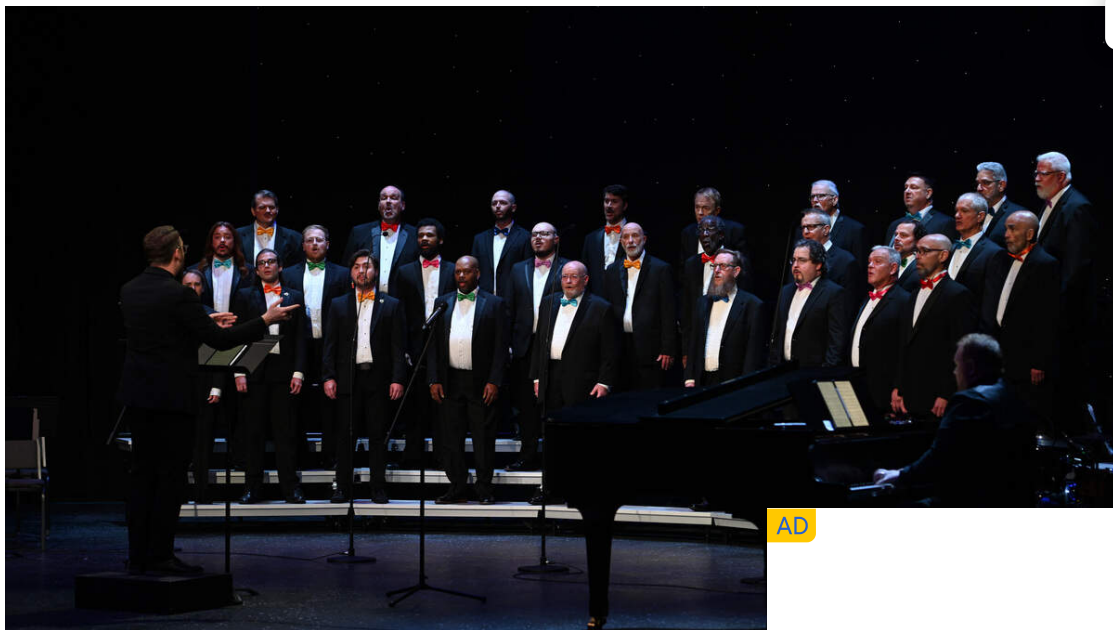


POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Funding the arts 'includes us,' says LGBTQ+ chorus denied grant by SC

By Lucy Valeski

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The Greenville Gay Men's Chorus Photo courtesy of Greenville Gay Men's Chorus, by Naki

Mary Adam was first introduced to the Greenville Gay Men's Chorus as an audience member. The 36-member group performed at her church.

“It’s usually a family event,” Adam said. “It’s all very lighthearted and positive and meaningful. Honestly, some of the songs might get more serious about a gay experience. Many times, you see people in the audience being brought to tears at connecting to whatever the message of that song might be. So it’s very powerful and, to me, just very important.”

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Adam became the chorus’ executive director after the role was created this year. But on Thursday, the chorus learned it would not receive state funding to pay some of its expenses, including a pianist, performance venue rent and Adam’s part-time salary.

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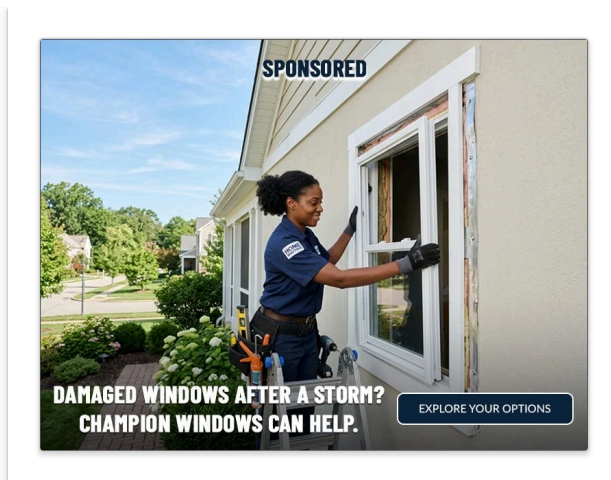
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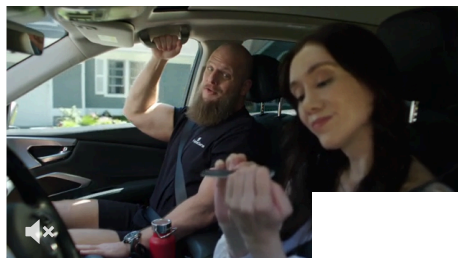
The Greenville Gay Men’s Chorus and Proud Mary, a Spartanburg-based group, will not receive grants intended to support their organizations’ 5-3 vote by the board of the S.C. Arts Commission Thursday.

No public discussion was held by the board before or after the vote. The Arts Commission did not pick up a phone call or email requesting more information. The board met with a lawyer in executive session prior to the public vote, and the meeting was entirely virtual.



Before the October meeting, reasons for withholding grant money were varied. One board member said funding the groups could defy an executive order from President Donald Trump in an email obtained by the ACLU of South Carolina. Another questioned the “artistic merit” of the programs in an August meeting and said in an email he could not defend funding the organizations to skeptical state legislators.

The ACLU of South Carolina said not providing state funding to the groups may violate the First Amendment.



“We look forward to a time when decisions are made with integrity and not based upon bias,” wrote Sally McClellan, the Proud Mary grants chair. “We look forward to a time when artists, and we are not discriminated against because of the people represented in our shows. That just isn’t today.”

About \$3.7 million for arts organizations around the state was held in June. At an August meeting, the board authorized funding for most organizations but held back money from the two, LGBTQ+-aligned groups.

The board also approved a resolution in August to [restrict grants for projects that “promote ideology” or are obscene.](#)

“The General Assembly holds this commission accountable for maintaining community standards, and the Commission has concerns about two programs that were presented, the Gay Men’s Chorus and Proud Mary Theatre Group,” said board member Rip Parks during the August meeting. “What we question is the artistic merit of these two programs. And so what we’re going to request as a commission is that these two organizations return to the commission and further explain and actually defend the artistic merit of these two programs.”

The commission then sent questions to both organizations about how the grant funding would be used and if the groups would do any in-school programming using the money. The grants the Arts Commission evaluated Thursday were for operational costs for an arts organization, including rent, staff salaries or utility bills.



The organization’s responses were presented to the board before the vote.

Both organizations said they did not spend state money on in-school programming. The Greenville Gay Men’s Chorus would have spent the grant on three part-time salaries, a bookkeeper, a photographer, a videographer, insurance, security, tax filing, licensing, a storage unit, venue rental, printed programs, a PO box, printer ink, paper, computer software, memberships and board development.

Proud Mary’s budget would fund a production of “The Book of Merman,” a parody, which includes payment to creative staff. Funding for a musical review of “spooky songs” from Broadway was also in the budget.

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The Greenville Gay Men’s Chorus initially expected to receive about \$13,000 in grant funding for the fiscal year. That’s about 13% of their roughly \$100,000 budget. Proud Mary expected to receive about \$2,000 in grant money for the same period.

“While we have done amazing things with few resources, our ticket sales do not cover the cost of productions, in part because we want to keep ticket prices at a rate that our community can afford them,” McCellan wrote in an email. “We, therefore, rely on grants and donations to literally keep the lights on. So, when our funding is

delayed or jeopardized, harm is done. And in this case, not just to Proud Mary Theatre Company, but to the arts in SC, in general. It's been a sad time.”

Why did Arts Commission deny grants?

No explanation of the board's 5-3 vote was given Thursday.



In an email obtained by the ACLU of South Carolina, Parks said Proud Mary and the Greenville Gay Men's Chorus were “totally inconsistent” with what the Arts Commission wanted to promote. He also expressed concern that legislators could pull funding from the commission if they awarded grants to the two groups. A spokesperson for the Arts Commission did not respond to an email requesting verification of the documents.

“I could not defend these programs to concerned legislators who could pull funding for the entire Commission over support of these organizations,” Parks said in an email obtained through a FOIA request by the ACLU and shared with The State.

Reviewers scored more than 100 organizations' requests for state grant funding and gave their recommendations to the board to approve. The Greenville Gay Men's Chorus received 87 out of 100 possible points in their grant application, according to a review obtained by executive director Adam and shared with The State. The chorus was scored on artistic merit, artistic excellence and public participation by three anonymous reviewers.

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Senate Majority Leader Shane Massey, R-Edgefield, urged some members of the commission to review projects and ensure they were in line with a majority of taxpayers' values earlier this year. He had concerns about grants awarded by the commission to projects he said were sexually explicit. Massey sat on the committee responsible for allowing the members to continue serving.

"I'm supportive of the commission, I think it does good work. That disappointed me," Massey said during a March confirmation hearing, referring to an emerging artist grant recipient. "But those types of awards are the things that get funding stripped... I would encourage you to pay very close attention to those things."

Massey said Wednesday he didn't know the details or merits of the groups in question.

"I think that the commission ought to review what the projects are, and whether it's an LGBT group or a church group, if the project is something that is just not appropriate, they shouldn't award a grant for it," Massey said.

Board member Jessica Rourke said in an email obtained by the ACLU she could not support the two groups, citing a Trump administration executive order barring public funds from being used to promote "gender ideology." 

"My decision is based on a personal and governance principle: funding should not be directed toward organizations with sexual orientations, nor should public funds support drag shows," Rourke wrote.

The ACLU of South Carolina disagreed. The executive order only applied to federal funding and the relevant portion was declared unlawful, ACLU legal director Allen Chaney wrote in a letter to the board. Plus, Chaney wrote, denying funding over a viewpoint disagreement would violate the First Amendment.

“Rather than turning from its values, we merely ask that the Commission continue to evaluate LGBTQ-focused affinity groups and arts organizations on the same artistic-merit criteria it applies to every other applicant,” Chaney wrote.

Adam said the Greenville Gay Men’s Chorus received donations following the funding disruption and could continue its performances. But not funding the chorus is a test for the commission to deny grants to other LGBT artists, Adam said.

“If you’re going to fund the arts, that includes us,” Adam said.

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Lucy Valeski is a politics and statehouse reporter at The State. She recently graduated from the University of Missouri, where she studied journalism and political science.



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