

Policy Briefing Summary

City Council



Regarding:	Public Art Program Proposal (2nd reading)
Staff Contact(s):	James Freas, Deputy City Manager
Presenter:	James Freas, Deputy City Manager
Date of Proposed Action:	April 20, 2026

Issue

Public art in Charlottesville is already an important component of the city's culture and legacy as public art displays are present in neighborhoods across the community. Despite this presence, in 2026 there is no existing public or private body that is responsible for managing, accepting, placing, or deaccessioning public art in Charlottesville.

Background / Rule

Public art can encompass a broad range of expression, media, materials, and functionality. It can come in many forms including murals, statues, performances, and writings. Public art, and the process of creating public art, can help cities engage residents, create safer streets, and thrive economically. Community identity, cultural understanding, and connection to place can all be strengthened by public art. Public art is already an important component of the City's culture and legacy as murals liven the pedestrian experience downtown and sculptures create visual interest for corridors throughout the City. Charlottesville is also home to a collaborative network of non-profit arts organizations, art galleries, and workshops. Reflective conversations around monuments and memorials mark Charlottesville's public art history, and provide incentive for a structured community led decision process around the design and placement of public art.

The City has made decisions around public art in different ways over the years. From 1988 to 2017 Piedmont Council of the Arts served as the designated local arts agency for Charlottesville. They coordinated the development of the area's first-ever cultural plan, titled Create Charlottesville (CreateCville) in 2014, and in 2015 helped create an economic impact assessment. This assessment found that arts and culture organizations generated \$5.7 million for local governments in the greater Charlottesville area and supported the equivalent of 2,131 full-time jobs. More recently Charlottesville's PLACE Committee was tasked with reviewing and advising on proposals for public art. However, this committee is no longer active. Organizations such as Art in Place and the Bridge Progressive Arts Institute have provided numerous art installations and public art resources in partnership with the City, including a Map of Murals in Charlottesville. Once again, however, in 2026 there is no existing public or private body responsible for managing public art in the city.

Charlottesville's Comprehensive Plan (2021) includes the following strategy under Goal 8, "Encourage community vitality and interaction through the incorporation of both private and publicly funded art into public spaces, neighborhoods, signage, gateways, and nodes of development. Ensure neighborhood engagement and involvement in this process."

With this background and history as context, and given the current level of community interest in public art as evidenced by work by New City Arts to conduct a planning process for creating a new community Arts Council or similar regional arts entity, staff has drafted an Ordinance for City Council consideration that would create a Charlottesville Public Art Commission that is intended to lead to the creation of a Public Art Program within city government.

The intention of this Ordinance is twofold:

1. To create a Commission that would be tasked with creating a Public Art Program and Public Art Master Plan in-line with community values and the Charlottesville Comprehensive Plan; and,
2. The Commission would function as a standing public art advisor to City Council in its responsibility for accepting, placing, commissioning (when applicable), monitoring, deaccessioning, and approving new public art projects.

Analysis

This Ordinance supports and aligns with the imperatives of effective management of city assets, in this case public art, and the Ordinance and follow-on project aligns with the city's strategic initiatives in particular in Recreation, Arts & Culture, and in Partnerships.

In addition, this Ordinance and Resolution align with Strategy 8.2 in Charlottesville's 2021 Comprehensive Plan regarding the role of public art in public spaces in the community.

Financial Impact

Were this proposal to go forward for consideration of adoption of the proposed ordinance, staff will request \$50,000 to be used to hire a consultant that will do the work to stand-up the Public Art Commission and the Public Art Program and hand these off to city staff.

Going forward, in alignment with other peer cities in Virginia, it is projected that the Public Art Program would require a .50 FTE staff time. It is not clear if that would need to be a new position or if that .50 FTE responsibility could be integrated into existing staff workload.

Recommendation

N/A

Recommended Motion (if Applicable)

- 1) "I move adoption of the Ordinance Amending Chapter 2 of the Charlottesville City Code by Adding Article XVIII Regarding a Public Art Commission."
- 2) "I move approval of the Resolution to Allocate \$50,000 from the Council Strategic Investment Fund to hire a consultant to complete the work necessary to stand up the Public Art Commission."

Attachments

1. Art Commission Ordinance
2. City Council Appropriation to Stand Up Public Art Commission_April 2026