



Date: September 14, 2021

To: Wanda S. Page, City Manager
Through: Bertha T. Johnson, Deputy City Manager
From: Jina B. Propst, Director, General Services Department
Subject: Proposal to Create a City of Durham Poet Laureate Pilot Program

Executive Summary

In May 2021, at the request of City Council, the Durham Cultural Advisory Board (DCAB) received a presentation from local poets Dasan Ahanu, Crystal Simon Smith, and Chris Vitello regarding creation of a City of Durham Poet Laureate. Poet Laureate programs are opportunities for jurisdictions or entities to formally recognize poets' contributions to literary culture and society, while also providing educational opportunities to residents. Communities across North Carolina appoint or support poets laureate, who serve as advocates for the literary arts. In August 2021, after consideration during its June and July monthly meetings, DCAB leadership drafted a letter to recommend appointment of a City of Durham Poet Laureate. DCAB shared its letter of recommendation with City Council on August 29, 2021.

Motion

To authorize the City Manager to direct staff to support the Durham Cultural Advisory Board and others to develop a City of Durham Poet Laureate pilot program.

Background

In May 2021, at the request of City Council, the Durham Cultural Advisory Board (DCAB) received a presentation from local poets Dasan Ahanu, Crystal Simon Smith, and Chris Vitello regarding appointment of a City of Durham Poet Laureate. In August 2021, after consideration and discussion during its June and July monthly meetings, DCAB leadership drafted a letter to recommend appointment of a City of Durham Poet Laureate. DCAB shared its letter of recommendation with City Council on August 29, 2021.

DCAB's consensus recommendation was to create a pilot program or position that aligned with the public proposal submitted to City Council by local poets, including the poet laureate qualifications, responsibilities, and duration of service. DCAB's recommendation specifically outlined that the City approach the first year of poet laureate program as a "pilot". This would enable time for program development, implementation, and evaluation of program performance by the cultural community and the City prior entering into an anticipated annual renewal cycle.

Issues and Analysis

Staff anticipates establishment of a City of Durham Poet Laureate pilot program will be heavily predicated on established poet laureate positions throughout North Carolina. Successful poet laureate positions exist at the state, regional and local levels.

- The North Carolina Poet Laureate is appointed for a two-year term by the governor, typically with the advice of a committee assembled by the North Carolina Arts Council

(NCAC). The NCAC supports the poet laureate by coordinating and publicizing speaking events, and provides a stipend for expenses.

- The Piedmont Laureate is appointed for a one-year term, and is co-sponsored by the City of Raleigh Arts Commission, Durham Arts Council, Orange County Arts Commission, and United Arts Council of Raleigh & Wake County with an honorarium provided annually.
- The Chapel Hill Poet Laureate position was established in 2019, providing an honorarium for a two-year term.

For the City of Durham Poet Laureate pilot program staff anticipates the following framework in response to the preliminary recommendations provided by DCAB.

Selection Process:

In its recommendation to City Council, DCAB emphasized its desire that the selection process be representative of the Durham cultural arts community and driven by robust community engagement. To achieve this goal, staff envision a community-driven process lead by DCAB members, local poets, and others in the cultural arts community, designed with staff support. Staff support may include facilitating solicitation of a pool of poet laureate candidates through an open call for poets, to be advertised to the greater Durham community. The ability for the public to submit poet nominations may be incorporated to further involve the community in the selection process. Upon conclusion of the community-driven selection process, a nomination committee would submit its recommendation to the Mayor. The Mayor then could concur with the recommendation and appoint the inaugural the City of Durham Poet Laureate for the pilot program year, or the Mayor could ask the selection committee to take some additional action, or consider an alternative next step(s).

Program Timeline:

To promote meaningful community conversations, gather cultural-community stakeholder input, and facilitate a robust call for poets, staff anticipates program planning beginning during winter 2021/2022, culminating in a recommendation to the Mayor for appointment in early spring 2022. This timing would allow an inaugural City of Durham Poet Laureate to begin serving during the pilot program year beginning in July 2022. Upon conclusion of the pilot year, DCAB and other stakeholders would be asked to evaluate program success and make recommendations to enhance the process. Assuming a successful pilot, this timing could support a second selection process during winter 2022/2023 to identify the next poet laureate.

Scope of Service:

During the pilot program year, DCAB recommends that the poet laureate scope of service be flexible, as key events are likely to vary year to year and poets must adapt their work to the needs and landscape of the community. For example, in other communities, poet laureates often share their work and offer programming in spaces as diverse as schools, prisons, hospices, in addition to other local institutions. The City of Durham Poet Laureate should therefore possess the capacity and will to serve all Durham residents regardless of cultural background or identity.

Honorarium:

DCAB has recommended an annual honorarium of \$5,000. This amount provides greater consideration to the proposed Poet Laureate than is provided by other local programs. Staff believes the DCAB recommendation appropriately considers Durham living wage commitments and other Poet Laureate programs. The Chapel Hill Poet Laureate receives an annual \$2,000 honorarium, and the Piedmont Laureate receives an annual \$6,000 honorarium. If appointed, staff anticipate receipt of the proposed \$5,000 annual honorarium will be codified in an agreement with

the City clearly specifying conditions required to successfully complete the scope of service. The City Attorney's Office would be consulted regarding the agreement and scope of service as well as adherence to law associated with freedom of speech, use, and copyright status. The Office of the Mayor and the City Communications Department would be asked to collaborate on annual events and other scheduling matters for poet laureate commitments.

Alternatives

City Council could choose not to authorize the City Manager to direct the creation of a City of Durham Poet Laureate pilot program. City Council could choose to authorize the City Manager to direct the creation of a pilot program under different program parameters than proposed herein.

Financial Impact

DCAB has recommended a \$5,000 annual honorarium be provided to the proposed Poet Laureate beginning in July of FY22/23. General Services will enter a new initiative as a part of the FY22/23 budget cycle to fund the proposed pilot.

Equal Business Opportunity Summary

The Poet Laureate Program was not reviewed for compliance with the Ordinance to Promote Equal Business Opportunities in City Contracting.

Contractor Workforce Diversity & Hiring Practices

Due to the nature of this agenda item, obtaining Contractor Workforce Diversity & Hiring Practices information is not applicable.

Attachments

Exhibit A: Durham Cultural Advisory Board Poet Laureate Pilot Recommendation Letter

Exhibit B: Public Proposal for Poet Laureate Presentation

Exhibit C: Public Proposal for Poet Laureate – DCAB Questions and Response