Create the Vote Coalition Meets With Boston Mayoral Candidate and City Councilor-at-Large John Connolly

Candidate would create a cabinet level position for arts and culture, as well as city department to oversee cultural initiatives

BOSTON, September 5, 2013—The Create the Vote Coalition announced today that Boston mayoral candidate and Councilor-at-Large John Connolly met with the Coalition Aug. 23.

The Coalition—a collaboration of Boston’s arts, cultural, and creative institutions convened by MASSCreative—met with Connolly at HarborArts in East Boston. Representatives from HarborArts, ArtsBoston, ZUMIX, BostonAPP/Lab: Art in Public Places, and two working artists questioned Connolly about his vision for the arts in Boston.

Connolly said that the most important thing that a mayor could do was use the power of the bully pulpit to show support for arts and cultural initiatives. “That means talking about the arts in every speech,” he said, noting that when the mayor showed that the creative community is a priority, then others will also see it as a priority.

Connolly said that there needed to be a commissioner of arts and culture in the mayor’s cabinet of advisors who oversaw a city commission devoted to arts and culture. “I want the arts to have its own city department, which means it has its own city budget,” he said. “The best city departments are phenomenal at leveraging city funds for additional state, federal, and private funding. How many more people will get involved if they see that City Hall is involved?”

Connolly talked about the need for a strategic vision for arts and cultural initiatives that intersected with other planning needs related to housing, economic growth, and transportation. “Any smart urban plan needs to have business, transportation, and the arts integrated throughout the built environment,” he said.

Connolly said that the planning function of the Boston Redevelopment Authority needed to be separate from the development function.

When economic growth and development can take place under the auspices of a strategic plan, “it pays off every time when it’s done in a thoughtful manner,” he said.

Connolly said that he would like to reform the city’s Payment In Lieu of Taxes program, commonly known as PILOT, in which the city bills nonprofit organizations exempt
from real estate taxes for municipal contributions. In most major cities, arts and cultural institutions that contribute to the economic, educational, and civic health of the community receive public funding from the municipality. “I want to rethink PILOT extensively because it doesn’t work,” he said. Large nonprofit institutions might be better encouraged to invest in “tangible benefits” that enhance its neighborhood and surrounding community, he said.

Connolly praised the BPS Arts Expansion Initiative, which has been spearheaded by EdVestors, a private philanthropic initiative that encourages investment in the Boston Public Schools. But he noted that even with that significant additional investment in the arts, many students were still receiving a bare minimum of instruction in creative activities such as music, theater, and art.

Connolly noted that as Chair of the City Council’s Committee on Education he had had the opportunity to down with students who have dropped out of school and to ask what would have helped. Nearly every teen mentioned the desire to have had more opportunity to study the arts, Connolly said.

“Every student should be exposed to arts and music multiple times a week for the whole school year. We are really robbing our kids of a future without this kind of instruction,” Connolly said. “This is a main priority of mine.”

Connolly spoke of the need to reform the permitting process, which stymies event planners. “I want City Hall to function as if you’re walking into the Apple Store and the arts permitting process is a good place to start,” he said, adding that it should be easy to get permits for storefront theaters, pop-up art galleries, and other community building activities.

Catherine Peterson, Executive Director of ArtsBoston and a MASSCreative Board member who participated in the meeting with Connolly, said: “We are very excited to be jumpstarting a new conversation about how important the arts are to Boston. Our next mayor should be a catalyst for fresh, big-picture thinking about the arts. We want to see the mayor in the audience. And we want the mayor to advocate for more funding to help the sector grow and thrive so that we can bring even more value to the city and its neighborhoods.”

Matt Pollock, Executive Director of HarborArts who also participated in the meeting, said: “It’s so important that arts and cultural organizations, from the large institutions that enjoy international reputations, to smaller neighborhood-based organizations, get the support they need from the city to work to their fullest capacity.”
“Creativity is powerful,” added Matt Wilson, executive director of MASSCreative, who facilitated the meeting with Connolly. “It increases economic activity, boosts educational opportunities for young people, and helps build strong communities. We look forward to collaborating with the next mayor of Boston to support the arts and cultural community in working to its fullest capacity.”

Connolly was the sixth candidate to meet with the Coalition, which previously interviewed former Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative Executive Director John Barros; state Rep. Marty Walsh; Codman Square Health Center founder Bill Walczak, District 8 City Councilor Mike Ross, and Councilor-at-Large Felix Arroyo.

On September 9, Create the Vote will host the Boston Mayoral Candidate Forum on Arts, Culture, and Creativity. The forum will be moderated by Joyce Kulhawik, President of the Boston Theater Critics Association and JoycesChoices.com, and it will foster discussion of mayoral candidates’ vision for the arts in Boston. The forum will take place at the Paramount Theatre on Washington Street. All members of the public are invited to attend.

The Create the Vote Coalition will continue to meet with candidates and share with the public what they learn. The Coalition looks forward to learning more details from candidates, including those they have already met with, about how their ideas and initiatives for the arts will be implemented from a policy and funding perspective. For more information about the coalition and the Create the Vote campaign, visit MassCreative.org.

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Founded in 2012, MASSCreative works with creative leaders and entrepreneurs, working artists, arts educators, and arts and cultural supporters to empower creative organizations and the public with a powerful voice to advocate for the resources and support necessary to build vibrant and connected communities.