

Department Source: Cultural Affairs
To: City Council
From: City Manager & Staff
Council Meeting Date: March 16, 2026
Re: Artist Laureate Agreement with Audra Sergel
Impacted Ward: Citywide

Executive Summary

The City of Columbia Office of Cultural Affairs launched an Artist Laureate Program to select the inaugural artist in 2026. Applications opened in November 2025, and after a review process by the Commission on Cultural Affairs, Audra Sergel has been recommended to serve as the first Artist Laureate. Execution of an agreement with the artist is needed.

Discussion

The City of Columbia Office of Cultural Affairs launched an Artist Laureate Program to select the inaugural artist in 2026. The program is designed to recognize the work and contributions of experienced Columbia artists, providing them further opportunities to educate, advocate and represent the community through their own creative initiatives. Applications were opened to eligible artists in November 2025, with a deadline of Dec. 19, 2025.

Local artists working in the disciplines for consideration included fine and visual arts, performing arts and literary arts. The application asked artists to submit proposals that included three creative elements: the creation of an original work of art inspired by Columbia, an educational workshop or presentation and a community engagement project. The selected artist would also plan to participate in other City-sponsored events throughout the year (such as the Columbia Values Diversity Celebration and Celebration of the Arts).

The Artist Laureate will serve for a one-year term and receive a \$5,000 budget to for program-related expenses. The program is being funded through a grant from the Missouri Arts Council, a state agency.

The City's Commission on Cultural Affairs reviewed applications at their Jan. 12, 2026 meeting and completed a round of interviews with four finalists at their Feb. 9, 2026 meeting. After consideration on the artists' artistic and technical merit, strength of past work as well as their proposal, the Commission recommended Audra Sergel to serve as Columbia's inaugural Artist Laureate. Execution of an agreement with the artist is needed for her to begin her one-year term.

Audra Sergel is a musician, educator, and creative whose work has grown out of a lifelong love for music and community. Over the past three decades, she has shared her original music on stages across the country, from regional tours to national festivals, as both a solo artist and a collaborator. In addition to performing and collaborating, Audra is a composer and music director for the theater. Her compositions also include original choral works

performed by community and collegiate ensembles, as well as scores for video and multimedia productions. Teaching students of all ages is at the heart of Audra's work. For more than 25 years she has welcomed students into her private studio, Sergel Music Studio, and she serves on the faculty at Stephens College Conservatory of the Performing Arts. She has guided over 50 productions as a musical director with Stephens College, Okoboji Summer Theater, the Big Muddy Opera Company, TRYPS Children's Theater, Talking Horse Productions, and the University of Missouri Department of Theater. Community-building through music is another constant thread in her life. She co-founded *Cabaret for a Cause*, founded *The Quorus: Columbia's LGBTQIA+ Community Choir*, and serves as music director at Broadway Christian Church. She is also a founding member of both the Big Muddy Opera Company and Compass Music Center.

Sergel's Artist Laureate project is titled "When a City Sings: Columbia in Concert," a participatory original choral and storytelling project that invites community members of all ages to share their voices, stories and values through music. By centering listening, shared authorship, and collaboration, the project uses the musical mirror to reflect the city back to itself and strengthen our civic and personal connections through collective sound. The original choral and spoken word concerto would be created through a year-long process of listening and bringing our community together. The participants' words, stories, ideas, and emotional truths would form the foundation of the music and choral work itself. The artist will include workshops and a series of "Community Voice Circles" hosted in collaboration with local organizations as generative spaces of sharing that shape the work itself. In addition to participant workshops, the artist will offer a presentation component that makes the creative process visible. This might include a short talk-through of how community input becomes musical structure, lyric, and form, demystifying composition and reinforcing the idea that art is made through listening as much as expression.

Components of the project include a variety of workshops geared towards different segments of the community including Community Story Circle Workshops, Elementary and Youth Songwriting Workshops, and adult "From Story to Song" workshops.

The artist will use the material generated from the workshops to compose an original choral composition. The culmination of the project will be a free concert where the original work is performed by a collaboration of community choirs and musicians.

Fiscal Impact

Short-Term Impact: \$5,000 (included in OCA's FY26 budget, funded through a grant by the Missouri Arts Council)

Long-Term Impact: None.

Strategic & Comprehensive Plan ImpactStrategic Plan Impacts:

Primary Impact: Resilient Economy, Secondary Impact: Inclusive and Equitable Community,
Tertiary Impact: Not Applicable

Comprehensive Plan Impacts:

Primary Impact: Livable & Sustainable Communities, Secondary Impact: Economic
Development, Tertiary Impact: Not Applicable

Legislative History

Date	Action
N/A	N/A

Suggested Council Action

Staff recommends that Council authorize execution of the agreement with Audra Sergel.