



**Virginia Commission for the Arts
Commission Board Meeting
Norfolk | Norfolk Waterside Marriott
March 11, 2026**

Board Meeting Minutes

I. Attendees

- Commissioners: Barbara Parker, Frazier Millner Armstrong, Raven Custalow, Debbie Garrett, Alex Grabiec, Tim Zhao
- Not in attendance: Hayley Allison, Dr. Vanessa Thaxton-Ward
- Staff: Colleen Dugan Messick, Casey Polczynski, Shauna Friend, Cathy Welborn, Lo Bruner
- Attorney General's Office: J.C. LaRiviere, Attorney

II. Call to Order

Chair Parker called the meeting to order at 9:10 a.m. and provided a welcome. She introduced VCA's new legal counsel, J.C. LaRiviere.

Chair Parker conducted a Roll Call of Commissioners:

Parker, here
Armstrong, here
Allison, absent
Custalow, here
Garrett, here
Grabiec, here
Thaxton-Ward, absent
Zhao, here

III. Approval of Minutes – December 2025 Commission Board Meeting

Chair Parker called for a motion to approve the December 2025 Board meeting minutes:

Motion: Commissioner Armstrong
Seconded: Commissioner Grabiec
All approved; motion passed.

IV. Chair Update

Chair Parker provided a Chair update.

- Commissioner Updates | Lou Flowers, previous Secretary, has resigned for personal reasons.
- VCA Appointments | With Chair Parker and Vice Chair Armstrong's terms ending soon the Governor will appoint Commissioners for Regions 1, 2, and 6. There is a portal available for submitting recommendations, and Commissioners are asked to inform the Executive Director of potential candidates. Chair Parker extended congratulations to Executive Director Messick and Deputy Director Polczynski on their recent reappointments.
- FY26 VCA Grants Update | The February and March deadlines for GOS Medium & Large (Short Form) applications, GOS Medium & Large (Long Form), and Operating Support

Small applications have passed. A small number of applicants missed the deadlines; however, overall grant requests increased. Senior Grants Officer Cathy Welborn noted that this increase may be attributed to the VCA's strengthened communications outreach. FY27 Virginia Touring Grants opened on March 1

- **FY26 VCA Grants Looking Ahead** | April 1 is the upcoming deadline for Creative Communities Partnership Grants, Community Impact and Arts in Practice applications. Artist Roster applications are due July 15.
- **FY26 Advisory Panels** | Seven screening session dates taking place in April and May for GOS and three Community Impact Panels have been distributed to Commissioners.
- **FY26 VCA Reach to Date** | There are still four counties that have not yet engaged with the VCA: Amelia, Craig, Surry, and Sussex.
- **Poetry Out Loud State Finals** | Six state finalists competed on Thursday, March 5 at VCA's POL partner, the Wayne Theatre. The Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind also participated in the event. Organizers faced challenges this year, as the anthology was significantly reduced following the Poetry Foundation's decision to no longer partner with the NEA. Additionally, the anthology was not finalized until late October 2025. Both Deputy Polczynski and Commissioner Garrett were in attendance. The final competition takes place in Washington, DC in late April. The Board extends its best wishes to state champion Amelia Rylak as she advances to the next round.
- **45th anniversary of the Artist Rosters** | This year, the VCA will mark the 45th anniversary of its Artist Rosters by commemorating the launch of the Touring Artist Roster in 1981 and using this milestone to celebrate the combined impact of both the Touring and Teaching Artist Rosters. Executive Director Messick submitted a request to Governor Spanberger to consider hosting the celebration at the Executive Mansion. The event is proposed for October, in alignment with Arts and Humanities Month, and will invite both current and former Roster Artists, VCA staff and Commissioners.
- **ArtWorks Update** | Planning is underway for ArtWorks, scheduled for the first week of November 2027 at the Richmond Hilton Hotel at Short Pump. The event will be supported through a drawdown from the ArtsFund, and Local Arts Agencies will play a role in facilitating breakout sessions. Commissioners are encouraged to share suggestions for state or national speakers for breakout sessions with Executive Director Messick. Commissioner Grabiec asked if a call for speakers proposals would be issues and Executive Director Messick clarified that the VCA will identify and invite speakers directly. Commissioner Garrett asked if constituent survey data would inform breakout session topics, and Chair Parker and Vice Chair Armstrong confirmed that this feedback will guide the planning process.

V. Executive Director Update

Executive Director Messick shared an overview of agency updates.

- **Housekeeping** | The VCA has relocated to historic Reids Row, named to honor Dr. William Ferguson "Fergie" Reid, a pioneering civil rights leader and surgeon. He was the first African American elected to the Virginia General Assembly in the 20th century (1967) since Reconstruction.
- **Staffing** | Dawn LeHuray, the VCA's former Communications Coordinator and Office Specialist, has left the agency to return to Wisconsin. The agency is currently interviewing candidates for her replacement with an aim to onboard them in early April. The VCA is developing a P-14 Fiscal and Grants Associate position to support Shauna and Cathy. This role will serve as a bridge between both Grants and Fiscal and will have access to Foundant and Cardinal.
- **General Assembly Updates** | The VCA distributed a brochure on January 21 at the General Assembly outlining how the agency will allocate the special \$2 million appropriation. Deputy Polczynski and VMF Fellow, Jack Siegel modernized the VCA code, which passed

unanimously in both chambers and now moves to Governor Spanberger for review and signature. Three state budget amendments were introduced but were ultimately not included in the final budget: an amendment from Senator Pillion requesting \$2 million in FY27 and \$2 million in FY28, and an amendment from Delegate Cousins requesting \$500,000 in FY27. Chair Parker also noted that Commissioners may attend Arts Advocacy Day, as long as they do not gather in groups with more than two in order to avoid constituting a public meeting.

- Mid Atlantic Arts regional SAA gathering | Executive Director Messick will attend this gathering on April 21 and 22. Travel reimbursement is provided by Mid Atlantic Arts.
- Communications | Executive Director Messick reported strong performance metrics, including growth in social media followers, newsletter subscribers, and open rates. Press releases are now formally distributed, with one release highlighting the VCA Teaching Artist Roster picked up by *The Virginia Independent*.
- Fiscal and Compliance | The Auditor of Public Accounts' Internal Control Questionnaire for 2025 is outlined in the Board Book. Deputy Polczynski will also be developing the VCA's Policy Manual over the summer. Additionally, the agency will be working with legal counsel to refresh the VCA bylaws.
- Streamline Processing of VA W-9's | The VCA continues to streamline the payment process for grantees. Deputy Polczynski has identified an automated method for applicants to submit required payment information through Box. In April, the VCA will also share a Zoom recording with grantees explaining how to enroll in EDI (direct deposit) for award payments. Because mailed checks can be delayed/lost (and the agency incurs a fee to reissue them) the VCA will encourage grantees to use direct deposit.
- Spring/Summer Community Roundtables | Community Roundtables will take place this summer, bringing members of the public together to discuss how VCA grant programs can continue to evolve as we modernize our processes.
- Quarter Professional Development webinar series | Planning is underway to offer a quarterly professional development series for grantees, featuring a variety of topics and guest speakers.
- Semiannual touchpoints with Local Arts Agencies (LAA's) | Continued coordination with Local Arts Agencies, with updated scheduling for 2026.
- Policy Manual | Chair Parker noted that the agency's Policy Manual should be updated annually and requested that a policy be developed addressing Commissioners' participation in Board meetings when attending remotely.

VI. Diversity and Accessibility Committee Updates

Commissioner Grabiec, Chair of the Diversity and Accessibility Committee, shared an overview of updates.

- GOS Accessibility Application Question Data | In FY27, the VCA expanded the accessibility section of the GOS and OSS applications to include the following questions.
 - Does your organization have a designated Accessibility Coordinator?
 - Who is the Accessibility Coordinator and what is their position title?
 - Has your organization completed an Accessibility Self-Evaluation (yes, no, in process)
 - Passport Program UpdatesData collected | Preliminary data has been collected among the 67 GOS Short Form applicants who submitted early. Eight organizations have not designated an Accessibility Coordinator. Of the 67 applicants, 23 have completed an accessibility self-assessment, 39 are in the process of completing one, and five have neither started the assessment nor designated an Accessibility Coordinator.
- Open Door Arts Self-Study group | Initiated in October 2025, with the last session of the first cohort being held today. Participating organizations have completed a self-assessment

and developed accessibility plans to support their access goals.

- Special Fund Taskforce Accessibility Allocation Update | In September, the Commission voted on dedicating \$63K to support accessibility initiatives, resources, and grants:
 - Virginia Voice Partnership (Passport Program Expansion) – \$5,000
 - Open Door Arts (Self-Assessment Study Group) - \$5,000 allocated, \$3,900 expended
 - Accessibility Webinars & VCA Accessibility Handbook - \$3,000 allocated, \$4,500 expended
 - Accessibility Microgrant Program - Guidelines were approved at the December meeting, with the program set to launch on July 1, FY27. A total of \$50,000 has been allocated for the rolling grant program, which will pilot a two-cycle model.
- Creative Aging, Creative Futures Grant (CACF) Award | VCA staff conducted a site visit to Powhatan United Methodist Church, SPAN Center AAA (Area Agencies on Aging) Site. The CACF grant will include partnerships with the Virginia Department of Aging and Rehabilitative Services, as well as VCA grantee and teaching artist organization Arts Connect (formerly Tidewater Arts Outreach). Friendship Cafés are congregate meal programs supported by funding from the Older Americans Act, and transportation for participants is often provided.
- Passport Program Expansion | Virginia Voice Partnership – Special Recognition grant awarded for audio transcription, companion services, transportation, tickets, and program coordination.
- Passport Program Marketing Support | Commissioner Armstrong shared that Virginia Public Media will be promoting the Passport Program through its 90by5 early childhood awareness initiative. Through its relationship with the WIC program at VDH, VPM has offered to distribute Passport Program flyers in offices, provide public service announcement airtime, and feature the program on its website. Additional opportunities may exist to broaden statewide visibility through WHRO and Roanoke stations.

VII. Small Town and Rural Arts (SARA) Update – Geoff Kershner, Randolph College

Geoff Kershner, SARA Lead, provided an overview of recent updates. He thanked the Commission for identifying SARA as a special initiative and acknowledged Commissioner Grabiec and his wife for their outreach efforts. He also noted the need to expand programming into Amelia County, an underserved locality in Region 8.

- Workshop #1: Building Creative Communities | The first workshop is scheduled for March 24 at the Colonial Theatre in South Hill and will be led by the Department of Public Transformation (DoPT). Focused on Region 8 (Halifax, Mecklenburg, and Charlotte counties), with monthly workshops planned to support local arts organizations and leaders.
- Workshop #2 Arts-based Civic Engagement | Second workshop will held on March 25 at Virginia Tech.
- Statewide Digital Workshop | A virtual workshop is scheduled for April 19, followed by sessions at The Prizery on April 21, and a virtual offering on May 15. One-on-one coaching will also be available, with a final workshop planned for June, potentially in Amelia County.
- SARA Practice Hub | The SARA Practice Hub, hosted on SmallTownBigArts.com, includes a rural arts organization map and locator. Currently, the map reflects organizations funded by VCA, with plans to expand to include additional organizations not yet receiving funding. Eligible areas are defined as communities with populations under 20,000. The Hub also features a digital resource library, including strategic planning materials from the VCA website, and a strategic planning app designed for small organizations that may not have access to consultants.

Geoff will share the slide deck with VCA and invited Commissioners to suggest organizations for inclusion in the Hub. He also clarified that the previously listed April 19 workshop date was

incorrect; the workshop will instead be held on April 29. He added that VCA is welcome to include a link to Small Town Big Arts on the agency's website to highlight the SARA initiative.

VIII. Commission Votes

FY27 Artist Catalyst Grant Guidelines

Lo Bruner shared the 2025 constituent feedback survey showed significant interest from individual artists seeking support outside of the VCA Artist Rosters. To develop this new program, Lo and VMF Fellow Jack Siegel consulted six peer state arts agencies to learn best practices and incorporate their insights. Artist Catalyst Grants are designed to help Virginia artists advance their creative practice by providing one-time support of up to \$500 for activities such as skill development, pursuing a unique opportunity, engaging the public, or completing a significant project. Applications are accepted on a first-come, first-served basis in two cycles, with no cash-match requirement. Once each cycle reaches its maximum number of awards, it will close and payments will be issued in a single batch to the Fiscal Officer. In conclusion, the program delivers meaningful support to artists while remaining manageable for staff, even with the anticipated demand.

Chair Parker asked for a motion to approve the FY27 Artist Catalyst Guidelines.

Commissioner Garrett, motion
Commissioner Custalow, seconded
All approved; motion passed.

FY27 Lifelong Learning Grant Guidelines

Deputy Polczynski shared that the Lifelong Learning grant was also identified as a need in the 2025 constituent feedback survey and that reinstating the program would align with the agency's position under the Secretary of Education. The program's one year hiatus allowed the VCA to assess to who was being funded, who was not, and how the program could better serve not only Pre-K–12 students but also adults and seniors. The reinstated arts education stream would focus on underserved, under resourced, and underrepresented. The two cycle model follows the Accessibility Microgrants rolling grant cycle, with awards up to \$4,000 and a 10% cash match requirement to help reduce barriers to entry.

Chair Parker asked for a motion to approve the FY27 Lifelong Grant Guidelines.

Commissioner Grabiec asked what types of activities would be prioritized. Deputy Polczynski explained that this grant could help build early infrastructure for Creative Aging, particularly once NASAA funding concludes after two years. It could also support schools in rural communities as well as Virginia libraries. Executive Director Messick added that after-school programs would also be a focus following the reduction of NEA funding.

Commissioner Grabiec, motion
Commissioner Garrett, seconded
All approved, motion passed

FY27 Arts in Practice Guideline Update

Chair Parker provided an overview of the proposed 10% cash match for the FY27 Arts in Practice grant. Lowering the requirement from 15% would streamline education grant programming communications across both Arts in Practice and Lifelong Learning.

Chair Parker asked for a motion to approve the 10% cash match for Arts in Practice.

Commissioner Garrett asked whether this change would result in fewer grantees across the grant programs. Cathy Welborn responded that this would not be an issue, and Executive Director Messick added that the VCA has had carryforward funds for the past two years, ensuring the agency remains in a stable financial position.

Commissioner Custalow, motion
Commissioner Zhao, seconded
All approved; motion passed.

IX. Nominating Committee

Chair Parker proposed that Frazier Armstrong, Tim Zhao, and Raven Custalow serve on the VCA's nominating Committee.

Chair Parker asked for a motion to accept the new slate of officers for the Nominating Committee.

Commissioner Garrett, motion
Commissioner Grabiec, seconded
All approved; motion passed.

Chair Parker noted that the Nominating Committee will convene virtually rather than meeting immediately following the Commission Board meeting. She reminded members that officers serving on this committee may not communicate with one another outside the scheduled meeting, as this would constitute a public meeting.

Chair Parker opened the floor for Commissioners to share arts events happening in their respective regions. Commissioner Grabiec shared updates on the new America250 exhibition at the Longwood Center for the Visual Arts. Deputy Polczynski also noted that the Virginia Poet Laureate has written a poem for the publication accompanying the exhibition. Chair Parker added that former Commissioner Jan Monroe is hosting a performance of Shrek 2 through StepVA, her organization that provides theater experiences for children with disabilities. She shared that Piedmont Arts is hosting an American Watercolor Society exhibition that includes a Roanoke artist. Commissioner Armstrong highlighted upcoming America250 events on March 21 featuring the Charlottesville Ballet and Opera on the James in Lynchburg. Commissioner Zhao shared that the 'Heal the World' Children's Art Painting Exhibition will open on May 24. Commissioner Garrett reported that Lime Kiln Theatre has released its upcoming season, with shows beginning March 18. Commissioner Custalow announced the August 1 "Just Harvest" festival in Tappahannock, celebrating Indigenous artists and Black communities.

X. Public Comment and Next Board Meeting

Chair Parker invited public comment from VFTA President Geoff Kershner, who was unavailable due to an 11:00 a.m. conflict. Chair Parker asked Commissioner Zhao to report on Arts Advocacy Day, who shared he learned a great deal from the fast-paced, story-driven advocacy experience. Cathy Welborn shared that Advisory Panel instructions will be sent to Commissioners via their VCA email accounts. Chair Parker thanked the Commissioners and staff for their time and efforts. She shared the upcoming Board meeting will take place in Richmond, July 16-17, which will include a Meet and Greet at Reid's Row.

XI. Adjournment

Chair Parker adjourned the March Board Meeting at 11:03 a.m.