October 7, 2015

The Honorable Ken Calvert  
Chairman  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Interior Appropriations Subcommittee  
B-308 Rayburn HOB  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Betty McCollum  
Ranking Member  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Interior Appropriations Subcommittee  
1016 Longworth HOB  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Calvert and Ranking Member McCollum:

As President and CEO of Americans for the Arts, the national nonprofit that serves, advances, and leads the network of organizations and individuals that has been supporting the arts in America since 1960, I write to share my appreciation for your continued commitment to advance FY 2016 funding for the National Endowment for the Arts. We value our work with you and thank you for your leadership on behalf of the arts.

As you begin next discussions on a potential omnibus bill, I want to share with you concerns regarding the language that appears in the FY 2016 Interior and Environment Bill Draft Committee Report, as it pertains to a key program of the National Endowment for the Arts—Our Town.

As you may recall, last budget cycle, the Endowment requested flexibility with Our Town funds to ensure that the limited funding reached the most competitive projects. The committee's instruction this year calling for no FY 2016 funds to support Our Town is alarming and I believe contradictory to your stated emphasis on advancing investments in jobs and economic development.

As you may know, Our Town is the most recent of the agency's core grant programs. It epitomizes and encourages partnerships, including public-private partnerships. Every Our Town grant requires the support of the local mayor, or another local government entity, and often unites organizations that have never before worked together, including banks, churches, hospitals, and other community and economic development...
organizations. The majority of the grants go to communities of less than 100,000 (172 out of 320 grants), with 58 grants going to towns smaller 10,000, and 12 to towns smaller than 1,000. It has funded all 50 states plus DC and Puerto Rico, and has funded many tribal communities. This summer, the Endowment announced 69 new Our Town grants, totaling $5 million—including 5 projects that are national or regional in scope.

Some extraordinary work has happened as a result of this investment, and I’d like to share a few examples to better illustrate the impact of this work as you negotiate final FY 2016 funding.

- In the San Diego neighborhood of Market Creek—a diverse community of 88,000 people—a 2011 Our Town grant allowed for an arts-based community planning process that has revitalized the neighborhood, rescuing it from blight, and returning it to a desirable tourist and living destination known for its open spaces, walking trails, and plazas.

- In Sitka, Alaska, a 2014 Our Town grant supported Alaska Arts Southeast in advancing the transformation of the former Sheldon Jackson College campus comprised of 19 buildings on a 20-acre National Historic Landmark site into a multidisciplinary arts education campus, working in partnership with the City and Borough of Sitka, the Sitka Convention and Visitors Bureau, Sitka Sound Science Center, Island Institute, and Alaska State Museum.

- In Fergus Falls, MN, a 2013 Our Town grant facilitated an ongoing partnership between arts organizations, the Economic Improvement Commission, and preservation and historical societies around how the community would recover from the closing of a major hospital. The work ultimately resulted in the creation of dozens of artist-led community and economic development projects that have empowered the local community to strengthen their economy, grow cultural tourism, and increase the skills and impacts of creative workers.

- In a grant just awarded, Good Work Network is now expanding business development with 40 performing and visual artists in New Orleans, in partnership with the New Orleans Mayor’s Office of Cultural Economy, Ashé Cultural Art Center, Puentes New Orleans, and Nfungotah Inc./Dance for Life.
To make this work readily transparent and to share best practices, last year, the Endowment launched an online, publically available resource featuring case studies now from 75 of the initial 360 Our Town projects. I encourage you to take a look at what communities are doing: [http://arts.gov/exploring-our-town](http://arts.gov/exploring-our-town).

Over the five years of the Our Town grant initiative, projects have included cultural planning, design projects, and arts engagement, each of which transforms towns and brings access to the arts. As written by *Playbill* news reporter Robert Simonson in 2012, “Even those who are not lucky enough to pull down a grant are sometimes positively affected by the program. ‘It has started a lot of conversations in communities….People tell us that even though they didn't get a grant, it started a conversation in the town and sometimes the people decide to go ahead and do the thing they wanted to do anyway.’” All because federal seed money was possible and the opportunity to try existed.

I hope you will remove the limiting language in the committee report and continue to enable this work to occur and make a difference in communities all across the country, from every size and shape -- rural, urban and everywhere in between -- to help enable access to the arts to all Americans.

I stand ready to work with you. In recognition of all you do for the arts and arts education, I thank you.

Sincerely,

[signature]

Robert L. Lynch
President and CEO

cc: The Honorable Lisa Murkowski, Chairman
    The Honorable Tom Udall, Ranking member