

Paper Mache for 6-19-26 by David Read

California has never been shy about celebrating its creativity. We are home to Hollywood, world-renowned museums, innovative public art, groundbreaking music, vibrant theater companies, and some of the most diverse cultural traditions anywhere in the world. Creativity is one of California's defining characteristics. It fuels our economy, shapes our identity, and helps tell the stories of our communities. Yet when it comes to investing public dollars in the arts, California finds itself at a crossroads.

The arts are not simply entertainment. They are a major economic driver. California's creative economy generates hundreds of billions of dollars annually and supports hundreds of thousands of jobs. Arts and culture contribute to tourism, downtown revitalization, education, workforce development, and quality of life. From film production and live performance to public art and cultural festivals, creativity is woven into nearly every aspect of life in the Golden State.

The California Arts Council, established in 1976, serves as the state's primary vehicle for supporting arts organizations, artists, arts education programs, cultural preservation efforts, and community-based creative projects. Through grants and services, the agency helps ensure that arts opportunities reach every corner of California, including rural communities like Yuba-Sutter. Yuba Sutter Arts & Culture has been the local affiliate of the Council for 45 years and receives about one third of its annual funding from the state agency.

In recent years, the Council received a temporary boost in funding as lawmakers recognized the devastating impact the pandemic had on arts organizations. Theaters went dark. Museums closed. Festivals were canceled. Emergency funding helped many organizations survive an unprecedented crisis. But emergency funding is not the same as sustainable funding. Today, arts organizations across California continue to face rising costs for insurance, utilities, facilities, staffing, and programming, don't we know. At the same time, many groups are still rebuilding audiences and donor support. Demand for California Arts Council grants far exceeds available funding, leaving many worthy projects unfunded each year.

Despite being home to the nation's largest creative economy, California's 2026 budget did not include the arts community's request to increase the California Arts Council budget to \$50 million as the agency celebrates its 50th anniversary. The agency remains funded at roughly \$21 million annually, leaving California ranked about 35th in the nation in per-capita arts funding and prompting continued advocacy for greater investment in the state's cultural infrastructure. Arts and cultural production contributes approximately \$289 billion annually to California's economy and supports more than 821,000 jobs. While \$50 million sounds substantial, it represents only a tiny fraction or about 0.014% of a \$350 billion budget. Yet those dollars have an outsized impact. California Arts Council grants often serve as seed funding that allows local organizations to attract additional grants, donations, sponsorships, and community support. One state investment frequently leverages many times that amount in local economic activity as is the case in Yuba-Sutter.

The benefits extend far beyond galleries and theaters. Arts funding supports youth education, community engagement, cultural preservation, public health initiatives, tourism, and economic development. It helps communities tell their stories, celebrate their heritage, and create places where people want to live, work, and visit. Here in Yuba-Sutter, we see those impacts every day. State arts funding helps support programs for our students, veterans, seniors, families, and underserved populations. It makes possible performances, exhibitions, workshops, public art projects, and cultural experiences that enrich lives and strengthen community connections. The debate over arts funding ultimately comes down to priorities. Do we view the arts as a luxury, or do we recognize them as an essential part of a healthy, vibrant society? California has built a global reputation on creativity. Investing in the arts is not simply about preserving that reputation. It is about ensuring that future generations have the opportunity to create it anew.