



URGENT ITEM AGENDA MATERIAL

Government Code Section 54954.2(b)
Rules of Procedure Chapter III.C.5

THIS ITEM IS NOT YET AGENDIZED AND MAY OR MAY NOT BE ACCEPTED FOR THE AGENDA AS A LATE ITEM, SUBJECT TO THE CITY COUNCIL'S DISCRETION ACCORDING TO BROWN ACT RULES

Meeting Date: May 14, 2024

Item Description: Budget Referral and Technical Support for the Aurora Theatre Company

This item is submitted pursuant to the provision checked below:

- Emergency Situation (54954.2(b)(1) - majority vote required)
Determination by a majority vote of the legislative body that an emergency situation exists, as defined in Section 54956.5.
- Immediate Action Required (54954.2(b)(2) - two-thirds vote required)
There is a need to take immediate action and the need for action came to the attention of the local agency subsequent to the agenda for this meeting being posted.

Once the item is added to the agenda (Consent or Action) it must be passed by the standard required vote threshold (majority, two-thirds, or 7/9).

Facts supporting the addition of the item to the agenda under Section 54954.2(b) and Chapter III.C.5 of the Rules of Procedure:

The Aurora Theatre is facing a financial crisis that threatens immediate closure. The need to carry this item came to the attention of our Council office after the posting of the agenda for this meeting because it is traditional for Councilmembers to initiate contact and support organizations in distress within their own Districts. With no District 4 Councilmember in place, the Mayor and Council were not made fully aware of the issue in due time.

Our office took the initiative to meet with City staff and put together an item to support this important arts organization. To meet the deadline to be considered for the FY 25-26 budget cycle, with the first hearing on the budget scheduled on May 21, this item is being submitted as an urgent item.

May 14, 2024



Sophie Hahn
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To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council
From: Councilmember Sophie Hahn (Author)
Subject: Budget Referral and Technical Support for the Aurora Theatre Company

RECOMMENDATION

Direct the City Manager to work actively and urgently with the Aurora Theatre Company to offer support during a time of financial crisis, with all technical and financial assistance and any and all other resources at the City’s disposal. Further request the City Manager connect Aurora Theatre with any potential outside resources and funding.

Refer to the Fiscal Year 2025-2026 Budget Process a one-time emergency grant of up to \$150,000 to the Aurora Theatre Company, pending information from staff about the availability of existing and other resources to support the organization.

SUMMARY STATEMENT

The Aurora Theatre is a beloved and highly valued Berkeley institution facing a financial crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. This situation is not unique to the Aurora Theatre, as evidenced by the recent closure of the Bay Area Children’s Theatre and other theatres in the Bay Area and around the country. This referral requests the City Manager’s Office to provide technical assistance to the Aurora Theatre Company. The Aurora has previously accessed City resources that helped the organization grow and serve the community.

An emergency grant of up to \$150,000 would further enable the Aurora Theatre to close part of the gap necessary to survive, thrive, and continue contributing to the cultural life of Berkeley and the Bay Area, and the economic life of Berkeley’s downtown.

BACKGROUND

The Aurora Theatre was founded in 1992 by actor and director Barbara Oliver, and a group of professional Bay Area theatre artists. Their desire was to produce plays “about important ideas, mediated by language and people.” In other words, the ideas, words, and people would be the focus of each production, “assisted by other elements like sets, lights and costumes,” but not dominated by them.

For its first nine seasons, the Company performed at the Berkeley City Club, on a three-quarter thrust stage with 67 seats. In 2001, with tremendous community, government, and foundation support, Aurora completed a \$2.5 million capital campaign and moved to a new 150-seat theatre in the emerging Downtown Berkeley Arts District. The new venue was so successful that by 2007 Aurora was able to complete a further capital campaign to fund a seamless expansion

into a second, contiguous space that opened in 2009 as Aurora's Dashow Wing. The Dashow Wing now includes Harry's UpStage, a 49-seat black box performance space. Aurora's subscription seasons now include performances both in the 150-seat Alafi Auditorium and in the smaller Harry's UpStage.

Led by Barbara Oliver in its first twelve years, Aurora entered a new era in 2004 when Tom Ross took on the position of Artistic Director. Mr. Ross had been with the company since its inception, and has directed more than 30 productions for Aurora. Mr. Ross initiated the Global Age Project, Aurora's new play discovery program, which presented staged readings of dozens of new plays by national and international playwrights over 10 years. In 2016, Mr. Ross retired the Global Age Project and launched Originate+Generate, Aurora's new play commissioning and development program, which continues today. Mr. Ross stepped down in 2019 and was succeeded by Josh Costello, who had been Aurora's Literary Manager and Artistic Associate since 2012.

Throughout its history, Aurora Theatre Company productions have been defined by their emphasis on subtlety, shadings of feeling, and ensemble responsiveness. Both at the Berkeley City Club and in either of Aurora's two venues in its current home on Addison Street, audiences enjoy seating close to the action, creating an intimate and engaged theatre experience. Aurora is committed to serving as storyteller to its community, presenting plays that speak authentically to the present moment and making audiences feel welcome. Its productions have received many regional awards including the Bay Theatre Critics Circle Awards, the Theatre Bay Area Awards, and the Glickman Award for best new play in the Bay Area.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Aurora was forced to suspend live performances in March 2020 and earned income dropped from \$512,404 in the fiscal year ending July 31, 2020 to \$128,969 in the following fiscal year.

Following the fallout of the pandemic, the Aurora Theatre has been operating on a deficit while navigating unsustainable attendance numbers, and all without compromising its work on stage. Thanks to its savings, assistance from important federal employee support programs – namely the Paycheck Protection Program and the Employee Retention Credit – and a one-time \$1 million windfall from the federal Shuttered Venue Operating Grant, the theatre has thus far successfully staved off closure while continuing to operate. The theatre's continued success despite the odds is further highlighted by the move of an Aurora Theatre commissioned, developed, and premiered play about Berkeley – Jonathan Spector's "Eureka Day" – moving to Broadway's Samuel J. Friedman Theatre this November.

The Aurora Theatre hopes to premiere its 2024-2025 season in October, which includes Noël Coward's "Fallen Angels," hip-hop collective Felonious, Lloyd Suh's "The Heart Sellers," Lynn Nottage's "Crumbs from the Table of Joy," and Jane Wagner's "The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe." An April 15th petition to the Berkeley City Council asked the body to provide the Aurora with emergency grant funding and has, as of May 13, 2024, garnered 1,567 signatures.

Aurora Theatre has been supported by the City of Berkeley in the past; this request for technical and financial assistance would continue this spirit of collaboration and support. In 2007, the Aurora received a \$417,000 loan from the City's now inactive Legacy Loan program, which has since been repaid in full. In 2020, the organization received the Business and Arts Organization Continuity Grant Award in the amount of \$24,000 and in 2022 the Aurora received \$31,000 from the Berkeley Arts Recovery Grant program. The organization also received allocations from the Civic Arts Grants Programs in 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023. In total, the City of Berkeley has provided some \$131,500 in grant funding to support the Aurora Theatre.

Aurora has been a responsible partner for the City of Berkeley, and has a plan to pull through the current crisis they are facing. While the need for assistance from the City is temporary, losing the theatre would be a permanent blow to the cultural and economic life of the City, which is unlikely to be remediated in the near future. With intensive counseling and support for the City's Arts and Economic Development staff, and an emergency grant of up to \$150,000, the City can meaningfully help the Aurora Theatre move forward with its 2024-2025 program, continue to rebuild its audiences, and achieve long term viability.

RATIONALE FOR RECOMMENDATION

The Aurora Theatre has been a vital addition to Berkeley's arts and culture scene for 32 years. Following the pandemic, this cultural asset has been working to stay afloat and continue providing arts, education, and entertainment for Berkeley audiences. As theatres across the United States fail as a result of pandemic-related financial downfalls, Berkeley cannot lose another vibrant cultural asset. A thriving arts district is essential to downtown Berkeley's continued recovery and revitalization.

In past years, individual Berkeley-based arts and cultural organizations have received direct capital through the budget referrals. Since FY 2016, Berkeley has awarded \$150,000 to the following organizations: the UC Theatre, Capoeira Arts Foundation, Luna Kids Dance, the La Pena Cultural Center, and \$100,000 to the Kala Art Institute.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

N/A

FISCAL IMPACTS

One-time \$150,000 emergency grant from the General Fund.

CONTACT

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