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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMONWEALTH of PENNSYLVANIA

House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing
Economic Development Through Arts + Culture

Wednesday, April 30, 2025 | 10:00 a.m.
Representative Johanny Cepeda-Freytiz

OPENING REMARKS

10:00 a.m. Rep. Johanny Cepeda-Freytiz, D-Berks

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

10:05 a.m. Levi Landis, Executive Director
GoggleWorks Center for the Arts

Susan Rohn, Executive Director
Yocum Institute for Arts Education

Cammie Harris, Chief Executive Officer, Executive Director
Reading Film Festival

Daniel Egusquiza, Founder, Executive Director
Barrio Alegría

Brian Adams, Owner
The Art Room

Josephina Encarnacion, Owner
La Rocina Atelier

Cory Varona-Corniel, Owner
OCOA Beauty

Aries Franklin, Poet
The Poet Smiley

Draft Written Testimony for PA House Democratic Policy Committee – Arts & Culture Roundtable

Submitted by:
Cammie Harris
Executive Director
ReadingFilm Office

April 25, 2025

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony in support of Pennsylvania's arts and cultural sector. My name is Cammie Harris, and I serve as Executive Director of the ReadingFilm Office, the region's official film commission. I am also a doctoral student at Alvernia University, where my research explores how regional creative hubs can drive economic development, innovation, and workforce opportunity.

At ReadingFilm Office, we work to attract film and television production to Berks County while also supporting emerging storytellers, students, and local businesses through year-round programs and an annual film festival, *ReadingFilmFEST*. Our goal is to build a creative ecosystem that uplifts community voices and generates long-term economic value.

The Economic Value of Film and Media

The creative economy generates over \$800 billion annually in the United States and supports over 5 million jobs (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2023). The U.S. film and television industry is a \$134 billion sector that supports more than 2.7 million jobs nationwide, including writers, directors, editors, sound engineers, set designers, and more (Motion Picture Association [MPA], 2023). In Pennsylvania, the industry generates over \$1.2 billion in economic activity annually and supports thousands of jobs across production, post-production, hospitality, and logistics (Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, 2023).

Cities intentionally investing in creative industries tend to outperform others in talent attraction, business innovation, and cultural vibrancy (Florida, 2002; Flew, 2012). However, these investments often concentrate in large metro areas, leaving smaller cities like Reading overlooked despite their potential.

Regional film commissions, such as ReadingFilm Office, play a key role in ensuring that this economic impact reaches communities beyond Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. We help producers identify local crew and locations, navigate permitting processes, and connect with community partners. Our work brings direct economic benefits while also cultivating creative ecosystems in underrepresented areas.

Why Mid-Sized Cities Matter

Scholars | urban economists like Ann Markusen (2006) and Richard Florida (2002) have emphasized that mid-sized cities can thrive when they invest in cultural infrastructure and creative labor. For instance, Santa Fe, NM with an avg pop. 90,000 has used strategic investments in film, digital media, and the arts to drive local development, enhance tourism, and create community identity. Reading, with a population of approximately 95,000, is similarly positioned to become a regional media hub, but only if we are supported with the same tools and investments.

Our city's affordability, architectural diversity, and proximity to larger metro areas like New York City and Philadelphia make it an attractive production site, particularly for independent filmmakers and streaming content creators looking for diversity in looks and film-friendly service.

How Reading Is Building Its Creative Economy

In 2023, ReadingFilmFEST welcomed over 2,000 attendees and 35 + filmmakers from around the world, contributing to hotel bookings, restaurant spending, and raising the city's profile within the independent film community. But our impact goes beyond the festival. Through our educational programs, *Reel Voices*, the *Five Minute FilmFEST*, and Internships, we work directly with schools and community groups to introduce students to storytelling tools, digital media, and career exploration in film and television. In addition, we've launched a number of community-based arts programs that have continued to be held up and sustained by our community partners. These initiatives target youth from around the county, giving them access to real-world experience and pathways into a media workforce that is in high demand.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024) projects that employment in film and video editing, camera operation, and digital post-production will grow faster than average over the next decade. Yet access to training and industry exposure remains uneven, particularly in places like Berks County. We aim to close the gap in Reading, Berk County, making sure we create a pathway where local talent can thrive.

Policy Recommendations

To position Reading and cities like it as cultural and economic leaders in Pennsylvania, I respectfully offer the following recommendations:

- Expand the Pennsylvania Film Production Tax Credit and reserve a 5% allocation for regional and rural productions, at least 50 miles outside of Philadelphia or Pittsburgh (commonly referred to as the "T-Zone")
- Fund regional film incubators and production hubs that support training, equipment access, and studio space.
- Support media literacy and vocational programs that connect students to careers in film, TV, and digital storytelling.

Arts and culture are economic engines, and film is one of the most scalable, accessible, and globally relevant sectors. Let's ensure that cities like Reading have the tools to thrive in this space. In closing, I urge lawmakers to recognize arts and culture as creative expressions and pillars of economic growth, youth engagement, and community identity. Reading Film Office stands ready to contribute to that vision. Thank you for the opportunity to share our work and research.

References

Florida, R. (2002). *The rise of the creative class: And how it's transforming work, leisure, community and everyday life*. Basic Books.

Flew, T. (2012). *The creative industries: Culture and policy*. SAGE Publications.

Markusen, A., & Schrock, G. (2006). The artistic dividend: Urban artistic specialization and economic development implications. *Urban Studies*, 43(10), 1661–1686.

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Rushton, M. (2013). Cultural economics. In R. Towse (Ed.), *A handbook of cultural economics* (2nd ed., pp. 142–147). Edward Elgar Publishing.

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Hello and thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

My name is Brian Adams and I'm the owner of The Art Room, a pottery painting/Art activity studio that's been part of the West Reading community for the past four years. In that time, we've become more than just a creative space—we've become a place of healing, connection, and growth.

Art, especially accessible art like pottery painting, is so much more than a hobby. It's a powerful tool for public health.

First, the mental health benefits are undeniable. When someone sits down to paint—whether it's a child, a senior, a veteran, or a busy parent—they're not just decorating pottery. They're slowing down. They're calming their nervous system. We've had guests tell us that a single hour in our studio felt more therapeutic than a counseling session. That's not unusual—studies show that creating art lowers stress hormones and improves mood.

There's also a cognitive benefit. Art helps people focus, solve problems, and improve memory. For older adults, it can help delay cognitive decline. For children, it boosts academic performance, attention, and self-esteem.

Socially, the impact is just as strong. Our studio brings people together from all backgrounds. We host family nights, teen groups, senior sessions, and special needs classes. I've watched total strangers become friends over paint and conversation. And after the isolation of the pandemic, this kind of in-person connection is more important than ever.

Physically, art can even reduce pain and improve motor skills. That's why hospitals, rehab centers, and aging programs are incorporating more art into their care. We've had stroke survivors come in to work on hand strength through painting—and leave with a piece they're proud of.

At The Art Room, we see these benefits every single day. And we're committed to expanding them—through scholarships, outreach programs, and community partnerships.

But to do that, we need support.

Funding for the arts isn't just about paintbrushes or pottery. It's about public health, education, and community resilience. It's about giving people a safe, positive space to heal, connect, and grow.

Thank you for recognizing the power of art, and for helping us continue this work that makes a real difference in real people's lives.



Testimony of Lucine Sihelnik

President & CEO, Greater Reading Chamber Alliance

Before the PA House Majority Policy Committee

Public Hearing on Economic Development through Arts and Culture

GoggleWorks Center for the Arts, Reading, PA

April 29, 2025

Chairman Bizzarro, Representative Cepeda-Freytiz, and esteemed members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today at this important hearing. My name is Lucine Sihelnik, and I am honored to serve as the President and CEO of the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA) — the leading voice for economic development and business advocacy in Berks County.

GRCA is proud to represent over 900 member businesses of various sizes and industries, including those in the creative sector — from independent artists and nonprofit galleries to architects, event producers, media firms, and cultural institutions. As an organization deeply committed to the economic health of our region, we know that arts and culture are not peripheral to economic development — they are central to it.

Arts & Culture Are Economic Infrastructure

In Reading — Pennsylvania's fourth-largest city — arts and culture are powerful engines for job creation, tourism, business attraction, and downtown revitalization. They generate employment not only for artists but for graphic designers, technicians, educators, hospitality workers, and more.

Institutions like GoggleWorks Center for the Arts, the Reading Public Museum, the Santander and Performing Arts Center, and dozens of local creative entrepreneurs and arts organizations draw visitors, nurture community engagement, and drive spending in local restaurants, hotels, and shops. These entities are not only enhancing quality of life — they are producing economic impact.

Reading's Creative Identity: A Catalyst for Revitalization

Reading's identity is uniquely rich in cultural diversity and artistic potential. As a majority-minority city, we have the opportunity — and the responsibility — to uplift and invest in creative expression that reflects the voices and experiences of our entire community.

We've seen how public art, festivals, and youth arts programming increase civic pride, reduce blight, and attract foot traffic to downtown areas. Murals, music, theater, and cultural events are powerful tools in combatting negative perceptions of our city and rebranding Reading as a place of creativity, community, and opportunity.

When we center arts and culture in our revitalization strategy, we are not just beautifying our spaces — we are building ecosystems of innovation and inclusion.

Creative Workforce = Future-Ready Workforce

At GRCA, we believe workforce development includes preparing people for careers not just in trades or technology, but in the creative economy — an area of immense potential growth.

From film editing and digital design to stage production and arts education, careers in the arts offer meaningful work that aligns with the skills of a new workforce generation. Programs like those offered at GoggleWorks help cultivate that pipeline of talent and give young people creative outlets that build confidence and career pathways.

Policy Opportunities for Arts-Driven Growth

I respectfully offer a few recommendations to help position arts and culture as pillars of economic development across Pennsylvania:

- Expand funding for arts and cultural initiatives, especially in historically underfunded or underserved communities.
- Integrate arts into economic development and workforce strategies, including entrepreneurship, skills training, and community revitalization.
- Create grant or tax incentive programs for cultural startups, small arts businesses, and nonprofit creative organizations.
- Support public-private partnerships that bring together local governments, developers, businesses, and arts institutions to catalyze neighborhood growth.

- Include artists in economic planning conversations, ensuring their voices are part of shaping the future of our cities.

Conclusion: A Creative Economy Is a Strong Economy

In closing, I want to restate: Arts and culture are not side projects — they are foundations for thriving communities. When we invest in our artists and cultural organizations, we are investing in small business development, job creation, and regional identity.

Reading is already home to a vibrant creative sector — and with the right support and policy framework, we can unlock its full potential as a driver of inclusive, sustainable economic growth.

On behalf of the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance and our 900 member businesses, thank you for your attention to this vital issue. I welcome your partnership in making arts and culture a cornerstone of economic development in Reading and across the Commonwealth.

Thank you.

Lucine Sihelnik, MALS
President and CEO