
**Baltimore Office of Promotion
and the Arts
Response**

B A L T I M O R E
OFFICE OF PROMOTION & THE ARTS

May 27, 2021

Ms. Isabell Cummings
Inspector General
Office of the Inspector General
200 N. Holiday Street
Baltimore, MD

This letter is a response to the report by the Office of the Inspector General, dated May 4, 2021. The Department of Transportation (DOT) and the Baltimore Office of Promotion & The Arts (BOPA) each have their own Banner Program. As referenced in the current and past agreements between BOPA and Baltimore City, the city provided BOPA with the opportunity to manage a portion of the city's vertical banners to provide an additional source of funding to support art and culture in Baltimore City. As a nonprofit 501 (c)3 that serves as Baltimore's Arts Council, film office and events producer BOPA is appreciative of the designation of our nonprofit to manage and maintain a portion of the vertical banner system in specific areas of the City.

BOPA maintains the vertical banners in our inventory at our expense; conducting a census of existing vertical banner poles, replacing, and repairing hardware as needed and soliciting nonprofit and for-profit organizations to sustain the system through advertising. Banners are priced to defray the cost of providing customer service, scheduling, manufacturing, installing and deinstalling each banner. BOPA must rely on private contractors, charging market rates, for these services. The two tiered pricing system was developed to encourage the use of the system by nonprofit organizations in Baltimore City such as the Aquarium, Visit Baltimore, the Baltimore Convention Center, museums, educational institutions, and other cultural and civic organizations. The higher for-profit rate subsidizes the cost of the nonprofit rate and enables us to cover the cost of servicing the system and provides a modest contribution to support the work BOPA does in Baltimore. BOPA does not have the use of city equipment and we cover our own personnel and insurance expenses so the cost must cover market rates to run the program.

The [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] banners in question were scheduled to be removed at the precise time in 2020 that Baltimore was impacted by the COVID health crisis. The one contractor that provides services for the banner program could not accommodate removal of the banners due to COVID closures and concerns. The pandemic also negatively impacted BOPA, the fundraising that would normally sustain us was abruptly interrupted, it was impossible to attract new signage for the vertical banners and we could not cover the cost of deinstalling the full inventory. I made the practical decision to leave the banners in place until they could be safely de installed and, we had the funds to cover the cost of the

deinstallation which we did as soon as we were able. There was no cost to the city and negligible, if any, benefit to [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] since the city was under quarantine because of the health crisis. Additionally, removing the banners would have had a significant negative impact on BOPA's ability to use what funds we had to provide emergency financial relief and support to the cultural community throughout initial stages of the pandemic. We deemed that to be the greater good.

Never, during my nearly three-year tenure at BOPA and through the recent revalidation of our agreement with Baltimore in 2020, have I received an inquiry about, or a directive to return funds from the vertical banner program to the City's general fund. BOPA, like DOT, will coordinate with the City Administrator's Office to review the division of duties to ensure equitable application of our vertical banner program.

Cordially,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Donna Drew Sawyer". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Donna Drew Sawyer
Chief Executive Officer