



# Rockford Area Arts Council

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The Rockford Area Arts Council supports, promotes, and develops access to the arts for everyone.

**2026-2028 Arts Council Funding Request: \$125,000/year - \$375,000 Total**

**Agency:** Rockford Area Arts Council (RAAC)

**Mission:** *The Rockford Area Arts Council supports, promotes, and develops access to the arts for everyone.*

**Executive Director:** Mary McNamara Bernsten

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**Annual Operating Budget (FY26):** \$1.67 million\*

\*Includes USEPA Grant (\$1.54 million over two years) restricted solely for environmental remediation of the Armory.

**Typical RAAC Operating Budget:** \$800,000–\$900,000

**City of Rockford Support Structure for Rockford Region Cultural Plan (RRCP) Implementation:**

- RRCP supported, in part, by the City of Rockford and completed in July 2024
    - o Four Goals identified by the community
      - Youth and Arts Education
      - Advocacy and Policy
      - Inclusivity and Intersectional Collaboration
      - Neighborhood & Space Development
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## Why Funding the Arts Council Matters

The City of Rockford’s investment in the Arts Council delivers significant value. The city does not have its own arts and culture department or dedicated staff; our agency provides essential services that ensure equitable access to the arts, strengthen the creative sector, and enhance quality of life for residents and visitors. In doing so, we serve as the city’s arts and culture infrastructure, allowing the City of Rockford to achieve these outcomes while avoiding the substantial costs of building and maintaining municipal staffing for this work. Investment in the Rockford Area Arts Council:

- Strengthens Rockford’s creative economy, thereby increasing home and business values
  - Provides safe, high-quality, trauma-informed programs for youth
  - Supports the redevelopment of a major historic in service of the Rockford Region Cultural Plan
  - Expands equitable access to arts & culture and elevates the creative sector as an economic force
  - Supports the mental, emotional, and social well-being of children and families
  - Establishes long-term sustainability for Rockford’s arts & culture ecosystem
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- LOOKING AHEAD TO 2026-2028
  - **Youth and Arts Education**
    - Establish 3-year grant funding for SPARK! after-school program at Washington Park
    - Expand SPARK! in the Park from four to six weeks
    - Develop a collaborative strategy for populating parks and public school grounds with SPARK! public art
    - Provide accessibility training for arts instructors + public
    - Select and support the City of Rockford Poet Laureate and Youth Poet
    - Support and promote the national program, Poetry Out Loud
  - **Advocacy and Policy**
    - Host the annual State of Culture event with collaborative partners
    - Establish annual County funding commitment
    - Strategize a regional “% for the Arts” program
    - Lead 2026 Capitol Day for the Arts and inform the State of Illinois bipartisan Creative Caucus
    - Host quarterly Creative Sector Round Tables (24/year) for literary, performing, visual, and digital artists and musicians
    - Connect local businesses and individuals to creative contractors
    - Continued advocacy for arts & culture at the local, state, and federal levels
  - **Inclusivity and Intersectional Collaboration**
    - Secure multi-year funding for programs that address the social/emotional health of our region’s residents
    - Coordinate with the COR’s Public Works for predetermined public art installations
    - Host our annual Business of Art Forum, a resource workshop for creatives
    - Collaborate on grant/funding research through the County and Region 1
    - Expand Winnebago County Community Mental Health Board 2026-2028 grant submission to cover:
      - Development of SPARK! Vets through American Legion – Post 340 and Veterans Memorial – Art Therapy and enrichment programs for Veterans
      - Development of SPARK! 55 – Art Therapy and enrichment programs for Seniors
  - **Neighborhood & Space Development**
    - Armory:
      - Comply with the US EPA environmental remediation grant
      - Initiate and complete the environmental remediation of the Armory
    - Public Art: Establish annual agreements with local partners

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- Rockford Park District
- RPS and Harlem public schools
- City of Rockford
- Cultural District Designation:
  - Help facilitate convenings and synthesize the community input
  - Create community-driven priorities for utilizing grant funds to develop the South Main Corridor's Cultural District

**The City of Rockford has funded the important work of the Rockford Area Arts Council since 1981, and we are grateful for your continued support. Together, we make the City of Rockford a vibrant community, a fun place to visit, and a home!**

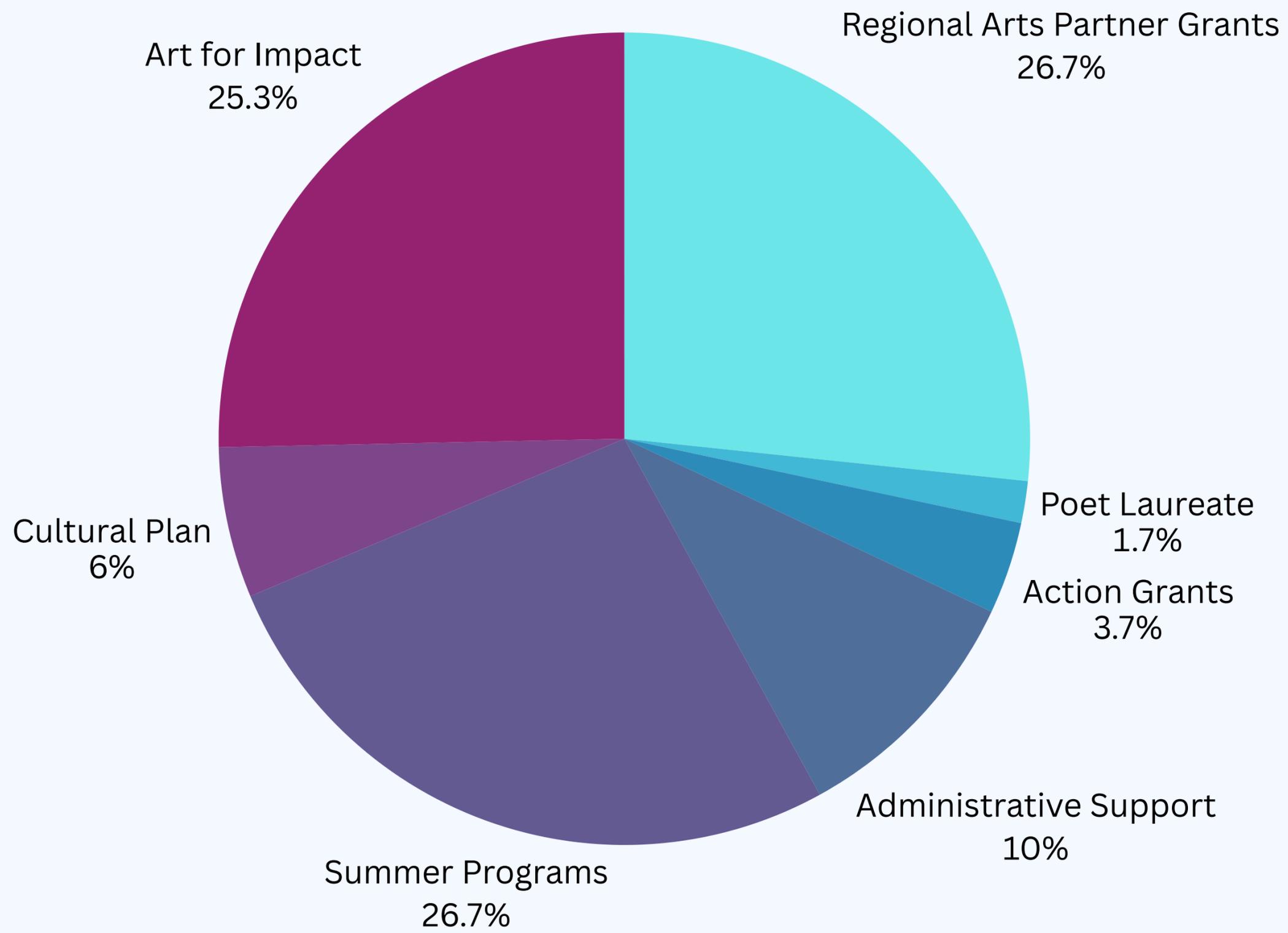
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# FY 2025 City of Rockford/RAAC Analysis

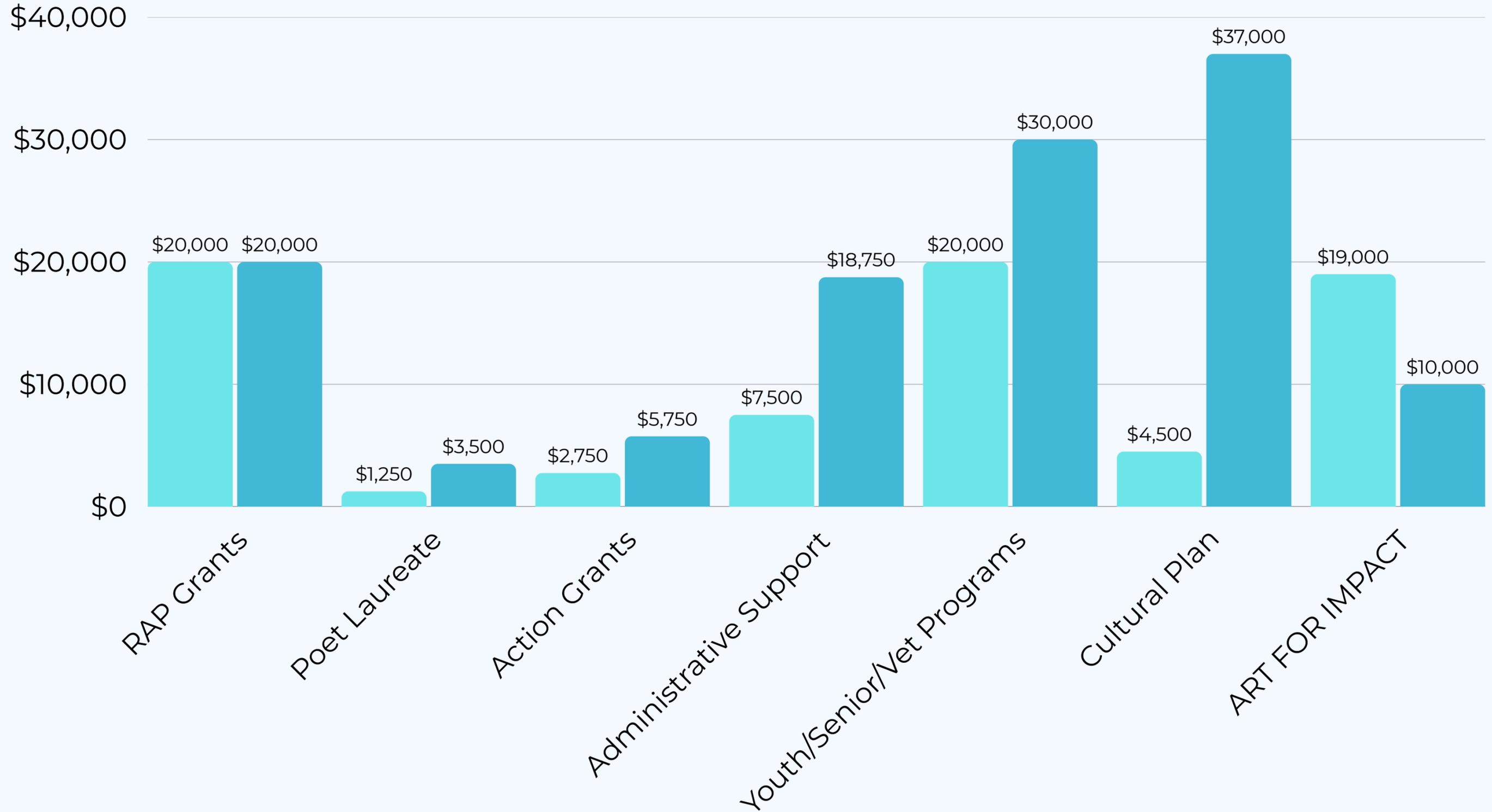


# Funding Breakdown



# FY 2025 vs 2026 Spending

FY 2025 Proposed FY 2026





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## City of Rockford – 2025 Annual Report

- **Since July 2024 and the completion of the Rockford Region Cultural Plan**
  - Youth and Arts Education (all programs listed are free and open to the public)
    - Extended SPARK! @Washington Park Community Center after-school arts program
    - Increased FREE summer SPARK! programs by 56%
    - Developed a Youth Arts Directory for arts instruction and experiences
    - Provided accessibility training for RAAC arts instructors and artseducators
  - Advocacy and Policy
    - Hosted first annual State of Culture with collaborative partners—COR, Park District, GoRockford, IceHogs, RAMP
    - Supported the City of Rockford’s allocation of \$250,000 for arts & culture-related projects and programs
    - Strategized County Funding mechanisms and developed advocates
    - Researching ‘% for the Arts’ programs, as modeled in comp communities
    - Served as captain of the annual Capitol Day for the Arts in Springfield
      - Established the first-ever bipartisan legislative Creative Caucus
    - Developed quarterly Round Tables for the Creative Sector (24 total/year)
    - Connected local businesses and individuals to creative contractors
  - Inclusivity and Intersectional Collaboration
    - Achieved funding for SPARK! @Washington Park through Winnebago County Community Mental Health Board—officially addressing the social and emotional health of WPCC youth through curriculum and assessments
    - Developed annual Business of Art – artist resource workshop
    - Working with County/R1 for grant/funding research
  - Neighborhood & Space Development
    - Collaborated with Rockford Park District and ComEd to install a public sculpture at Brown Park
    - Collaborated with Rockford Park District to install public art at Haskell STEAM elementary
    - Collaborated with Burpee Natural History Museum to install a public sculpture at the entrance to their building
    - Purchased the National Armory building – 2030 Cultural Civic Center
    - Worked with COR to achieve the State of Illinois Cultural District Designation

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## Media Links:

- Arts Council Summer Programs on [RAAC YouTube Channel](#)
- Mary with Dr. Yarbrough, [Harlem High School Podcast](#)
- Armory
  - o [RockRiver Current](#) – Armory article, Kevin Haas
  - o [Transform Rockford Interview](#) – Wally Haas
  - o [WNIJ](#) – Yvonne Boose
- [Morning Blend](#): Andy Gannon and Maggie Polsean
- [WNIJ/Public Radio: Yvonne Boose reports on inevitable NEA/Federal funding challenges](#)
- [WIFR – Arts Awards](#)
- [WIFR – Round Tables](#)
- [WIFR – Night of the State of Culture](#)
- [WIFR – Morning Blend](#)
- [The Bull, 95.3: Interview with Steve and Ryan – the best media coverage](#) 🧡 🧡
- [The Bull, 95.3: This week in the Stateline, with Steve Summers](#)
- [SPARK! Mosaic 2025](#), artist Susan Burton
- [City of Rockford Poet Laureate and City of Rockford Youth Poet](#), Arts Council website
- [Harlem High School, Dr. Yarbrough's Arts podcast](#)
- [Haskell Elementary School, SPARK! Mosaic installation – Rock River Current](#)
- [The Bull, 95.3: This week in the Stateline, State of Culture recap and Fall ArtScene with Steve Summers](#)

## State and National Recognition:

- **State of Illinois recognition** for the Illinois Arts Council's [‘The Muse’ online publication](#) – Poetry Out Loud, Rockford is IL winner
- **National recognition** for Americans for the Arts annual conference, June 2025 – [RAAC will present with Lord](#)

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## 2025 Activities

- **January 2025 – Regional Arts Partner Grant Reception:** 25 grant recipients were recognized and celebrated during the Arts Council’s January Board Meeting.
- **January 2025 – City of Rockford Poet Laureate:** The Arts Council installed the city’s third Poet Laureate at the January City Council Meeting.
- **February 2025 – City of Rockford Youth Poet:** The Arts Council installed the city’s fourth Youth Poet at the February City Council Meeting.
- **February 2025 – Poetry Out Loud Regional Competition:** The Arts Council facilitated the Northwest Regional Poetry Out Loud competition at Jefferson High School.
- **March 2025 – Artists & Arts Organizations Round Tables:** Musicians, literary, visual, and performing artists, along with arts and culture agencies, met to discuss strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, identifying resources for future collaboration.
- **March 7, 2025 – Rockford Area Arts Awards:** The Arts Council hosted its annual awards program, recognizing regional artists for their contributions. Nominations came from community leaders, organizations, and peers, with winners selected by an experienced review panel.
- **March 2025 – Poetry Out Loud State Competition:** The Arts Council supported Northwest Region champion Mikiah Gerrity at the state competition.
- **April 2025 – Spring ArtScene:** The spring edition of the biannual gallery walk showcased local visual artists in themed shows across multiple venues, with select locations featuring live music.
- **May 2025 – Poetry Out Loud National Competition:** The Arts Council supported Illinois State Champion Mikiah Gerrity at the national competition in Washington, D.C.
- **June 2025 – SPARK! Mosaic:** The Arts Council’s summer youth program offered high-quality arts instruction with artist Susan Burton, serving 29 youth—an increase from the previous year.
- **July 2025 – SPARK! in the Park:** A two-week youth arts program served 100 participants, doubling attendance from the previous year. Programming included 2D and 3D visual arts, dance, and movement.
- **July 2025 – Public Art Installation:** The Arts Council installed *Carrying the Dream*, a sculpture at the Rockford Public Library created by seven artists to convey a message of racial healing.
- **August 2025 – SPARK! Somnium:** The youth arts program expanded to serve 30 middle and high school students, welcoming middle school participants for the first time.
- **September 2025 – Creative Community Summer Social:** The first annual event brought together individuals from diverse arts backgrounds to connect and network.
- **September 2025 – State of Culture:** The first annual event featured a panel discussion on integrating the Rockford Region Cultural Plan into various agencies’ strategic plans.
- **October 2025 – Fall ArtScene:** The fall edition of the biannual gallery walk highlighted local visual artists, with select venues featuring live music.
- **November 2025 – Business of Art Forum:** The Arts Council hosted its second annual forum, providing a platform for Rockford-area creatives to discuss professional and financial challenges, share experiences, and explore growth opportunities.