



**Virginia Commission for the Arts
Commission Board Meeting
General Assembly Building
June 17, 2026**

Board Meeting Minutes

I. Attendees

- Commissioners: Barbara Parker, Frazier Millner Armstrong, Raven Custalow, Debbie Garrett, Alex Grabiec, Dr. Vanessa Thaxton-Ward, Tim Zhao
- Virtual Attendance: Hayley Allison (Gate City, Virginia)
- Staff: Colleen Dugan Messick, Casey Polczynski, Shauna Friend, Cathy Welborn, Lo Bruner, Tess Wladar
- Attorney General's Office: J.C. LaRiviere, Attorney

II. Call to Order

Chair Parker called the meeting to order at 9:03 a.m. and conducted a roll call of Commissioners:

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

Chair Parker welcomed Secretary Smith, who delivered opening remarks and expressed the Department of Education's support for the VCA and its mission. He thanked the Commission for its work and highlighted its continued value to communities across the Commonwealth.

Chair Parker approved Commissioner Allison's virtual attendance.

III. Approval of Minutes – March 2026 Commission Board Meeting

Chair Parker called for a motion to approve the March 2026 Board meeting minutes:

Commissioner Thaxton-Ward and Allison recused as they were absent from the March 2026 meeting.

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

IV. Chair Update

Chair Parker recognized Commissioner Zhao to share the VCA mission moment. Commissioner Zhao shared his recent experience at a VCA-funded theatre performance at Mountain View High School in Stafford. He enjoyed representing the Commission at this event which had demonstrated the importance of arts funding in bridging language barriers and fostering cultural understanding with ESL learners. Chair Parker welcomed the VCA's new Communications Coordinator and Office Specialist, Tess Wladar. Tess shared her background in the arts and recent professional experience. Chair Parker provided an overview of VCA updates:

- NEA Partnership Agreement | From the total \$942,208 award, the following allocations have been made:
 - \$798,558 - NEA awards will be distributed, along with state funding, to GOS grantees with operating budgets of \$150K+
 - \$88,650 - de minimis rate required by VA Dept of Planning & Budget. This amount will be applied to VCA rent, staff salaries, and professional development.
 - \$25,000 - Poetry Out Loud, Wayne Theatre
 - \$30,000 - Folk & Traditional Arts, Virginia Humanities
- Region 1 Changing Landscape | Two GOS applications were removed from FY27 funding review due to financial challenges. Art 180 announced it will permanently close on August 28. As of May 9, Swift Creek Mill Theatre has paused operations.
- NEA Engagement
 - POL: Amelia Rylak, a senior at Grace Christian School in Staunton, represented Virginia at the national finals. Jayda Dawn, a junior at University High School in Carmel, Indiana, was named National Champion.
 - 2025-26 Musical Theater Songwriting Challenge: Congratulations to Cameron Steele, a sophomore at Riverside High School in Leesburg, was named one of eight national winners with his song "Just Gold"!
- ArtWorks 2027 PD Survey | The VCA issued short survey in the May 2026 newsletter and social media to gather input on potential ArtWorks sessions. We received 74 responses, primarily from nonprofit arts organizations, individual artists, and educators. The highest number of responses came from regions 1, 2, and 4. The top five greatest areas of need/interest are as follows:
 1. Fundraising and diversifying revenue portfolios
 2. Grant writing
 3. Marketing/promotion/reimagining audience engagement
 4. Collecting data and employing evaluations to guide programming
 5. Increasing online presence through website and social media

Chair Parker shared that Fiscal & Compliance Officer Shauna Friend has uploaded the conference coordinator Request for Proposal (RFP) into the state procurement system (eVA). The closing date is July 7 and in addition to electronic submissions, the VCA is able to accept hard copy proposals from vendors who are not eVA certified.

Commissioner Armstrong suggested establishing a Special Task Force dedicated to ArtWorks 2027 planning.

V. Executive Director Update

Executive Director Messick shared an overview of agency updates.

- Gratitude for Service | Colleen Messick expressed her appreciation for Chair Parker and Vice Chair Armstrong for their years of dedicated service. She distributed letters signed by the Governor thanking them for their impactful contributions to the arts.

- **VCA Code Update** | The modernized VCA Code was approved by the General Assembly with minor language edits and will take effect on July 1, 2026. Regarding the Arts Fund, new language allows the Executive Director to draw interest from the fund. License plate and income tax proceeds continue to support the Arts Fund. A new fiscal policy will be presented for a Board vote in September.
- **Communications Outreach** | Monthly newsletter subscribers is at all-time high with an average email open rate of over 60%. The newsletter continues to be an important resource, and social media engagement continues to grow.
- **On the Square** | In partnership with the Department of General Services, the VCA recently hosted an arts engagement event with grantees and Roster Artists for Commonwealth employees on Capitol Square.

VI. Diversity and Accessibility Committee Updates

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

- **GOS Accessibility Application Data** | Newly expanded accessibility questions in the FY27 GOS application captured valuable information on accessibility efforts. The data indicates which organizations have completed a 504 self-assessment or may need additional support through new Accessibility Microgrants. The results also show that many grantees have already designated an Accessibility Coordinator or are in the process of doing so.
- **Open Door Arts Self-Study group** | Facilitated by accessibility advocate Dani Rose, the 2nd cohort begins July 15 and concludes November 11.
- **Area Agencies on Aging (AAA)** | VCA staff conducted AAA site visits to Hayden Village Center in Franklin and the Charles City Friendship Café. These visits will inform the facilitation of the Creative Aging, Creative Futures Grant (CACF).
- **CACF Updates** | The VCA is hosting an upcoming webinar for AAAs alongside grant partners, Virginia Department of Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) & arts service organization, ArtsConnect Virginia. With \$48k allocated for program funding, the grant opportunity will open in early July, with the aim to prioritize underserved, under-resourced, and under-represented older Virginians.
- **Virginia Voice Special Recognition Grant** | Deputy Director Polczynski share that this special \$5,000 investment enabled Virginia Voice to purchase equipment in support of their mission. They will be submitting their Final Report later this month.

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

SARA Lead, Geoff Kershner, thanked the Commission for identifying SARA as a special initiative. The pilot focused on region 8, with a goal to build capacity for smaller arts organizations. He highlighted the strength of SARA partners, Randolph College, Virginia Tech, and Department of Transformation. He also noted that in-person engagements were better attended vs. virtual gatherings.

- **In-person Convenings** | South Hill, South Boston, Farmville, and Virginia Tech
- **Virtual Convenings** | Statewide and region 8 virtual sessions
- **Final Workshop** | Funding (cross-sector funders/partnerships) and audience engagement were high interest topics. The capstone project encouraged participants to develop a funding pitch, demonstrating that arts support can come from many different sources.
- **Digital Toolkit** | New resources are available on smalltownbigarts.com which include a strategic planning companion, rural arts map, resource library, and events calendar.
- **Insights moving forward** | Emphasizing place-based work, messaging on how arts build civic and local pride, audience specific language when conducting funding outreach (utility of the arts), regional partners are key, and in-person activities to strengthen networks.

Commissioner Armstrong thanked Geoff for his leadership and asked how Commissioners could continue to support the initiative as it moves forward. Geoff shared that Commissioners could assist by introducing community members to anchor institutions and identifying community assets.

VIII. Commission Votes | FY27 Grants

Chair Parker provided an overview of the FY27 Advisory Panels, noting that there were seven GOS Long Form Panels and three Community Impact Panels. She reminded Commissioners of Conflict of Interest definitions and when recusals should be announced. To streamline the process, the Board would employ block voting for GOS Short, and then for LONG form, voting per Panel, then block voting for OSS and CCPG, concluding with Community Impact. The procedure is as follows: Commissioners initially present a brief summary of the Advisory Panel they observed, followed by the identification of any recusals, subsequent discussions, and finally, the casting of votes.

General Operating Support for Medium and Large Arts Organizations (GOS)

A. GOS Short Form Applications

Chair Parker shared an overview of the 66 GOS Short Form applications. Chair Parker called for a motion to approve the (GOS) Short Forms for Medium and Large Organizations as recommended by VCA staff.

Motion: Commissioner Armstrong

Seconded: Commissioner Thaxton-Ward

Recusals: Commissioner Armstrong - Opera on the James

All approved, motion passed

B. GOS Long Form Applications

Chair Parker shared an overview of the 107 GOS Long Form applications which were reviewed by both VCA staff and Advisory Panels.

Regions 1, 3, & 2-Williamsburg | Advisory Panel #1

Commissioner Armstrong provided an overview of the Advisory Panel #1. Discussion topics included sustainability, and documenting/measuring impact. She thanked staff for identifying qualified Panelists and implementing lead readers. Chair Parker called for a motion to approve Regions 1, 3, & 2-Williamsburg (Advisory Panel #1) as recommended by VCA staff.

Motion: Commissioner Custalow

Seconded: Commissioner Zhao

Recusals: Commissioner Armstrong- CultureWorks

All approved, motion passed

Region 2 | Advisory Panel #2

Commissioner Thaxton-Ward provided an overview of Advisory Panel #2. She shared that the Screening Session was well-organized and Panelists brought diverse perspectives to their review. Chair Parker called for a motion to approve Region 2 (Advisory Panel #2) as recommended by VCA staff.

Motion: Commissioner Thaxton-Ward

Seconded: Commissioner Zhao

All approved, motion passed

Regions 5 (Bath County), 6, 7, & 8 | Advisory Panel #3

Commissioner Allison provided an overview of Advisory Panel #3. This was her first Panel, and she noted that Panelists were highly prepared and had dedicated significant time to their reviews. Chair Parker called for a motion to approve Regions 5 (Bath county), 6, 7, & 8 (Advisory Panel #3) as recommended by VCA staff.

Motion: Commissioner Garrett
Seconded: Commissioner Grabiec
All approved, motion passed

Region 5 | Advisory Panel #4

Chair Parker provided an overview of Advisory Panel #4. She noted that Panelists were well-prepared and key discussion points included artistic excellence and strategic planning. Chair Parker called for a motion to approve Region 5 (Advisory Panel #4) as recommended by VCA staff.

Motion: Commissioner Grabiec
Seconded: Commissioner Garrett
All approved, motion passed

Region 4 (Part 1) | Advisory Panel #5

Commissioner Zhao provided an overview of Advisory Panel #5. In addition to Panelists being well prepared, he expressed appreciation for the history of several organizations, with some operating for over 100 years. Chair Parker called for a motion to approve Region 4 - Part 1 (Advisory Panel #5) as recommended by VCA staff.

Motion: Commissioner Armstrong
Seconded: Commissioner Thaxton-Ward
All approved, motion passed

Region 4 - Part 2 | Advisory Panel #6

Commissioner Grabiec provided an overview of Advisory Panel #6. He noted that Panelists selected were of high quality and well informed. Key themes included clearer board structures/term limits, strategic planning, diversified revenue streams, and strategies for reaching underserved communities. He added that accessibility efforts could be expanded beyond ADA requirements. Chair Parker called for a motion to approve Region 4 - Part 2 (Advisory Panel #6) as recommended by VCA staff.

Motion: Commissioner Custalow
Seconded: Commissioner Zhao
All approved, motion passed

Large Organizations | Advisory Panel #7

Chair Parker provided an overview of Advisory Panel #7 which evaluated large arts organizations with budgets exceeding 2.5M. Challenges during reviews included assessing financials and strategic planning. She highlighted the wide range of Panelist expertise, which contributed to strong and well-rounded reviews. Chair Parker called for a motion to approve Large Organizations (Advisory Panel #7) as recommended by VCA staff.

Motion: Commissioner Thaxton-Ward
Seconded: Commissioner Zhao

Vice Chair Armstrong asked for additional thoughts about new GOS applicant, the Branch Museum. Chair Parker shared that Panelists were attentive to how artistic and curatorial decisions were made and evaluated. Vice Chair Armstrong noted that similar trends may be emblematic of prospective applicants moving forward. Chair Parker added that despite areas of opportunity, the applicant was encouraged to reapply.

All approved, motion passed

Operating Support for Small Arts Organizations (OSS)

Chair Parker provided an overview of the 80 OSS applications, which were reviewed internally by VCA staff. She shared that there were more OSS applications this year compared to last, with some moving into GOS. Chair Parker called for a motion to approve Operating Support for Small Arts Organizations (OSS) as recommended by VCA staff.

Motion: Commissioner Armstrong
Seconded: Commissioner Garrett
All approved, motion passed

Creative Communities Partnership Grants (CCPG)

Chair Parker provided an overview of the 109 CCPG applications which were reviewed internally by VCA staff. Chair Parker called for a motion to approve CCPG as recommended by VCA staff.

Motion: Commissioner Thaxton-Ward
Seconded: Commissioner Custalow
Recusals: Commissioner Grabiec – Prince Edward County
All approved, motion passed

Community Impact Grants

Chair Parker provided an overview of the 44 Community Impact applications, which were reviewed by both VCA staff and three Advisory Panels.

Commissioner Custalow provided an overview of Community Impact (Advisory Panel #1). This was her first Panel, and she noted that Panelist discussion was highly informative. Wide regional representation aided their thorough review and discussion themes included accessibility and inclusivity efforts.

Recusals: Commissioner Grabiec – Virginia Children's Book Festival

Commissioner Garrett provided an overview of Community Impact (Advisory Panel #2). She noted a wide range of regions represented in both applications and Panelists. The review process was well-designed, well-executed, and equitable.

Commissioner Zhao provided an overview of Community Impact (Advisory #3). He appreciated the high level of preparation from Panelists. Discussion focused not only on artistic excellence, but also community engagement, partnerships, and measuring impact. Panelists also discussed the importance of new strategies to reach students and families with limited access to arts.

Chair Parker called for a motion to approve Community Impact Grants (Advisory Panel #1, #2, & #3) as recommended by VCA staff.

Motion: Commissioner Garrett
Seconded: Commissioner Armstrong
All approved, motion passed

IX. Commission Vote | FY27 Proposed Budget

Executive Director Messick provided an overview of the FY27 proposed budget. She shared that the VCA has already reached 132 of all 133 official counties and independent cities, with only Craig County remaining. She also outlined increases in FY27 funding requests, and the proposed budget increases to support these needs across GOS, OSS, CCPG, and Community Impact.

In addition to elevating current funding, the VCA will roll out four new grant programs to expand reach: Lifelong Learning (\$100k), Capacity Building Grants (\$75k), Accessibility Microgrants (\$50k), and Artist Catalyst Grants (\$50k).

To support these funding needs, the VCA will be relying on level funding from the General Assembly. The agency is estimating approximately \$114,284 in carryforward funds and plans to draw \$250,000 from the Arts Fund, which has been underpulled in recent years. By approving this proposed budget, the VCA will still have a remaining 1M from the \$2M special one-time appropriation. She expressed her appreciation to increase the GOS funding requests from 3.8% to 4% percent through these revenue sources and commended staff for dedicated work.

Chair Parker called for a motion to approve the FY27 Proposed Budget.

Motion: Commissioner Thaxton-Ward
Seconded: Commissioner Garrett
All approved, motion passed

Chair Parker paused the board meeting at 11:00 a.m. The meeting was reconvened at 11:30 a.m.

X. Commission Vote | FY27 Capacity Building Grant Guideline Update

Chair Parker shared an overview of the proposed update, which adds an option for multiple organizations to submit a collaborative application requesting up to \$3,000. Chair Parker then called for a motion to approve the FY27 Capacity Building Guidelines update.

Motion: Commissioner Garrett
Seconded: Commissioner Thaxton-Ward
All approved, motion passed

XI. Commission Vote | FY27 Lifelong Learning Grant Guideline Update

Chair Parker shared an overview of this update, which now delivers grant payments on the front end instead of following completion of the activity and delivery of a Final Report. Chair Parker called for motion to approve the FY27 Lifelong Learning Guidelines update.

Motion: Commissioner Grabiec
Seconded: Commissioner Zhao
All approved, motion passed

XII. Commission Vote | Teaching Artist Roster Background Check Policy

Chair Parker shared that the revised policy now requires a background check every five years to meet renewal requirements, a limit of eight checks per organization awarded inclusion to the

Roster, and new confidentiality and redisclosure policies. Chair Parker called for a motion to approve the revised Teaching Artist Roster Background Check Policy.

Motion: Commissioner Armstrong
Seconded: Commissioner Garrett
All approved, motion passed

XIII. Commission Vote | VCA Policy Manual

Deputy Director Polczynski explained the reasoning behind revising the VCA Policy Manual. She shared that the Policy Manual outlines how the agency operates, while the Bylaws define how the Commission Board functions. To move forward, she requested that the Board repeal the current Policy Manual so that staff can draft a new version to be presented and voted on at the next Commission meeting.

Commissioner Garrett asked how the agency will operate in the interim. J.C. LaRiviere shared during the interim period, the agency would continue to operate in accordance with applicable state statutes.

Chair Parker called for a motion to repeal the current VCA Policy Manual so that staff can work on drafting a new Manual to be presented at the September Board meeting.

Motion: Commissioner Garrett
Seconded: Commissioner Zhao
All approved, motion passed

XIV. Commission Vote | Proposed revisions to VCA bylaws

J.C. La Riviere shared the proposed revisions to the VCA bylaws. The impetus for re-examining the bylaws was prompted by a former Commissioner's resignation. Additional revisions were needed, such as adding clarification on the Board and agency as entities with distinct functions and obligations, which could be better clarified in their governance documents. Discussions at this meeting would inform the revised bylaws which would be presented and voted on at the September Board meeting. Proposed revisions include:

- **Officer Roles** | Chair Parker opened the floor for discussion on the role of Secretary. She suggested that instead of overseeing minutes, that this would be a training role for Vice Chair or Chair. Commissioner Armstrong suggested to define the role of Secretary more broadly, given the smaller number of Commissioners and committee structures. It was agreed that the Secretary's role would primarily serve to support both the Chair and Vice Chair.
- **Nomination/Election Process** | Commissioner Armstrong suggested eliminating the Nominating Committee in favor of floor nominations, given the small numbers of Commissioners. Commissioner Garrett requested that nomination conversations occur in advance. J.C. shared that if the board would like, under FOIA, discussions regarding nominees for officer positions could be conducted during closed sessions during which unofficial straw polls could be conducted, but that the board would need to be in open session for formal nominations and voting.
- **Officer Terms** | Chair Parker agreed that a two-year term for officer roles would be appropriate given the learning curve. Executive Director Messick added that staff would appreciate this continuity.
- **Agenda Process** | Defining a formal agenda process in order to ensure that Commission business is conducted in an efficient manner.

- Electronic Meetings | Electronic meeting language should be removed because FOIA and state meeting policies are frequently updated. Including these details in the bylaws risks making them quickly outdated, especially since any changes require discussion and approval over two Board meetings.
- Attendance | Adding Chair discretion around Commissioner removals due to low attendance.
- Standing committees | Adding a voting process to create or dissolve standing committees, while maintaining the Chair's authority to form ad hoc committees as needed.
- Advisory Panels | Removing Advisory Panels language, as these processes will now be defined in the VCA Policies.

Chair Parker and Executive Director Messick proposed that the Executive Director and Board Chair jointly develop the agenda and that staff is available to support committee agendas. Commissioner Armstrong emphasized that Commission orientation is integral to onboarding that the responsibility for this process should be defined in either the bylaws or VCA Policies. Chair Parker thanked J.C. for his thorough and thoughtful recommendations.

XV. Commission Vote | Slate of Officers

Commissioner Zhao, chair of the Nominating Committee, presented the new slate of officers: Commissioner Garrett as Chair, Commissioner Grabiec as Vice Chair, and Commissioner Custalow as Secretary.

Chair Parker opened the floor for additional nominations.

Chair Parker called for a vote to appoint Commissioner Garrett as Chair. All approved; motion passed. Commissioner Garrett abstained.

Chair Parker called for a vote to appoint Commissioner Grabiec as Vice Chair. All approved; motion passed. Commissioner Grabiec abstained.

Chair Parker called for a vote to appoint Commissioner Custalow as Secretary. All approved; motion passed. Commissioner Custalow abstained.

XVI. Public Comment and Next Board Meeting

Chair Parker invited public comment from VFTA President Geoff Kershner. Geoff shared that VFTA has encountered challenges stemming from COVID, including visibility and connectivity. Despite facing budget cuts, VFTA aims to continue operations until ArtWorks 2027. Operations will be moved to Randolph College and will engage enrolled students to assist administratively. Fran Bradford from McGuire Woods will continue to be involved. VFTA is developing a strategic roadmap in anticipation of upcoming leadership changes and hopes to strengthen its connectivity with the VCA.

Commissioner Armstrong recommended that a clear value proposition be shared with members. Chair Parker added that an updated website would clearly define VFTA's role and thanked Geoff for his continued efforts.

XVII. Adjournment

Chair Parker adjourned the June Board Meeting at 12:25 p.m.