

2021 OMAHA Arts & Culture Voters' Guide

GENERAL ELECTION – MAY 11

POLLS OPEN 8AM – 8PM

ArtStock - a cohort of 40+ Omaha Arts & Culture sector organizations and artists - is a coalition of diverse representatives of the arts community that are working to build a stronger sector from within.

The “Municipal & State Arts Advocacy” group sourced questions from Omaha residents, gathering input from all 7 districts. These questions were then scaled down to a questionnaire that was then sent to all Omaha City Council and Mayoral candidates listed on the primary ticket.

As the Omaha Mayoral and City Council races are Non-Partisan, the goal of this guide is to create non-partisan awareness of the challenges and opportunities that the arts sector faces and create accountability for future leaders.

Questions were sourced from an open call with input from Omahans from all 7 districts. All candidates on the ballot were given the opportunity to respond to this guide.

Visit **vote411.org** for more information about voter registration, elections, candidates, and your voting district.

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Omaha Mayoral Candidates

Jean Stothert: <http://jeanstothert.com> **Current Public Office:** Mayor of Omaha since 2013. **Past Public Office:** Omaha City Council, Four years (2009 – 2013); Millard Board of Education (Omaha, NE) – Appointed 1997 Elected 1998, 2000, and 2004 (Offices held: President (3 years), VP, Secretary, and Treasurer. **Education:** Bachelor in Science from Seattle Pacific University; Registered Nurse - Head nurse and Department Head - Cardiovascular Surgery, St. Louis University. Over 12 years of experience as a critical care nurse and nursing manager. **Occupation:** Mayor of Omaha. **Volunteer experience:** Millard Board of Education, NE Medical Guild, Metropolitan Area Planning Authority, League of Municipalities, American Nurses Association, Salvation Army Board of Directors, NE Humane Society Friend, South Omaha Business Association, Millard Rotary.

RJ Neary: <http://www.nearyforomaha.com> **Current Public Office:** None. **Past Public Office:** Neary served 10 years on the City of Omaha's Planning Board, September 2004 to September 2014. He served as Chair twice: in 2009 and again in 2013. **Education:** BA in agricultural economics, University of Nebraska – Lincoln. **Occupation:** Chairman, Investors Realty. **Volunteer experience:** Omaha Habitat for Humanity, board member; Catholic Charities Board & Foundation Board; Omaha By Design Steering Committee; Urban Land Institute, member; Nebraska Judicial Resources Commission; Roncalli Catholic High School Board of Trustees; etc.

Do you support a municipal Arts and Culture department within city government? Why or why not?

Jean Stothert: As mayor, I have not favored adding new, taxpayer-funded departments to city government. Our focus has been, and should continue to be, the effective delivery of critical city services like public safety and transportation. We are extremely fortunate that in Omaha many of the arts and cultural leadership activities and funding are supported by incredibly generous non-profit and corporate entities and individuals. In addition, the Omaha Public Arts Commission (PAC) is deeply involved in all aspects of our city's position as a thriving arts community. The

PAC board includes a Museum curator, an architect or landscape architect, a representative of local non-profit visual arts corporation or association, a visual art teacher, a commercial visual artist or designer, two established visual artists, and two at-large members. These members are appointed by the mayor and approved by the Omaha City Council. It is the PAC's responsibility to make recommendations on artwork donated or acquired by the City (i.e. artistic merit, the value of pieces); plus serve as the advisory committee to other city boards in all matters regarding visual art and aesthetics. Most recently, The Public Arts Commission, with Omaha by Design, developed a "Public Art Omaha" mobile phone app for iPhone and Android. Users can find the nearest public art, take art tours, and even suggest pieces for inclusion.

RJ Neary: Yes, it is essential to support and provide access to quality visual, literary, musical, performing, and educational arts programming; manage vital cultural centers; preserve historic sites; create public art; and fund services (when feasible) provided by arts organizations and individual artists.

What will you do to encourage and increase representation, equity, and access across the arts sector, including within arts audiences and organizations?

Jean Stothert: In 2020 I hired Omaha's first Deputy Chief of Staff for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. This position was created to guide the City's role on these issues. An initial task will be evaluating and making recommendations to provide diversity strategies in City staff, boards, and commissions. I have made the CODE commitment on behalf of the City of Omaha. The Commitment to Opportunity, Diversity, and Equity is in participation with the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce to increase opportunity and equity for underrepresented populations in our community. The arts sector is one of the best opportunities to celebrate our community's diversity as well. In the past couple of years, we have partnered with the South Omaha Business Association and the South 24th Street Business Improvement District (BID), investing over half a million dollars to refurbish the South 24th Street Streetscape, including the Tree of Life monument and decorative streetscape elements. We're currently working with the North 24th Street BID to identify partnership opportunities on their streetscape planning process. Finally, we have created, by Executive Order, a number of Advisory Boards that make recommendations in many important areas. These include:

- Native American Advisory Board
- LGBTQ+ Advisory Board
- Millennial Advisory Board
- Active Living Advisory Board
- Community Advisory and Employee Advisory Board, with both working on our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Strategic Plan

RJ Neary: We need to make sure Omaha's varied cultures are recognized, acknowledged, and experienced. I plan to appoint a cabinet-level Equity Officer who will work in conjunction with a potential cultural affairs department to ensure representation, equity and access across the arts sector, including within arts audiences and organizations.

What role will Arts and Culture play in Omaha's development over the next 5 years? How will you include diverse arts sector voices as the city invests in this future landscape of Omaha?

Jean Stothert: Arts and Culture will play a tremendous role in Omaha's near-term development. The best current example will be the significant investment in the arts for our transformative RiverFront Project. My administration has been working closely with the Downtown Riverfront Trust and the Riverfront Arts Committee. The results will be outstanding and shared by all of Omaha and our visitors. Some of the most notable elements of The RiverFront will be a performance pavilion and a centerpiece public art piece at the head of the new Gene Leahy Mall. These will be complemented by a sculpture garden just outside of the world-renowned Holland Center representing curated pieces from local and global artists.

We have also partnered with Omaha Performing Arts in supporting infrastructure to develop their new performance hall. This new facility will be uniquely sized and configured to fill a market need for performing arts, which will include local and touring artists.

We're also excited to be partnering with the North 24th Street Business Improvement District and Dana Murray to implement a new jazz education program for local youth in the City-owned Love's Jazz and Arts Center at 24th and Lake Streets.

RJ Neary: Omaha needs an Arts and Cultural Plan. The Arts and Cultural Plan should identify community concerns, set a vision for the future and recommend actions to achieve long-term arts and cultural priorities. The Plan should be developed by looking at local data, research and by listening to diverse community residents, artists, arts and cultural groups, a community advisory committee, City staff and elected officials, civic leaders and experts. I hope to see hundreds of individuals contribute to the Arts and Cultural Plan through meetings, interviews and events, with thousands more accessing the planning project online.

Getting to art events can be difficult for other-abled or transportation challenged people. And even if personal transportation is available, parking is a challenge. If elected, what would you do to upgrade mass transit in Omaha?

Jean Stothert: This work is already well underway. Think of the new ORBT bus system as the “spine” of a future network of bus routes, which will one day run north and south as well. During the height of the pandemic, our bus system was still used at 50% of normal ridership, so we know those who use ORBT rely on it. Once concerts, art fairs, and other programs resume, Omahans will be able to park at Westroads, then catch an ORBT downtown for their event.

Riders and commuters on the ORBT corridor will be treated to newly-installed public art features at select ORBT bus stops. In partnership with Metro Transit, Omaha by Design, and the Public Arts Commission, the supporting infrastructure of these stations are adorned with art by a diverse set of commissioned artists. Last year, after years of research and community input, we implemented a Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) overlay which supports infill development and development practices along transit routes which promotes and encourages the use of transit systems to take single occupant vehicles off the road.

In 2017, I convened the Smart Cities Advisory Committee, a coalition representing business, non-profit, philanthropy, higher education and government agencies. This committee worked hand-in-hand with the Smart Cities Lab, a nationwide collaborative of eleven cities committed to work together on addressing transportation challenges and issues. The first initiative was developing and implementing a regional plan that solves transportation issues with policy, technology and innovation. This led to the ConnectGO initiative in partnership with the Greater Omaha Chamber. ConnectGO will modernize our transportation system. The coalition identified and is implementing a series of pilot programs for innovative transportation changes throughout our community (Market to Midtown Bikeway on Harney, ParkOmaha’s new curbside parking management, a smart district to test a variety of new technologies including improved parking management practices to reduce vehicle searching, and a seamless multimodal transportation payment app).

We’ve been working on a more sustainable transportation system for years. A critical first step was the passage of the 2020 street bond issue, approved overwhelmingly by the voters. Stewardship of our transportation infrastructure is the City’s first priority in making important improvements to transit and multi-modal improvements in our system.

The Smart Cities Advisory Committee also identified and is implementing a series of pilot programs for innovative transportation change throughout our community:

- Market to Midtown (Harney St.) Bikeway – coming this spring
- Transportation funding public engagement platform - coming this spring
- ParkOmaha curbside management pilots - one underway
- Autonomous shuttle - exploring
- Seamless mobility payment platform - exploring
- Smart District concept - working with Noddle Cos to explore/implement at Aksarben

And, we’ve expanded dedicated bike lanes, completed the 20-mile bike loop, and expanded commuter trails as we continue to invest in all modes of transportation.

RJ Neary: It's time that Omaha's transportation system reflects the city we want to be -- a city that is greener, healthier, more efficient, with reconnected neighborhoods. We need to invest in and prioritize multi-modal transportation options for our city.

The fact is, by integrating walking, taking public transit, and bicycling into our transportation system we will drive down costs to individuals and families while also improving our well-being and environment. However, Omaha's transportation system is based largely on driving cars, and the trend in that direction has only exacerbated over the past eight years. When I am Mayor, I will work with the Metro Area Planning Agency, Mode Shift Omaha, community leaders, businesses and planners to make multi-modal transportation, with an emphasis on alternatives, a reality in our city. This will not only improve our city but create new opportunities for good-paying jobs and actually improve economic equity.

Specifically, I will:

- Make sure that our city's sidewalks are repaired, widened where possible and always immediately cleared of snow to ensure that pedestrians are accommodated and encouraged year-round
- Focus on filling in unoccupied spaces (infill) effectively and efficiently and plan transportation around that infill to counteract sprawl and reduce driving
- Redouble our investment in trails for cyclists, walkers and runners to improve healthy options for outdoor exercise, with an emphasis on safety and aesthetics
- Greatly increase the options for bike lanes for commuters, especially on east-west corridors
- Re-staff "bike official" positions in city government
- De-emphasize highways in favor of boulevards and local streets that are connected to neighborhoods
- Work tirelessly to ensure that public transit reaches all locations equally, with an emphasis on transporting workers where they live to where the jobs are
- Study how economically disadvantaged people access public services, education and employment opportunities within our city in coordination with MAPA, UNMC and others
- Ensure our multi-modal transportation system is accessible to people with disabilities
- Identify and eliminate barriers to biking, walking, and other transportation alternatives
- Study and, if warranted, work to eliminate the use of local roads by large over-the-road heavy trucks
- Annually report on multi-modal transportation outcomes

Just as brain-drain is a real issue in Omaha, so is creative-drain. Creatives leave Omaha in search of more opportunities and exposure. What do you

think the city can do to encourage creatives to stay and welcome additional creatives to Omaha?

Jean Stothert: I prefer to think of it in a positive way. “Brain Gain,” or how do we continuously make Omaha an even more thriving and welcoming place of opportunity, so that our native sons and daughters want to come back? We know it’s already happening, but we want more to return. By growing the city the way we have and making sure those jobs, affordable housing, and a fun and innovative urban core are waiting for them, we believe we have the key to reversing creative drain. It is our artists, actors and musicians who make Omaha fun, but it’s our job to give them a place where opportunities exist for them to create a complete life here too. Omaha is consistently ranked as a top 10 (or top 20) city (see below) - and offering vibrant art and cultural experience is part of what makes Omaha one of the best.

- Work-Life Balance (#5 2021-SmartAsset)
- Best Places for Young Professionals (#5 2020 Yahoo Finance)
- Best Places for Millennials (#17 Business Insider)
- Best Cities to Live and Work (#7 2020 Zippia)
- Best Midsize Cities in America (#2 Bestcities.org)

RJ Neary: In addition to transportation issues described above, Omaha has the potential to be a magnet for creatives, both in terms of attraction and retention. However, over the past eight years, Omaha has struggled to attract and retain young people, especially young creatives. While many mid-size cities have successfully drawn creative talent from bigger coastal cities, under the current mayor Omaha has unfortunately not kept pace with places like Milwaukee, Cleveland, or even Kansas City in the competition for the next generation. I am committed to reversing creative-drain and will work tirelessly to improve our city so that it attracts and retains new creatives. I will do this by:

- Offer grants of \$5-10,000 to young creatives who relocate to Omaha from cities like Chicago, New York City, San Francisco and Los Angeles or return FROM those cities back to Omaha
- Empower and appoint younger creatives to arts and cultural boards that will shape the future of Omaha
- Improve coordination with relevant players (business, academic, medicine, entrepreneur, tech) benefitting from the presence of creative talent in Omaha
- Identify and support key driving sectors for retaining/attracting creatives, and report on metrics
- Mitigate/remove structural impediments/barriers to attracting creatives
- Integrate these efforts with Cabinet-level Equity Officer to ensure growth of young professionals of color and LGBTQIA professionals in Omaha

What role do you think city government should play in supporting the arts?

Jean Stothert: City government should focus on providing a healthy and financially-sound environment that serves as an incubator for creativity and beauty. This means making sure that the city budget is managed well so taxes can remain low, creating stability and opportunity that encourages new business growth and the fiscal freedom that allows a commitment to a thriving arts community. City government can also continue to promote and encourage participation in all of the incredible arts opportunities, venues, and programs available.

RJ Neary: As noted above, this needs to be a priority for city government. We should strive to be the Arts Capital. Arts and culture provide a heartbeat to any city, help measure the pulse and vibrancy of a community and fuel economic growth. Great cultural cities are measured by arts & culture, sports, dining and affordable living options. Omaha should be primed to lead on all of these. In order to do so however, we must make a real commitment to the arts. Too often, the current administration gives a token nod to the importance of arts without action to back up their words.

Emerging from Covid; it can't just be about the suburbs or downtown, it must be also be about the arts and our neighborhoods. I understand the key role arts and culture plays in fueling growth and economic development as well as the role our local artists play in revitalizing our community's vacant and inactive spaces. We are seeing some amazing work in the Capitol District but we can do so much more.

How do you plan to use your role to support the Arts and Culture sector?

Jean Stothert: I currently appoint the leadership of the Omaha Public Arts Commission. I also advocate for our arts, theatre and music programs at any opportunity. I encourage displays of art for public enjoyment. I also enjoy attending, speaking and welcoming arts related organizations and events in Omaha. These are all components of the identity of our city – and currently Omaha ranks very well nationally for its support of the Arts. (SMU Data Arts, 2020)

RJ Neary: I will work with City Council to provide financial support for arts and cultural sector initiatives in carrying out our Arts and Cultural Plan.

Omaha City Council Candidates – District 1



Pete Festersen <http://www.petefestersen.com> **Current Public Office:** Omaha City Councilman 2009-Present. **Past Public Office:** Omaha City Council President 2013-2015. **Education:** B.A. Connecticut College, M.P.A. University of Nebraska at Omaha. **Occupation:** Vice President, CHI Health. **Volunteer experience:** Saving Grace Perishable Food Rescue, United Way of the Midlands, Avenue Scholars, Omaha Children's Museum, College World Series, Inc, NE Early Childhood Collaborative, NE Chamber of Commerce, NE State Trauma Board, Omaha Planning Board.

Sarah Johnson <http://sj4oma.com> **Current Public Office:** n/a. **Past Public Office:** n/a. **Education:** Bachelor of Journalism - Broadcasting 2003 University of Nebraska Lincoln. **Occupation:** Small Business Owner. **Volunteer experience:** Co-founder of Mode Shift Omaha and served on the board of directors as vice chair and treasurer. Benson BID Board member and Neighborhood Association member. Benson Out Back group as well as Benson First Friday Green Team Clean up crew.

Do you support a municipal Arts and Culture department within city government? Why or why not?

Pete Festersen: As a musician myself, I am supportive of raising the profile of our arts and cultural institutions and believe they are important to the future of our city. Prior to the pandemic, I had been meeting with a national consultant about creating a focus within city government that would promote the local music and festival scene. I believe city government should be involved in promoting the arts and that some central point of coordination would be helpful whether it is a separate department, a position within the mayor's office, or some other position of stature within local government.

Sarah Johnson: Absolutely! Creativity is integral to building a city's culture; a community full of art is an interesting one, a community full of culture. The arts are often undervalued, yet they play an important role in civic life - one that crosses all socioeconomic boundaries; all genders; experiences; ages. The arts can help build a safer, more resilient community. It gives people outlets that may otherwise be unavailable to them. It benefits our mental health. It beautifies our city. It inspires us. It attracts more creative, innovative thinkers to the city.

What will you do to encourage and increase representation, equity, and access across the arts sector, including within arts audiences and organizations?

Pete Festersen: I think this is a challenge for our current arts and cultural institutions that must be addressed. The demographics of our city are changing and we need to find ways to embrace and welcome that diversity in our offerings and by way of expanding new audiences. Omaha's philanthropic community has done a good job of encouraging better equity and access to many

of our institutions including free admission and programs in partnership with our school districts but clearly more needs to be done.

Sarah Johnson: Omaha is fortunate to have a significant artistic community and I would want to build on that by working with those who are active in the community to identify the areas that they struggle with. I would like to see more organizations like the Union for Contemporary Art in other areas of the city. I would push for the city's existing arts advisory board to be more representative of the people working and living in our city -- not just those that may have had some professional success already. The advisory committees that do exist need to be able to voice their true opinions without retaliation from the city administration. Diversity is our strength! I'm grateful for the work of BFF as they strive to be inclusive, intentionally, to all types of artists. I think that as a community we need to admit that we have a segregated community and the first step is being able to call the issue what it is: racism. Then we must be intentional with who we bring to the table to build a more connected and welcoming arts scene, and Omaha overall.

What role will Arts and Culture play in Omaha's development over the next 5 years? How will you include diverse arts sector voices as the city invests in this future landscape of Omaha?

Pete Festersen: I believe arts and culture will help us to successfully re-bounce from the COVID-19 pandemic and play a major role in our economy over the next five years. I believe there is pent up demand for such things as live music, drama, symphony and opera performances and that everyone will benefit socially and emotionally from a strong resurgence of our arts and cultural organizations. Involving the creative class in our collective decision making and within the city board and commission structure would help to include diverse arts sector voices in this future landscape.

Sarah Johnson: A lot of issues that we face as a community, regarding the arts and otherwise, comes down to a lack of communication, trust, and transparency. Currently it seems that our representatives are gatekeepers to government rather than conduits between the community and decision makers. In order to make progress as a community we need to embrace diversity, and work to increase agency for the currently marginalized. This applies across the board but as it pertains to the diverse voices in the arts sector as well. I'm excited about the work Senator Hunt has done in the Legislature regarding the arts. Between passing her bill allowing Arts Districts, and the "support the arts" license plate, some progress is being made to showcase that we as Nebraskans understand the importance of arts and culture. I will work to make sure artists and creatives are involved in development and will listen to what they think a better Omaha looks like. It all starts with conversations and listening to those closest to the issues; I'll rely on the experts!

Getting to art events can be difficult for other-abled or transportation challenged people. And even if personal transportation is available, parking is a challenge. If elected, what would you do to upgrade mass transit in Omaha?

Pete Festersen: Mass transit is a critical issue for the future of our city. I've been a strong supporter of the new bus rapid transit system and helped to ensure its long-term success by adopting transit oriented development amendments to our city's master plan. Still, this is just the first step needed to diversify our public transit system to make it more accessible and efficient for those that need it most and to help attract the workforce we need to be successful.

Sarah Johnson: Through my work as a founding member of Mode Shift Omaha, I know first hand how much Omaha struggles with looking at transportation and mobility holistically. This a huge part of the reason I decided to run. I'm currently working to push Omaha to reclassify sidewalks as part of the transportation network. This would allow more funding to go into infrastructure and maintenance of things like sidewalks and ADA curb cuts so people regardless of their physical or financial ability are able to move about Omaha. I'll also work to see the Regional Transit Authority come to fruition! This will allow more funding for public transportation which would then allow for our buses to run more frequently and longer hours. Currently, it's basically impossible to rely on our buses after about 9pm. This needs to change and part of that starts with admitting that we have focused our resources too heavily toward car drivers. This shift in culture starts at the top and when I'm elected I'll be the only City Councilor who doesn't own a car. Totally different, non-car centric perspective will be brought to the table immediately!

Just as brain-drain is a real issue in Omaha, so is creative-drain. Creatives leave Omaha in search of more opportunities and exposure. What do you think the city can do to encourage creatives to stay and welcome additional creatives to Omaha?

Pete Festersen: Omaha needs to pursue policies that allow the creative class to thrive in our community. In addition to providing lively music, arts and entertainment venues and events, we need to do a better job embracing diversity of all kinds like we did when we passed the state's first non-discrimination ordinance. And we need to promote our historic neighborhood business districts, outdoor recreation opportunities, and public transit as well.

Sarah Johnson: We need to shift the public perception of what an artist is and continue to showcase all of the positive impacts that the arts have in the community. Nationally, the arts are a huge part of the economy - in fact, the arts sector grew 4.45% between 2015-2017 alone, and comprises 4.2% of the nation's GDP! The city could do better by creating a Department of Arts and Culture and to lead the city's creative presence; by attracting more creative industry, for example, by offering tax-incentives to film productions; and, importantly, to support more arts

funding to Omaha artists. In general, Omaha needs to work on being a more progressive and welcoming city because too many talented folks are relocating to cities that embrace diversity and showcase it, rather than ignore and downplay the variety of cultures Omaha is home to.

What role do you think city government should play in supporting the arts?

Pete Festersen: City government should play an active role in supporting the arts. Many citizens don't realize the major impact our arts scene has on the local economy and that it's critical to providing the quality of life we all enjoy and like to promote. I'm a proponent of public art as well and would consider pursuing a one percent set aside in public projects to enhance the public art throughout the community.

Sarah Johnson: The city should be treating the arts as the important income generator that it is. Our city has many creative individuals and we aren't working hard enough to appreciate them, retain them, and show the rest of the nation what we have going on here. The arts are vital in developing a more inclusive, healthier, more vibrant community - and again, we should treat it as such. I always like looking at what is working in other cities to see how we can implement successful programs here. We could work to improve trust between the arts sector and the government; a lot of it comes down to relationship building which I love. Government should be so lucky to engage with the creative thinking that is standard with artists and really work together to create opportunity for that innovation to succeed.

How do you plan to use your role to support the Arts and Culture sector?

Pete Festersen: I have been an active participant in the local arts scene both personally and professionally and that will continue. I've supported new music venues in Benson, the Benson Theatre, Benson First Fridays, Film Streams in Dundee, the Slowdown, and many other entities throughout my district. And I have also been directly involved with city contributions and approvals related to the Holland Performing Arts Center, the downtown outdoor music venue, the Kaneko, the Omaha Conservatory of Music, the MAHA Music Festival, the Omaha Community Playhouse, and the Omaha Academy of Ballet and that advocacy will continue.

Sarah Johnson: I've already been a good partner to the arts through my small business in Benson. I worked with BFF over the years, not only to host artists regularly, but also to connect with artists to cover nearly every inch of my property (and adjacent buildings) with murals of all kinds. When I'm elected I will be available and proactive and will improve communication between the city and artist organizations working together to create a more artful Omaha. In order to work well together, I'd start with a lot of listening to those closest to the issues. I think there is so much potential! I'd love to work to give artists the resources they need and see what happens when the arts are funded in a more robust way. Something I dream about (since mega road projects bum me out) is filling the underbelly of our highways and interstates with murals.

I'd also like to ensure that local artists are included in new development, revitalization of older districts, and acknowledged as crucial to economic rebound, post covid, in Omaha.

Omaha City Council Candidates – District 2



Ben Gray* <https://vote4bengray.com/>

Juanita Johnson: <http://www.votejuanita.com> **Education:** Bachelor of Business Administration, MBA to be completed 2023. **Occupation:** Project Engineer. **Volunteer experience:** 1) President-Long School Neighborhood Association 2) Founder/Director 24th Street Corridor Alliance 3) Various Offices Nebraska Chapter, Regional and National-Blacks In Government.

Do you support a municipal Arts and Culture department within city government? Why or why not?

Juanita Johnson: Yes, I believe arts & culture is an essential part of society.

What will you do to encourage and increase representation, equity, and access across the arts sector, including within arts audiences and organizations?

Juanita Johnson: Plan to support funding and education efforts through-out my term as City Council Representative District 2. Also would like to emphasize the development of art education programs for young citizens in District 2.

What role will Arts and Culture play in Omaha's development over the next 5 years? How will you include diverse arts sector voices as the city invests in this future landscape of Omaha?

Juanita Johnson: I believe Omaha is off to a good start with its art awareness. You can see signs as you enter the city but it could expand these efforts especially in District 2. More emphasis on Art and Culture should be visible about the history within District 2 and other diverse areas of the city.

Getting to art events can be difficult for other-abled or transportation challenged people. And even if personal transportation is available, parking is a challenge. If elected, what would you do to upgrade mass transit in Omaha?

Juanita Johnson: There are several issues that need to be addressed regarding Omaha's mass transit system. I plan to include with these issues as we work through improving this system. I too have some difficulty walking distances because of insufficient parking and I have some ideas about how to include more people in Omaha art arenas.

Just as brain-drain is a real issue in Omaha, so is creative-drain. Creatives leave Omaha in search of more opportunities and exposure. What do you think the city can do to encourage creatives to stay and welcome additional creatives to Omaha?

Juanita Johnson: We have several of the best universities in the country right here in Omaha, graduating many art students every year. More emphasis should be placed on recruitment of those students and developing opportunities for them to demonstrate their talent. Also, the city needs to attract more companies with an interest in art development.

What role do you think city government should play in supporting the arts?

Juanita Johnson: The city should work on employment issues for new and established artists, find ways to keep them here; work to attract companies to further that effort; educate young and old about the value of art and how it contributes to a more harmonious society. City should support more cultural and diversity education through-out the city.

How do you plan to use your role to support the Arts and Culture sector?

Juanita Johnson: By keeping it as a stable part of the city's budget and insure that it is not the first item to be cut while I am in office.

Omaha City Council Candidates – District 3



Cammy Watkins <http://www.cammy4council.com> **Education:** BA from Cornell College. **Occupation:** Nonprofit Deputy Director. **Volunteer experience:** Habitat for Humanity of Omaha Global Village, Nebraska Alliance of Child Advocacy Centers, Spark CDI, OPS Inclusion Committee, Nonprofit Assn of the Midlands, and Council on Opportunity, Diversity and Equity

Danny Begley <https://www.dannybegley.com/>

Do you support a municipal Arts and Culture department within city government? Why or why not?

Cammy Watkins: Yes, we all know that a thriving arts scene is one of the main attractors of people to a community. Currently the City of Omaha doesn't invest enough in the arts in an intentional way. Having a department dedicated to promoting the arts within Omaha would be a step towards changing that.

Danny Begley: I think that the introduction of a municipal arts and cultural department in Omaha's city government will be necessary as Omaha continues to grow. We need to be supporting and encouraging our artists, especially during and coming out of a period where it has been very difficult to support oneself with their art. A city is nothing without its art and culture, and we should be doing everything that we can to support our artists

What will you do to encourage and increase representation, equity, and access across the arts sector, including within arts audiences and organizations?

Cammy Watkins: In my full-time work I am already doing this in collaboration with ArtStock. I would use my influence once in office to amplify the work being done through this program and take the recommendations of the Strategic Vision created through this group and find ways to implement it within our governmental entities.

Danny Begley: I think a big part of encouraging and increasing representation, equity, and access in the arts is making them more accessible. From a City Council perspective, this means supporting and encouraging art wherever we can. It means incorporating it into more aspects of the city and providing opportunities for young artists to establish themselves. From a personal perspective, this means attending events and encouraging others to do the same. An elected official cannot say that they support the arts if they themselves never find themselves at a show or a gallery.

What role will Arts and Culture play in Omaha's development over the next 5 years? How will you include diverse arts sector voices as the city invests in this future landscape of Omaha?

Cammy Watkins: In the next few years we are going to see the grave impacts of COVID-19 and the disconnectedness many Omahans have felt during this year. If invested in correctly, Omaha can work with the Arts and Culture community (both Artists and organizations) to rebuild community and find ways to address the segregation of our city. I feel this has to be done by working with both individual artists, as that is where the diversity of this sector lies, as well as the major arts organizations.

Danny Begley: The Arts and Culture sector will play a vital role going forward in Omaha's development. We cannot be a beautiful, diverse, regional and/or national city if we do not support our art and our artists. I think that the best step in including the diverse voices in the arts sector is simply to listen to them. I know that I am not an expert in the field of art and culture; that means that it is important to listen to other, educated voices that know and then use the information that they provide me to come to the best solutions possible.

Getting to art events can be difficult for other-abled or transportation challenged people. And even if personal transportation is available, parking is a challenge. If elected, what would you do to upgrade mass transit in Omaha?

Cammy Watkins: I would work with my colleagues in the City Council to promote the adoption of a Regional Transit Authority in Omaha. I would also like to investigate and work with the other City Council members to see if we can ramp up the timeline of the ConnectGo initiative. There are great ideas within that plan, but the 10 year timeline will only serve to have Omaha fall further behind. I would also like to investigate how we can have our MAT system become a part of the City structure and not be its own private entity.

Danny Begley: I think that upgrading public transit in Omaha is going to be an important challenge going forward, both in regard to the accessibility of arts events and to accessibility in general. I plan to encourage the expansion of public transportation throughout Omaha, along with fighting to make sure that the quality of the transportation increases as well. We need to make sure that public transportation in our city is safe, reliable, and time efficient. It is unreasonable to expect residents to use these services if they cannot get where they want to go, safely and in the expected time. If we can make the system better, then we can realistically encourage residents to be able to take advantage of these systems.

Just as brain-drain is a real issue in Omaha, so is creative-drain. Creatives leave Omaha in search of more opportunities and exposure. What do you think the city can do to encourage creatives to stay and welcome additional creatives to Omaha?

Cammy Watkins: Pay them. Plain and simple, our community values Art, but not the Artists who create it. As a performer I made the conscious choice that I would not sing unless I was paid. However, I had the privilege to do that as I had another financial resource through my full time work. Not all artists have that and too often they are being required to do their work for the "exposure." We have to change the culture here and understand that "Community" doesn't mean free or unpaid. Even if it is a small stipend Artists should be paid for their work.

Danny Begley: I think that part of this is fostering a place where Omaha creatives feel welcome and heard, while still being able to make a living. We need to provide and support more opportunities within Omaha for artists to be able to flex their artistic muscles in meaningful and creative ways. We need to look at the aspects of other cities that pull artists in and contemplate the ways that we can foster the same programs and activities here. We have so many wonderful, creative minds here in Omaha, and we want them to be able to use those minds and their skills in useful, fulfilling ways while staying here in Omaha.

What role do you think city government should play in supporting the arts?

Cammy Watkins: Omaha like many cities capitalizes on the tourism dollars that comes from Concerts and Performances and Art shows. If the city is going to bank on the value that these experiences bring to it, then we should also be making a line item in the budget to ensure this

art is sustainably funded. I think the city government should be a collaborator with the arts sector to ensure that we can maintain this valuable city asset.

Danny Begley: The balance between city government and supporting the arts is hard to determine. City government must support the arts and foster an environment where artists can thrive, but they must be careful not to interfere with the creative process or contents of the arts.

How do you plan to use your role to support the Arts and Culture sector?

Cammy Watkins: By elevating individual Artists and making space for them to be part of the conversations with neighborhood leaders to help bring about the cultural changes that we need in Omaha. I am doing this now as a candidate by commissioning 5 public art projects in District 3 with 5 different local artists and neighborhood youth. Senator Hunt's bill is a great catalyst to broaden the conversation about public art and I hope this project I am doing is an example of how simple this investment could be.

Danny Begley: I plan on using my platform in order to elevate the voices of those in the arts and culture sector. I also plan on looking for ways to encourage art in the things that the City Government does, fostering an environment that appreciates and respects both the art and the artist.

Omaha City Council Candidates – District 4



Becky Barrientos-Patlan* no website found

Vinny Palermo* <https://vinnypalermo.com/>

Omaha City Council Candidates – District 5



Don Rowe* <https://www.donroweomaha.com/>

Patrick Leahy* <https://leahy4citycouncil.com/>

Omaha City Council Candidates – District 6



Brinker Harding* <https://brinkerharding.com/>

Naomi Hattaway <http://www.naomiforcitycouncil.com/> **Occupation:** Nonprofit Consultant.
Volunteer experience: Women's 14 Fund of Omaha leadership, POC Collaborative Board, RISE Board, Ripple Effect Images Advisory Committee, Room to Read Gala Chair.
Volunteerism: numerous PTA President roles, RISE Builder program, Habitat for Humanity.

Do you support a municipal Arts and Culture department within city government? Why or why not?

Naomi Hattaway: Yes. I believe that arts and culture are vital to the heartbeat of our City. We see burgeoning support for these areas in certain parts of Omaha, and I believe we need to prioritize it at the City Hall level to build awareness and leverage a united front. Art is necessary for healing. Art is a prerequisite for community. We are lacking when we do not value and amplify the culture that exists in homes and communities across Omaha. I highly support a municipal arts and cultural department at City Hall, but strongly believe it needs to be affiliated with a line item on the budget.

What will you do to encourage and increase representation, equity, and access across the arts sector, including within arts audiences and organizations?

Naomi Hattaway: Diversity + Arts – Omaha has a vast cultural wealth that we could greatly benefit from as a city, by recognizing and appreciating the diversity it offers our residents. Through affirmative marketing (proactive, informative, and led by artists - not a hired consultancy group), intentionally seeking out broader representation on city committees and leaning on our nonprofits for a bolstering of services and entertainment (see Community Services Grants below), we could expand the beauty of Omaha's diversity to be enjoyed and respected city-wide. With respect to the arts, we must ensure that we maintain our priority, in funding the arts from youth initiatives to cross-district offerings.

Community Services Programming and Grants (Step Up, PACE, etc.) – City leaders frequently point to the presence and success of the Step-Up and PACE programs. Step-Up Omaha was created in 2008 and has partnered with over 100 organizations and businesses to provide work experience, internships and job training during the summer months for youth ages 14-29. As a result, many have gone back to finish their high school education, complete college or found gainful employment. PACE stands for Police Athletics for Community Engagement and was started in 2005 by the Omaha Latino Peace Officers. The program is said to prevent “at-risk” and disadvantaged inner-city children from becoming involved in street gangs, crime, drug use and victimization by providing free access to sports and ACT prep classes. I would like to prioritize the addition of new, additional programs that provide community services to expand on the success of Step-Up and PACE -- with a focus on arts and culture. We have the talent, we have the creatives in spades, we have amazing artistry in Omaha. I would like to look at innovative funding ideas – such as a discretionary budget for each city council district, or a participatory budgeting concept – to elevate a grant process and community services that focus on arts and culture injection (and amplification) that we offer to our community.

What role will Arts and Culture play in Omaha's development over the next 5 years? How will you include diverse arts sector voices as the city invests in this future landscape of Omaha?

Naomi Hattaway: If we do not let arts and culture take a lead in City healing, community restoration and the concept of building back post-COVID-19, we will be missing a huge opportunity. The easy answers to this question are that we must give leadership, budget and ownership to those that sit on Mayor's Advisory Committees. I would advocate to act as a support to the Mayor in reforming and revamping the purpose of those committees. Additionally, I believe strongly that we need someone who is a Creative on the Planning Department, as well as a public art committee or task force that intersects with our local universities, schools and our City government.

Getting to art events can be difficult for other-abled or transportation challenged people. And even if personal transportation is available, parking is a challenge. If elected, what would you do to upgrade mass transit in Omaha?

Naomi Hattaway: Our disabled community, and those with mobility challenges could benefit from a unified effort at bringing in a consultant like All Kinds Accessibility and / or Mode Shift to first create / update an audit of all of our City spaces that host arts and culture events. Whether that's something as large as the CHI Center, or as small as a City park that has summer concerts, we need to show the community that we are serious about access. Mass transit needs to be addressed in numerous ways, but I believe the first step is a baseline of awareness and understanding across City departments (Parks, City administration, Public Works, Planning, etc.) of why our disabled community must have their rights prioritized - beyond simply promising to be better with items such as curb cuts and parking prioritization for event spaces.

Just as brain-drain is a real issue in Omaha, so is creative-drain. Creatives leave Omaha in search of more opportunities and exposure. What do you think the city can do to encourage creatives to stay and welcome additional creatives to Omaha?

Naomi Hattaway: In the state Blueprint Nebraska initiative, our governing bodies are tasked with bringing in 43,000 new young people to our state between the ages of 18-34, yet we're not doing enough for the students and young people who are already here. While Blueprint Nebraska does not specifically address creatives, I believe the general attitude of not supporting the folks already here, crosses over from a discussion of youth directly to our creatives. The City doesn't need to bring anyone new (although we can welcome new artisans, creatives, etc. with open arms), we need to prove that we value those already here, those who are already serving the community through their work and their art. By prioritizing backing up any task force, advisory committee or the like with actual funding and decision making power (as well as access

to resources or through line sponsorship to neighboring City programs), we can prove that to our creatives, as the City of Omaha -- as a start.

What role do you think city government should play in supporting the arts?

Naomi Hattaway: Our current city government is very reactive, and takes on an administrative-only role. While that has been “fine” in the past for many Omahans, we don’t have time to continue that practice in the future. City government should adopt the importance and implementation of active, purposeful and intentional support of arts and culture. There are many examples of supportive ordinances that other like-sized cities are adopting through their City Councils, and Omaha needs to follow suit in bolstering the proactive support of the existing arts and culture scene.

How do you plan to use your role to support the Arts and Culture sector?

Naomi Hattaway: I feel our City Councilors should take on a more intentional role in seeding the adoption of an arts and culture priority by taking on the roles of heralding the arts and culture already present in Omaha, sharing with each other and their respective district residents, using social media and their community platforms to elevate and amplify the beauty and community impact of musicians, artists, authors, artisans, crafters, creators, etc. I also feel strongly that we need to celebrate the food component of the myriad of cultures and ethnic depth we have in Omaha. Food and culture is something I’m very passionate about and cannot wait to prioritize with some supportive ordinances once elected!



Omaha City Council Candidates – District 7

Aimee Melton* <https://meltonforomaha.com/>

Sara Kohen* <https://saraforomaha.com/>

*** No response received from this candidate.**

Use your ArtVoice & VOTE!!!

This Voter's Guide was created by the Municipal & State Arts Advocacy working group of ArtStock. ArtStock, a program of Amplify Arts, is a coalition of 40+ organizations and individual artists working together to identify and pursue strategies to build greater strength and unity in the Omaha metro arts sector. For more information, go to www.amplifyarts.org/artstock

Municipal & State Arts Advocacy working group is: Alex Jochin (BFF Omaha), Caitlin Little (BFF Omaha), Erin Foley (Film Streams), Maher Jafari (ArtStock Culture Work Fellow), Mark Kresl (Omaha Conservatory of Music), Melissa Wurth (Omaha Girls Rock), and Paige Reitz (The Union for Contemporary Art).

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