revenue stream to the Commission and it will also serve as a venue for expanded artistic, cultural, civic, and educational programming produced by the Commission and other community partners. The transfer of ownership was a significant undertaking for the Commission, and its completion marks a major accomplishment for the organization.

Merriweather Post Pavilion Project Overview and Update

Renovations at Merriweather Post Pavilion are ongoing. As of this report, the first two phases of construction are complete and the third phase is nearing completion. The construction project is managed by the venue's operator with oversight and input from the Commission.

Phase I of the project included construction of new concessions, restrooms, and a box office in the West Plaza, and Phase II included a new stage house and back of house building, both of which are complete and ready for the 2017 concert season, Merriweather's 50th. Phase III includes the construction of a warehouse and office building, as well as new restrooms, concessions, and box office by the venue's main gate. Anticipated future phases of the project call for the pavilion roof to be raised, a new seating bowl, roofs for the log sections, additional concessions stands, and new restrooms, including one that will be shared between the venue and Symphony Woods.

The Commission has also increased its visibility as Merriweather's "steward" through outreach to key stakeholders, representation at meetings and hearings, and by publicly documenting the renovation project on its website and social media channels. The Commission will continue to expand its outreach, as well, in the coming months.

Program activities

After putting its grant program on hold for FY2016 to focus on the construction and transfer of ownership at Merriweather, the Commission has thus far provided one grant to a local arts organization in FY2017 and is expecting to announce additional grants soon to support programming related to Columbia's 50th birthday celebrations.

Moreover, the Commission will soon announce new programming it is producing at Merriweather Post Pavilion this summer. The Commission expects to develop more fully its programming and grantmaking activities for its next fiscal year as it builds organizational capacity and increasingly focuses on this part of its mission.

Lastly, the Commission is actively working with several community groups to expand the use of the facilities at Merriweather Post Pavilion. To date, the venue has hosted a fundraiser for a local non-profit and there are potential similar events currently being planned. Coordinating the use of the venue by community organizations is an important role for both the Commission and Merriweather's operator, and both entities are excited about the prospects of enhancing Merriweather as a home for community programming and activities.

Organizational Development

Over the last year, the Commission's biggest organizational development effort was its successful acquisition of Merriweather Post Pavilion and work associated thereto, such as a lease with the operator, parking agreements, and financing, among other things.

While ownership of Merriweather and the long-term lease with an operator provide the commission with a solid foundation for its success, the Commission's critical role as steward of the venue requires developing a host of internal practices, policies, and controls to ensure the venue and the organization continue to thrive. The Commission has engaged experts in the fields of law, construction, financing, and insurance to help guide its work and organizational development in these areas. Moreover, it has continued to engage the expertise of its board members to support this development, as well.

However, as the Commission's role as "landlord" solidifies, it must turn its attention to building those facets of the organization that will help fulfill its broader mission of expanding artistic, cultural, civic, and educational programming at Merriweather Post Pavilion and throughout Downtown Columbia. In that respect, it has been working with community partners and others to create a vision for accomplishing this mission in a way that is collaborative, inclusive, and effective.

Finally, the Commission is continuing to build its community outreach efforts and has been developing strategies and plans to better engage its stakeholders in the community. Its social media and web presence is expanding steadily, and these activities will become more visible as the organization introduces new programming to the community in the coming months.

Financial Activities

The Commission's audit and tax returns for FY2016 are nearing completion now and will be submitted as soon as they are available.

As in years past, DCACC has expended considerable funds for legal and other professional services, including funding for a consultant to help the Commission oversee the Merriweather renovation project, an audit of the project costs prior to the ownership transfer, and most significantly, legal fees related to the complex agreements necessary for the Commission to become the venue's owner and landlord. As mentioned earlier, the Commission plans to engage in programming and grantmaking related to Columbia's 50th Birthday celebration and there is funding set aside in the budget to support these efforts and announcements about this programming will be made soon.

On the revenue side, the Commission is now receiving rent from its lease with IMA, Inc. and it also expects to receive revenue in the form of sponsorships for its programming.

Its current financial outlook is healthy, though at this point the Commission's operations are being funded through rental revenue. The start-up funding the organization received from Howard County Government in 2014 has largely been exhausted over the last three years. As with its programming efforts, the Commission is developing plans and concepts for generating additional revenue to support its mission for the long-term.

As for funding for the renovations at Merriweather Post Pavilion, the Commission and the operator finalized a private loan with a local bank to fund construction of Phase III of the project. And as part of the FY2018 budget that just passed the Maryland General Assembly, there is \$8 million in funding to support the next phases of the Merriweather renovation project.

Outlook

The Downtown Columbia Arts and Culture Commission's path ahead is as clear as it has ever been, though there is much about the organization's future that we do not know. With the successful transfer of ownership of Merriweather Post Pavilion, the Commission is poised to shift its primary focus to expanding artistic, cultural, civic, and educational programming at the venue and throughout Downtown, but its charge and the challenge before it is bigger.

Columbia is a city founded on a core set of values which, taken together, sought to create a community that is inclusive, empowering, and empathetic. These values must be carried forward, from one generation to the next, and the community they create must be nurtured and replenished. The Commission sees its role as broader than being a steward of an amphitheater, but also as an integral partner in the stewardship of Columbia's values.

Since its founding, Merriweather has brought people together and it will continue to do so in the decades ahead. Through the Commission's ownership of the venue, we hope that people come together to enjoy new experiences, programming, and uses at Merriweather and in Downtown Columbia, and as a result, we can continue to enhance the community that was born nearly 50 years ago.