

Minutes of the
Second Meeting of the
MHAA Racial Equity Working Group
December 8, 2020

The second meeting of the Maryland Heritage Area Authority (MHAA) Racial Equity Working Group was held virtually on December 8, 2020.

Attendees Present

Robert McCord (Secretary of the Maryland Department of Planning and Chair of MHAA), Reverend Tamara England Wilson (Chair, Maryland Commission on African American History and Culture), Walkiria Pool (Chair, Governor's Commission on Hispanic Affairs), Frederick Nnoma-Addison (Commissioner for the Governor's Commission on African Affairs), Shauntee Daniels (Executive Director of the Baltimore National Heritage Area and representative of the Maryland Coalition of Heritage Areas), Elizabeth Hughes (State Historic Preservation Officer, Director of Maryland Historical Trust, and MHAA member), Janice Hayes-Williams (MHAA member), Steve Lee (Commissioner for the Maryland Commission on African American History and Culture), and Chanel Compton (Executive Director of the Banneker-Douglass Museum and staff to the Maryland Commission on African American History and Culture)

MHAA Staff Present

Jennifer Ruffner, Ennis Barbery Smith, Andrew Arvizu, Bernadette Pruitt

Welcome and Introductions

Mr. McCord opened the meeting by thanking everyone for attending virtually and expressing his wishes for everyone that they had pleasant and safe Thanksgiving holidays.

Everyone in attendance took turns introducing themselves.

Review of the MHAA Primer and Workflow

Mr. McCord noted that one of goals of today's meetings is to provide some background information about the MHAA program to make sure that all the Working Group members have an understanding of MHAA's existing polices and processes.

Ms. Ruffner went over the items that MHAA staff has uploaded to the shared Google Drive folder, which includes the following to-date: MHAA's 10-year strategic plan, FY 2019 annual report, a recent economic impact report, list of FY 2021 grantees, notes from the last meeting, statement of work for the facilitator we are seeking to hire, a blank copy of the demographics survey, a workflow chart for the grantmaking process, and a program primer document with background information.

She invited participants to reach out to MHAA staff if they have trouble accessing these resources.

Ms. Ruffner went over the MHAA primer document. She noted that the first heritage area, Canal Place, was established in 1993, and that this heritage area is managed as a state agency. The heritage areas program was created in 1996, after the success of Canal Place. The program was conceived as a way to stimulate economic development through heritage tourism. It was designed with a “local up” approach that meant counties and municipalities propose new heritage area and develop themes. The state body, MHAA, then recognizes and certifies these heritage areas. MHAA membership is prescribed in the statute that established the program. MHAA also approves requests for heritage area boundary amendments and approves the grants awarded each year.

Mr. Nnoma-Addison asked about the relationship between this state level program and the national heritage areas program.

Ms. Ruffner explained that four of the state heritage areas overlap with three national heritage areas: Baltimore National Heritage Area, the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area (which overlaps with both Passages of the Western Potomac and the Mountain Maryland Gateway to the West Heritage Area), and the Journey Through Hallowed Ground National Heritage Area (which includes the state Heart of the Civil War Heritage Area). She also noted that the Southern Maryland Heritage Area is in the process of applying to become a National Heritage Area.

Ms. Shauntee Daniels, Executive Director the Baltimore National Heritage Area, said that managing a national and state heritage area means more reporting and paperwork for her organization. She said now that the state and national boundaries are different it means keeping track of who can apply for which financial incentives based on the project location, and that it would take legislation from U.S. Congress to change the boundaries of the national heritage area. She explained that the national heritage areas program is managed by the National Park Service, which falls under the Department of the Interior. She noted that national heritage areas receive different levels of funding based on the allocations for which they were approved and when they were established.

Mr. Steven Lee, Commissioner for the Maryland Commission on African American History and Culture, asked about whether neighborhoods that are eligible for the National Register of Historic Places are automatically included in heritage areas.

Ms. Daniels and Ms. Ruffner answered that becoming part of a heritage area is a separate process, not directly related to the National Register designation, determined by a boundary amendment put forward by the local heritage area and jurisdictions and approved by MHAA.

Ms. Smith noted that some properties that do not meet National Register significance criteria may be included in heritage areas based on their community and visitor resources, and that – in this way – the heritage areas program can be more flexible about what to include compared with the National Register.

Ms. Ruffner noted that over the past few years the heritage areas have been undertaking a series of boundaries amendments in order to add places that were not included when the heritage areas were first conceptualized. She emphasized that the places added must be added through a very conscious, intentional process, since nothing is automatically included based on other designations.

Ms. Ruffner shared that counties and jurisdictions must amend their comprehensive plans to add heritage areas when a heritage area becomes certified or adopts a boundary amendment.

Ms. Ruffner continued going over the primer document, noting that while MHAA is an independent body from MHT, MHAA is staffed by MHT. She noted that some positions are shared and jointly funded in cases in which grants management or administrative staff work on multiple programs.

Mr. Lee asked for clarification on the extent to which MHAA and MHT are separate and yet intertwined.

Ms. Ruffner explained that MHT and MHAA have separate boards, approving the different grant programs that each entity oversees and establishing their own policies.

Ms. Elizabeth Hughes, State Historic Preservation Officer and Director of Maryland Historical Trust, noted that the distinction between the two entities goes back to the legislation that established each of them, respectively.

Ms. Smith asked about grant reporting and financial documentation processes, some of which are established at an agency level.

Ms. Hughes explained that there have sometimes been decisions to make grant reporting and financial documentation processes consistent across programs in an effort to promote efficiency and good customer service, but there is nothing formal stating that these policies must be consistent across MHAA and MHT grant programs. Some policies are already divergent across MHT and MHAA grant programs.

Ms. Chanel Compton, Executive Director of the Banneker-Douglass Museum and staff to the Maryland Commission on African American History and Culture, asked about an organizational chart.

Ms. Ruffner said MHAA staff would upload their organizational chart to the shared drive.

Ms. Daniels asked about Target Investment Zones, as they relate to MHT and MHAA initiatives.

Ms. Hughes discussed that these zones were utilized as a way to concentrate financial investment for capital projects across the state but that they have become less useful for the program overtime. Now, MHAA uses a set of Target Investment Criteria, rather than Target Investment Zones themselves.

Ms. Ruffner noted that for MHAA grants, there is no requirement for properties to be eligible for the National Register, unlike MHT's Historic Preservation Capital Grants Program, which does use NR-eligibility as an eligibility requirement for award.

Ms. Ruffner continued going over the primer document, moving on to the section on heritage area recognition and certification. She noted that each county in the state, as well as Baltimore City, has a portion of a heritage area within their boundaries. As a result of this, most sites seeking to become part of a heritage area have found more success in being added to an existing heritage area through an amendment process, as opposed to proposing a new heritage area. She explained that there is no prohibition against having multiple heritage areas within the same county or jurisdiction, but – at a practical level – there are questions about whether a county would be willing to amend their comprehensive plan in order to add an additional heritage area and about whether this action could impact existing county-level heritage area financial support.

Ms. Ruffner explained that there has been some interest in establishing new heritage areas in counties in which the existing heritage area is very narrowly defined – Baltimore and Howard Counties for example, where the Patapsco Valley Heritage Area is specifically tied to the Patapsco River watershed. She added that existing heritage areas would not be in a position to approve or deny recognizing or certifying a new heritage area. However, the MHAA statute requires that they must consider the existing heritage areas' sustainability when considering applications from new heritage areas.

Mr. Lee asked about whether there was any policy that would disallow a noncontiguous heritage area that was instead thematically focused and not necessarily geographically defined.

Ms. Ruffner said that there is no requirement that heritage area boundaries be contiguous. A heritage area could be a set of points on a map. It would still be dependent on all the counties and municipalities involved amending their comprehensive plans.

Ms. Smith asked about whether the requirement to have counties and municipalities amend comprehensive plans is in statute, in the regulations, or in policy. Staff have confirmed that this is in the MHAA statute.

Mr. McCord said that this issue also goes back to the question of financial support from local government entities raised earlier. He said that just because a heritage area that is more thematically focused and less geographically focused does not exist now, it does not mean it cannot in the future. He said that MHAA could potentially change any relevant policies and practices to allow for this if this is a recommendation of the group. He noted that the requirement for local governments to amend their comprehensive plans likely goes back to the founding principle that the heritage areas program is a locally-driven initiative.

Mr. Lee said that the process of creating meaningful change and making sure that access to resources is equitable will necessarily involve some painful parts.

Rev. Wilson noted that in order for the working group to have the conversation about equitable grant distribution that was initiated by her Commission's letter, the changes recommended will mean that some organizations who are used to getting MHAA funding every year will end up

with less funding, unless the total pot of money increases. She said this is the reality if more African American-led organizations are to receive MHAA funding in future grant rounds.

Mr. Nnoma-Addison asked about the history of MHAA grant distribution to African American-led organizations.

Ms. Ruffner said that, while MHAA has tracked grants related to African American history and culture subject matter in the past, the program has not asked grantees to provide demographic data on their board and staff make-up. MHAA also did not have a working definition of what constituted an African American-led organization until the working group met last month and advised that MHAA staff should circulate a survey to past grantees and applicants asking about board and staff demographics. MHAA is in the process of collecting this survey data now. The group advised that organizations in which 50% or more of board members identify as African American may be defined as African American organizations. The survey also asks about the organizations' mission statements. Those organizations with mission statements that specify a focus on African American history and culture will also be noted in the data.

Update on the Demographics Survey

Ms. Ruffner said that so far MHAA had received 82 survey responses. The survey was sent to 300 – 400 organizations who either received or applied for MHAA grants over the past three years. She thanked Ms. Compton for suggesting that MHAA staff add an additional comments field in which respondents can provide additional information if desired. She said that the responses in the additional comments field have been largely positive, expressing support for this data collection and the related equity work. She noted that some responses have demonstrated that organizations are not currently collecting demographic data on their own board members and are asking for guidance on how best to do this.

Ms. Ruffner also noted that this survey will not capture data of organizations who have not applied for MHAA grants, and this is one of the limitations.

Returning to the Review of the MHAA Primer and Workflow

Ms. Ruffner picked up where she left off with the MHAA primer document, listing the types of grants that MHAA provides and some details about these grant categories.

Ms. Ruffner described the origins of the local management entities for the heritage areas, noting that when a heritage area is certified the counties and jurisdictions who proposed the heritage area also determine what organization will serve as the local management entity. In some cases, this organization is a non-profit organization created specifically to manage the heritage area. In other cases, it is a local government entity or a chamber of commerce.

Ms. Ruffner described that the local management entities have come together to create the Coalition of Maryland Heritage Areas, that serves an advocacy role for the program. Ms. Ruffner said she will compile the bylaws and board lists of the management entities that are non-profit organizations for the group's review so they can better understand the organizational structure at the local level.

Ms. Smith noted that the demographics of the heritage area boards will be compiled as part of the demographic survey.

Ms. Compton said that she would like to see MHAA survey grantees and applicants about whether they have a diversity and inclusion plan.

Ms. Ruffner noted that over the past few grant cycles, MHAA has asked about diversity and inclusion efforts as part of the MHAA project grant application, but the answers received have tended to be quite vague. Ms. Ruffner noted that MHAA staff are talking with the Office of the Attorney General staff to ask about what they are legally allowed to ask regarding race as part of the grant application process.

Mr. Lee underscored that Ms. Compton's question is a useful one and should be presented in a straightforward way. He emphasized that tiptoeing around questions of race has enabled systematic racism to remain unexamined and unchecked.

Ms. Daniels expressed her agreement with Ms. Compton and Mr. Lee. She added that she is concerned that in addition to asking these questions, which might make some people feel uncomfortable, we also need to give people tools to take on these questions, especially in more rural areas where the perception is that questions of race and systematic racism have been tiptoed around for so long without acknowledgment. She said that the group may not get the answers and data necessary to move these discussions forward if we do not give people the tools they need to help answer these questions. She noted that she has been participating in a group convened by Visit Baltimore that has been discussing similar topics, and that, when hard questions come up, the white people in the discussion tend to be silent and seem to be afraid to offend.

Mr. Lee said that Ms. Daniels made an excellent point about giving people the tools they need. He also underscored that being polite, showing courtesy and respect for people is an important part of this process of making programmatic change. He said many of the questions he has regarding MHAA processes are related to the distribution of grant funding. He noted that it should be a requirement for the people serving as part of the grants review process to be comfortable talking about racial equity and the distribution of grants as part of that process.

Ms. Ruffner described the grants review process for MHAA project grants, noting that applications are reviewed and ranked at the local heritage area level first and then they are reviewed at the state level by the MHAA Grants Review Panel. The two rankings are combined using an algorithm.

She described the formation of the panel last year and how, in previous years, the grants had been reviewed by a group of state employees from a number of agencies, called the MHAA Technical Advisory Committee. She described that the application process starts in January and awards are announced in July.

Ms. Smith noted that the other MHAA grants (management, marketing, and block) are reviewed directly by MHAA and are not ranked at the local heritage area level.

Ms. Daniels said that her organization conducts review processes for several grant programs and that it has been challenging to recruit diverse review panels. She said that the time commitment for grants review is significant and potential panelists have said that they do not have the extra time to commit. She asked how we can make it easier for people to participate at all levels of review.

Ms. Ruffner said that when the grants panel was created, MHAA staff asked MHAA to approve a small stipend for panelists. After the first year, we now know that panelists devote at least 30-40 hours of time to grants review, in addition to the trainings and review meetings. She said that MHAA staff have asked MHAA to reconsider providing a stipend and this will be on the agenda at MHAA's upcoming meeting in January.

Ms. Compton said that she would like to see some supplemental documentation that teases out the details of the grant review process, perhaps including scoring criteria, application forms, and more description of the process. She said that people not being paid to review grants and spending such a significant amount of volunteer time is concerning.

Ms. Ruffner said MHAA staff would add these requested documents to the shared drive.

Ms. Smith noted that when the panel was formed, MHAA staff did collect demographics from the grants review panel and can share this breakdown with the working group, as well as panel member bios.

Update on RFP for Facilitator

Ms. Ruffner thanked the group for their help in crafting the statement of work to be used in the request for proposals (RFP) for a working group facilitator. She said the RFP is undergoing legal review now and she hopes MHAA will be able to post it soon.

Mr. Lee asked that MHAA staff provide data about how many grants and the dollar amount of grant funds that have been awarded to the heritage area management entities.

Ms. Ruffner confirmed that MHAA staff will compile this data for the group.

Mr. Lee said that in the mid-1990s he conducted an extensive survey regarding the amount of Maryland state grant funding that went to African American organizations. The proportion was very small, and he shared his results with the National Endowment for the Arts. He said that after this process, he noticed an increase in the number of African American organizations receiving grant funding but that the progress was short-lived. He observed that the grant distribution reverted to its existing patterns soon after this effort. He said that this group should strive to create a framework for equitable grant distribution that will remain intact long after the initial efforts of this working group.

Mr. McCord agreed that whatever the working group accomplishes must be codified in some way to ensure that the more equitable model that is created cannot revert back to an old set of practices after just a few years. He said he is committed to making sure this does not happen.

Next Steps

Ms. Ruffner said that MHAA staff will begin adding the documents the group discussed today to the shared drive and that she hopes to release the RFP before the next time the group meets in January. She said she will send out a poll regarding the next meeting.

Mr. McCord thanked everyone for their time and their contributions. He emphasized how grateful he is for each member's commitment to the process and extended well wishes for the holiday season and new year.

The meeting ended at about 2:35 pm.