

California: San Diego to cut \$2.3 million from city arts budget

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Republican Mayor Kevin Faulconer has unveiled a revised budget proposal for San Diego that includes massive cuts to the city's Commission on Arts and Culture, which provides funds for the city's theaters, museums, playhouses and other cultural sites. Faulconer's original budget called for a \$4.7 million cut to the commission, a decrease of 30 percent for arts funding. But after public outcry, he was forced to cut "only" 15 percent, or \$2.3 million.

City officials stated that the budget deficit causing them to cut arts funding is the result of increased pension contributions, the standard justification for austerity measures. As a result of retirees living longer than pension planners originally calculated, combined with weak investment returns on the stock market, the city faces a projected \$80 million budget deficit.

Faulconer's original plan, to cut funding from the arts for the current fiscal year from \$15.1 million down to \$10.4 million, constituted a major attack on arts and cultural groups throughout the city. It followed news that President Donald Trump planned to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts, which gives \$423,000 to local artists in San Diego.

While Faulconer defended his cuts by pointing to the city's increased contributions to arts in recent years, the city had only increased arts funding because of a 2012 City Council commitment to keep arts spending at the same percentage before years of budget cuts began in 2002. The "Penny for the Arts" program required arts funding to be 9.5 percent of city revenue from hotel taxes, called "transient-occupancy taxes."

Although Faulconer relented to public pressure to cut less, the city establishment made it very clear that arts groups should not expect such mercies in the future, but be prepared for even deeper cuts. The mayor announced in his May revision, "Thanks to belt-

tightening at City Hall, we have some leftover dollars from this year's budget that we can put toward reserves to help us face future budget challenges from rising pension costs," he said, adding, "The fiscally responsible approach is to save now to prepare for lean budget years ahead we know are coming."

In a City Hall meeting shortly after budget cuts to arts programs was announced, Councilman Scott Sherman told the public that the proposed budget for next year made use of millions in one-time reserves and the elimination of jobs that are unfilled. He told the audience, "We're going to do on this council what we can to make things a little bit easier this year, but I need to warn you all that you need to prepare for next year. Because the bookkeeping gimmicks will be over, the reserves will be depleted and we'll still have the \$45 million increase from the previous year on our pension payment." He added, "So we're going to have to come up with real cuts next year."

Before the mayor's most recent budget revision, hundreds of artists and their supporters protested outside City Hall against the proposed cuts. At another City Hall meeting last week, a spare conference room had to be opened to accommodate all those who had arrived to express their opposition to the mayor's budget.

While many came to protest the cuts to arts programs, others came to address other vital social needs that are neglected by the city. The city's crumbling infrastructure was a major cause of concern, especially among those who told the City Council about the lack of public transportation and poor roads for bicyclists. Others decried the lack of public parks for children, such as in San Ysidro (adjacent to the US-Mexico border), which only has two parks, one of them built in 1927.

Advocates for the homeless also spoke up at the meeting, with many in attendance carrying signs that read: “Homelessness is to San Diego as unsafe drinking water is to Flint, Michigan.” Unlike most City Council meetings, which are by and large ignored by the population, recent meetings have seen higher and higher attendances.

The WSWs spoke to several attendees at the meeting, including Steve, a city worker. He called the budget proposals “short-sighted and deliberate,” before adding, “The council has already made up their mind on these matters, so the people here unfortunately are speaking to deaf ears.”

“Everything that is needed by the people is getting cut. The homeless aren’t addressed, and the proposed billions in cuts are undoubtedly going to hit the arts the hardest, not even addressing our infrastructure problem and how unsafe some of these streets are.”

Steve also noticed that more people were coming to the meetings. “This is a major first,” he said. “You typically see the same types of figures out at these type of things, but this time people came out in large numbers. It really shows how the situation is becoming.”

Katie, an opera singer, told our reporters how the initial proposed cuts would impact local artists. “Performers and artists have to already work multiple jobs just to make ends meet and a 30 percent cut will erase jobs,” she said.

“If the budget passes and the cuts are made, then the money will have to be made up somewhere. A lot of the money is dependent on ticket sales, so those will probably go up and a lot of the arts will have to grow even more dependent on the wealthy donors, which is unfortunate.”

Jose, a film student, told the WSWs that the city avoids a lot of other social problems as well, including homelessness, which is rampant in San Diego: “I think for a lot of people in there, they represent some of the major interests that this city needs to provide for. Homelessness is going up, the police are stealing their stuff, and a lot of the roads are messed up.”

He noted how “a lot of officials in our government do not represent the people’s interest. Here specifically they want to cut our programs for city development when that is one of the major priorities.

“They should be helping out with the homeless

instead of kicking them out to a different part of town. Where are they really going to go? Why should we pay more taxes to pay for things that our government officials should already be paying for? We have billions of dollars in a reserve fund when much of that money can be used for things right now.”

Mayor Faulconer let it be known what the city’s real priorities were when he also announced as part of his revised budget proposal that he would set aside \$100,000 for a national police chief and an additional \$150,000 to study how the city can recruit and retain more police.



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