

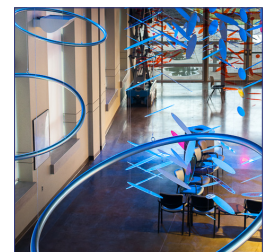
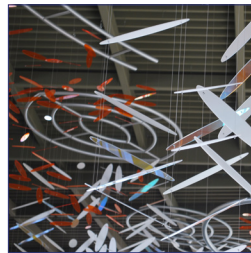


OKLAHOMA Arts

Walls That Work

A Practical Guide to Commissioning Murals

A Resource for Oklahoma Communities



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Introduction

Murals are one of the most visible and accessible forms of public art. When thoughtfully planned and executed, they can strengthen community pride, support local artists, and activate public spaces.

This guide was developed by the Oklahoma Arts Council's Art in Public Places Program to support communities, organizations, and property owners interested in commissioning murals. It outlines best practices for planning, funding, selecting artists, installing murals, and ensuring their long-term care.

While every project is unique, the following recommendations reflect common approaches used by successful public art programs across the United States.

Information in this guide is designed to provide assistance with developing, administering, and coordinating the creation of murals and other public art. It is produced by the Oklahoma Arts Council as the official state agency and leader for the arts in Oklahoma.

About the Oklahoma Arts Council

The Oklahoma Arts Council serves as the official state agency for the arts and works to advance public access to the arts across Oklahoma. Through programs such as Art in Public Places, the Council supports communities, artists, and public institutions in developing meaningful public art projects that strengthen community pride and enhance public spaces throughout the state.

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Key Definitions and Terminology

Artist Call: A public announcement requesting artists to apply for an artistic opportunity, usually containing information on eligibility, scope, budget, and selection criteria. Done through an RFP (Request for Proposals) or RFQ (Request for Qualifications).

Budget: The total allocated funds for a project that typically covers compensation for the artist, materials, equipment, insurance, site prep, and maintenance contingencies.

Community Engagement: Activities that involve local residents or stakeholders in the artistic process, such as meetings, workshops, and surveys.

Contract: A legally binding document outlining the responsibilities, rights, payment terms, timeline, copyright, and liabilities for a project.

Fabrication: The physical production of an artwork, including surface preparation, painting, installation, and finishing treatments.

Maintenance Plan: An outline of the expected life of an artwork that includes care requirements and conservation methods for its upkeep.

Mural: Considered public art, as opposed to commercial signage, a mural is a large-scale artwork painted or applied directly onto a wall or surface.

Selection Committee: A group of stakeholders—such as arts professionals, community members, and project partners—who are tasked with reviewing submissions and making recommendations.

VARA (Visual Artists Rights Act): A U.S. federal law that protects certain rights of visual artists. It gives artists the right to be credited for their work and to prevent intentional damage, destruction or major changes to their artwork that could harm their reputation.



Oklahoma Welcomes You by Alexander Tamahn, Oklahoma Art in Public Places, Tulsa International Airport

Why Murals Matter: Community, Culture, and Economic Impact

Murals are one of the most visible and accessible forms of public art. Installed in shared spaces, they allow communities to experience art in their everyday environments and contribute to the cultural character of a place.

Public art initiatives, including murals, can benefit communities in many ways:

- Strengthen community pride
- Activate underutilized or overlooked spaces
- Enhance the visual character of neighborhoods and districts
- Support local economic activity and cultural tourism
- Create opportunities for artists and creative professionals
- Encourage community engagement and participation
- Improve perceptions of safety and stewardship in public spaces



Indigenous Brilliance by Joseph Erb, First Americans Museum

According to a 2023 joint survey by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Bureau of Economic Analysis, the arts and cultural sectors contributed **\$5.4 billion** and employed almost 50,000 people in Oklahoma.

Project Leadership and Stakeholders

Public Art Selection Committee

Art can be used to reflect unique local history, culture, and landscapes. Participation in public art projects can encourage community engagement and is commonly done through local stakeholders taking part in a selection committee.

The selection committee typically participates in the review of key milestones of the project, including reviewing and approving the artist call, budgets, artist selection, conceptual design, safety, long-term maintenance plans, construction documents, and the installation process. They are also typically expected to attend dedication ceremonies and associated events pertaining to the new public artwork. Real or perceived conflicts of interest should be disclosed and impacted decision-makers should abstain from involvement in the process, when necessary.

Identifying Stakeholders, Allies, and Collaborators

- Local business owners, residents, government entities, tribal nations, businesses, and nonprofit administrators.
- Creative professionals who work in fields like design, architecture, performing arts, film, literature, artists—emerging, established, crafters, makers, knowledge holders—along with educators and students.

Defining the Vision: Theme, Purpose, and Community Engagement

Theme

When it comes to the thematic content of public art, context is important. The location of the mural, the local history, and the people in the area should be considered. Sensitivity should be exercised when proposing and designing public art. Caricatures and derogatory depictions of people and cultures are discouraged. Check local ordinances on what is considered obscene and review rules surrounding decency.

Purpose

When planning a mural, defining the goals of the project can be helpful. Consider what is being communicated, what it contributes, and what is its potential impact. These are questions that can drastically shape the final outcome.

Community Engagement

If community engagement is one of the key goals of the project, consider ways to involve the community. Possibilities could include identifying potential mural locations, suggesting artists, recommending themes and content, serving on selection committees, and providing volunteer assistance.



Welcome to Oklahoma by Rhiana Deck, Oklahoma Art in Public Places, OKC Will Rogers International Airport

Site Selection: Choosing the Right Wall

Site Selection

When selecting potential sites for public art such as murals, location plays a significant role in public perception and the “success” of the art. Look for places in the community that could benefit from a creative intervention.

Note: A mural is a commitment from the artists, the commissioning bodies, and the property owners—once an artwork is installed, the artist has moral rights (see VARA) and will need to be notified of alterations and removal.



Imagine Hope by Carlos Barboza, Oklahoma Art in Public Places, Workforce Community Hope Center

Written permission from the property owner should be secured before moving forward with a mural project. Agreements between the commissioning body, the artist, and the property owner help clarify responsibilities related to installation, maintenance, and the potential future removal of the artwork. Such agreements are often incorporated into the project contract or memorialized through a separate site agreement

More questions to ask when considering a potential wall:

- Who owns the wall? Is it a part of something?
- How will people see the wall? On foot, by car, bicycle, or other forms of transportation?
- Is it historic and will approval be needed from respective commissions and entities?
- Has the wall previously been painted? What prep work is needed?
- What direction will water flow? Are mitigation measures needed?
- What is the condition of the wall? Are repairs needed prior to mural installation?

Places that could be potential candidates for a project artwork:

- Cultural or business districts
- Sites that are targeted for new development
- Underutilized spaces
- Sites that are slated for public or private capital projects

Public spaces like libraries, parks, highways and other transportation corridors, municipal buildings, and other public buildings are good possible sites and increase the likelihood of public engagement. Consider events held in the community, such as concerts, fairs, historic celebrations, seasonal festivities, and farmers' markets.

Historic buildings

Listing on the **National Register of Historic Places** may impact modifications allowed to a building or site and can impact the types of art that may be installed. Verify the status of a wall with the owner of the building or site. If part of a designated historic building, site, or district, research what the rules are regarding installing new art before altering a surface. Actions such as demolition, significant alterations, and removing character-definition features without official approval can violate preservation guidelines and local zoning laws. If the site exists in a historic district, research rules regarding the installation of new art as it could impact the district's designation.

Beyond approval, consider reversible methods, such as mounting, that can avoid causing severe damage to historic surfaces. **Materials such as brick may have complications with breathability and moisture.** Existing paint may not be chemically compatible with contemporary materials, and **removal may be prohibited depending on the historical designation.** (See the National Parks Service Best Practices Guide and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties for more in-depth information.)



Pathway to Hope Public Art Trail: Joining Hands by Shane Allbritton and Norman Lee of RE:site Studio, Oklahoma Art in Public Places

Funding Murals: Budgets and Funding Sources

Getting Started: Small Projects Can Have Big Impact

Communities don't need a large budget to begin incorporating murals into their public spaces. Many successful mural programs start with a single project that helps build community interest and experience.

Pilot projects can serve as an opportunity to test processes, develop partnerships, and build support for future projects.

Over time, communities may expand their efforts into larger mural initiatives or broader public art programs.

Funding

Can come from a combination of public and private sponsors:

- Individuals
- Business owners
- Chambers of commerce or Main Street associations
- Municipal or county leaders or departments
- Nonprofit organizations or foundations

Crowdfunding can be a viable option. Grants are often available from local, regional, and national funders to support art in communities, but grants are often very competitive. Advance planning is needed. Research what stipulations there are for using grants and taxpayer money. Stipulations can vary by source and opportunity, and can range from minimum length of display time and building restrictions to specific thematic content or programming. For example, a grant may stipulate that a mural must remain and be maintained for 20 years, it must not go beyond a certain height, and it must include a community engagement project. Exploring creative ways to raise funds can be another option for generating interest and engagement.

Funds for public art, specifically murals, cover more than just the labor and paint. Expenses such as administrative fees and maintenance should be detailed in the contract and payment schedule.

Donation of materials, such as paint or the use of equipment, can be part of a project; however, donations should not discount the labor put into the artwork by the artists. Depending on the funding and commissioning structure, donations could be considered in-kind, but these should be reviewed by legal and business counsel before being pursued.

For example, a small, outdoor mural (100 sq ft) could be priced around \$2,500 whereas a larger, public mural (300 sq ft) might be priced closer to \$7,000-9,000.

Best Practice: Fair Artist Compensation

Artists should be compensated fairly for their time, design work, and labor. Public art projects often require significant planning, community engagement, and technical preparation beyond painting itself.

Providing clear payment schedules, proposal honoraria, and professional contracts helps ensure successful projects and attracts experienced artists.

The budget for the proposed project should include funds to pay the artists. Artists may be commissioned by the hour, by square footage, or through a flat fee for the whole project. This should be explicit in the contract and may be negotiated by both parties.

The national average price of commissioning a mural is between \$15-40/sq ft, but this price is influenced by a number of factors. Size, scale, artist expertise, design complexity, surface prep requirements, the need for equipment such as scaffolding and lifts, travel costs, and the planned lifecycle of a mural can all influence the cost.



Pathway to Hope Public Art Trail: Doorways to Hope by Marlon F. Hall and Gordon Huether, Oklahoma Art in Public Places

Budget

Overall budget, sample proposal consisting of artist fee, travel, insurance, equipment rental.

Labor		
Artist fee	40%	\$8,000
Assistants/subcontractors	10%	\$2,000
Materials		
Supplies	15%	\$3,000
Equipment	10%	\$2,000
Protective Coating	5%	\$1,000
Administration		
Maintenance	15%	\$3,000
Contingency	5%	\$1,000

A good rule of thumb is to reserve 10% of the total project budget for maintenance.

Sample Schedule	
Committee Formation	January 2026
RFQ	February 2-April 20
Shortlist	April 27
Final Selection Meeting	May 11
Artist Proposal Development	May 11-June 15
Artist Presentation and Selection Meeting	June 19
Stakeholders and Final Review	June 22
Install	July-August

Artist Selection and Review Process

After the selection committee is established, the proposed site is decided upon, and funding is attained, it is time to find the artist or artist team to make the creative project come to life. A call for artists with the details of the proposed project (site, potential theme, budget, preferred media, size, etc.) should be released as an RFQ or an RFP.



Installation of *Pathway to Hope Public Art Trail: Visionaries* by Alexander Tamahn and Joel Daniel Phillips, Oklahoma Art in Public Places

The selection should be based on artistic approach, technical skill, experience, budget, and the artist's approach to safety and project management.

In order to catch the interest of potential applicants, next steps include:

- Announce the opportunity on the commissioning body's communication streams (website, newsletter, social media platforms, etc.).
- Contact regional arts councils, arts centers, community colleges, universities, and other arts-related organizations.
- Share via word of mouth with artists and others in the creative industries.

RFQ vs. RFP: Choosing the Right Artist Call

Request for Qualifications (RFQ)

- Asks for artists to submit credentials (resumes, portfolios)
- Used to build a qualified shortlist
- Well-suited for broad searches and large projects
- Focuses on examples of completed work

Request for Proposals (RFP)

- Artists submit specific, detailed proposals (conceptual drafts, sketches, budgets, etc.)
- Smaller, more defined calls and final selections
- Provides an honorarium payment for submission and/or presentation of the proposal

Sometimes RFQs are used to precede RFPs for a selected group of finalists. Due to the substantial amount of work required for an RFP, artists may be deterred from applying if compensation is not provided. **Attract the best talent to your project by providing competitive compensation.**

Contracting

When commissioning an artist or artist team, it is essential to have a written contract agreed upon by all parties, which may be reviewed by legal and/or business counsel. This typically includes the following:

- Clearly defined scope of work
- Budget (cost of materials, administrative fees, allocated maintenance, etc.)
- Schedule of design, fabrication, and installation
- Payment schedule
- Intellectual property rights
- Waivers for volunteers, if applicable
- Maintenance and lifespan



Installation of *Imagine Hope* by Carlos Barboza, Oklahoma Art in Public Places, Workforce Community Hope Center

Depending on the project scale, contracts may require artists or contractors to carry general liability insurance during fabrication and installation. Commissioning bodies should consult with legal or risk management professionals to determine appropriate coverage requirements.

Artists should retain copyright to their artwork (see VARA in Definitions and in Resources); however, it should be expected that artists grant a license to the contracting agency for use of images of the artwork for publicity, educational, and promotional purposes. Artists, along with the commissioning bodies/owners, should receive credit for their respective roles in commissioned artworks.

Administrators and commissioning bodies should not ask artists to appropriate or use design concepts by other artists. Artists should have agreements with their subcontractors in regards to fabrication and installation, if applicable, and should include all relevant elements of the prime contract in the subcontract agreements.

Fabrication and Installation

Preparation and Fabrication

When planning a public artwork such as a mural, consider its projected lifecycle, and be mindful of how the site and surface can play significant factors in longevity. Sun exposure, moisture, and other weather-related elements can deteriorate or damage artworks over time, especially if it is outdoors. Preventative measures, such as tactful site selection, proper preparation of the site, and high quality materials (including anti-graffiti coatings and UV-resistant sealants) can extend the life of a mural, though maintenance and occasional touch-ups should be kept in mind (and budget) depending on the anticipated lifecycle of the mural.

Prior to installation, technical aspects such as lighting and signage may require consideration and planning. From the design stage to the installation stage, the artists (and their subcontractors) are to follow the schedule previously laid out in the contract and agreed upon.

If painting on a building is not an option, temporary or semi-permanent mural options to explore include:

- Chalk murals
- Wheat-paste installations
- Images affixed to panels or canvases that can be attached

Installation and Completion

Ensure that surrounding businesses and other entities are aware that a mural is being commissioned. Additional signage and work indicators may be useful, especially if there is use of ladders and heavy machinery involved. This is for the safety of both the artists and the public.

Maintenance and Conservation

Conservation Best Practice

Maintenance and conservation plans should be discussed and mutually agreed upon. A detailed and feasible maintenance plan should be prepared by the artists with information on who is responsible for taking care of the mural, how they will be informed of damage, liability insurance, and permissions. In the event that an artwork is damaged, it is considered best practice for administrators/commissioning bodies to consult with the artists about repairs, though they are not obligated to if they use best conservation practices.

VARA: Artists Federal Rights

According to the Visual Artist Rights Act (VARA), an artist can waive their right to have the artwork credited to them in the event of damage, alteration, or destruction of the artwork that is not to the artist's satisfaction or without their approval if they believe it no longer represents their work.

Property owners or commissioning bodies are legally required to notify the artist before removing or altering a mural, unless the artist has formally waived these rights in writing. Removal or painting over a mural without an artist's consent can result in legal consequences.

When possible, maintenance, restoration, or touch-ups should be performed by the original artist or by a qualified conservator familiar with mural conservation practices to ensure the integrity of the artwork is maintained.



Pathway to Hope Public Art Trail: Visionaries by Alexander Tamahn and Joel Daniel Phillips, Oklahoma Art in Public Places

Appendix A – Mural Project Checklist

A Step-by-Step Guide for Commissioning Bodies

Phase 1: Project Foundations

- Define the purpose and goals of the mural
- Identify key stakeholders and form a selection committee
- Establish a preliminary budget
- Confirm wall ownership and obtain written site permission
- Verify zoning, historic status, and required approvals
- Determine projected lifespan of the mural
- Discuss long-term maintenance responsibility

Phase 2: Site and Funding Preparation

- Assess wall condition and required surface preparation
- Evaluate visibility, access, and safety considerations
- Identify funding sources
- Confirm funding stipulations
- Allocate contingency funds (5-10%)
- Reserve maintenance funds (10%)

Phase 3: Artist Procurement

- Determine RFQ or RFP
- Draft artist call
- Publicly announce opportunity
- Assemble selection panel
- Evaluate submissions
- Provide honorarium for finalists
- Select artist/team

Phase 4: Contracting and Pre-Installation

- Execute written contract
- Address copyright (VARA)
- Obtain permits
- Coordinate equipment and site access
- Communicate installation schedule

Phase 5: Installation

- Prepare site
- Confirm safety protocols
- Monitor installation progress
- Document installation

Phase 6: Dedication and Stewardship

- Host dedication/unveiling
- Credit artist and partners
- Archive project documentation
- Implement maintenance plan
- Establish damage reporting process
- Consult artist prior to repairs/removal

Footer note:

Every mural project is unique. This checklist is intended as a general guide and should be adapted to reflect the goals, funding sources, site conditions, and stakeholders involved in each project.

Appendix B — Resources and References

[The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties](#)

[College Art Association Public Art Works Standards & Guidelines](#)

[National Governors Association: Rural Prosperity Through the Arts & Creative Sector](#)

[The Artist’s Guide to the Visual Artists Rights Act \(VARA\)](#)

[The Creative Sector: A Proven Economic Catalyst for Rural America](#)

[How to Reclaim City Roadways and Public Infrastructure with art](#)

[Heartland, Heartwork Field Guide - Springboard For The Arts](#)

[Community & Cultural Assessments - Rural America Placemaking ...](#)

[Community Arts and Culture Guide - IU Center for Rural Engagement](#)

[City of Dallas Office of Arts & Culture “Walls, Y’all!”](#)

[Forecast Public Art - Public Art Network Best Practices](#)

[Mural Arts Institute - Mural Arts Philadelphia](#)



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