

Metro Arts Alliance to end operations

[Courtney Crowder](#) Updated 4:47 p.m. CT Aug. 21, 2017



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The Metro Arts Alliance of Greater Des Moines, a decades-old nonprofit that funded central Iowa artists and arts education, announced it is ending operations in an email sent to supporters Monday.

Citing “financial realities that left few options,” the email said that [Metro Arts Alliance’s](#) board and staff made the “difficult decision on August 16, 2017, to cease operations after almost 42 years of providing access to the arts in our

community.”

"It's a sad day," Angela Ossian, the organization's executive director, said in an interview. "We have been working on the messaging since last week, but it was still really hard to press the send button this morning."

While some arts leaders in Des Moines were quick to say that Metro Arts shuttering was far from a reflection of the state of arts in central Iowa, others said that the Metro Arts situation could be seen as a cautionary tale.

"This isn't a comment on the status of the cultural sector in central Iowa," said Sally Dix, the executive director of BRAVO, a nonprofit that uses hotel/motel taxes to fund arts organizations. "As BRAVO looks at the cultural assessment that we have been doing for the past 10 months, we are seeing more artists and more arts organizations and just a huge demand and appetite for quality. This is just a transition, just a pivot point, and an opportunity to celebrate all that Metro Arts Alliance has done for the arts community in the last 42 years."

But Max Wellman, a musician, writer and general manager of local jazz club Noce, said that the loss of Metro Arts could be "indicative of some of the challenges we in the arts community will face moving forward."

"There are more and more artists producing work of a higher quality in central Iowa, but the support has stayed pretty much the same," he said. "That community is spread pretty thin, so we have to find a way to galvanize more support to keep up pace."

In the [Alliance's](#) case, the decision to shut down was financial; the group just couldn't see a way to make ends meet, Ossian said. The association lost \$26,000 worth of funding from donors who had previously donated to Jazz in July, the organization's marquee program, and additional grants also came in

lower than expected, she said.

"The work is done to bring in those funds and any nonprofit organization goes through this where you are getting low and you have the conversation about, 'OK, what's our strategy to help fill those gaps,'" she said, "We were always on the optimistic side that our grants would come in and charitable giving and philanthropic support would be there. And it was, but it wasn't enough."

Jazz in July, a free event series that brought emerging jazz musicians to parks and performance venues throughout metro neighborhoods, was the Alliance's best known program. But the group also focused on serving youth, working with Des Moines Public Schools to bring teaching artists into classrooms.

As of now, every program that Metro Arts had scheduled is on hold. The organization's staff is hopeful that they will be able to find groups or individuals to keep some of their successful programming going.

"Groundwork is underway to pursue another organization that can provide a similar, or maybe even stronger, community benefit, enabling the organization's past work to continue to serve the youth who depended on us," Rick Ballinger, the board's president, said in the group's email to supporters.



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Copper Creek Lake Park was the place to be in Pleasant Hill for Jazz in July July 28. The Max Wellman 7 band was hosted by Metro Arts Alliance to an over-flow crowd. (Photo: Mark Davitt/For the Herald-Index)

The Metro Arts Alliance began in 1969 as a small group tasked with completing an assessment of the city's existing arts and recreation programs. In 1975, that small group renamed itself the Arts and Recreation Council of Greater Des Moines and established a board with 35 members. The name changed to Metro Arts Alliance in 1992 and the mission coalesced around the arts in central Iowa, evolving into "an organization that connects people to the arts through programming, communication and support of artists and arts organizations," according to the group's website.

“Closing down an organization and its programs is not an easy decision for nonprofit leaders to make,” Ossian said in the email. “It required tough decisions about services, personnel, and — most importantly — the communities and constituents served by Metro Arts Alliance.”