

LOCAL NEWS

## Longtime arts champion Bob Lehman tapped to head advocacy group San Diego ART Matters

Before joining San Diego ART Matters, he was executive director of the San Diego Museum Council and tripled its membership in the middle of the pandemic



Since 2021, Lehman has led the San Diego Museum Council as the executive director. He has been named as the new executive director of San Diego ART Matters, the leading arts advocacy group in the region. (San Diego Museum Council)

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Bob Lehman, who has been at the helm of the San Diego Museum Council since 2021, has been named the new executive director of San Diego ART Matters, the region's leading arts advocacy and service organization.

San Diego ART Matters, formed in 1989, was previously known as San Diego Regional Arts and Culture Coalition. It began as an advocacy group aimed at ensuring funding for cultural organizations in the city of San Diego after the city manager proposed to eliminate arts funding accumulated from the city's hotel tax. Since then, it has grown to be a prominent voice in arts matters across California and the United States, partnering with the California Arts Advocates on state issues and Americans for the Arts on national matters. In 2024, the San Diego Regional Arts and Culture Coalition rebranded as San Diego ART Matters.

Lehman, who was the executive director of the San Diego Gay Men's Chorus from 2013 to 2019, didn't waste time in raising the profile of the San Diego Museum Council when he took over in the middle of the pandemic. In the span of just a few years, he increased the council's membership and was a highly visible and vocal advocate for museums across the county.

In the course of a day, it was not unusual to see Lehman hop from one museum to another, posting updates on the council's social media channels and appearing on TV to promote the council and its member organizations.

During his tenure, he tripled the council's membership to more than 100 arts groups and focused on growing its relationship with cross-border cultural institutions.

Lehman said that although he is no longer heading the San Diego Museum Council, he hopes to achieve "a strong partnership between San Diego ART Matters and the San Diego Museum Council that embraces the shared goals and overlapping missions of our organizations."

He added: “Especially in today’s difficult climate, we need to work together, collaborate and share resources. Those are the keys to long-term, sustainable success for us both and will serve as a model for more collaborations and alignments throughout the San Diego region.”

In lieu of a new executive director at the San Diego Museum Council, Tom Felkner, the council’s director of operations, will handle day-to-day business. He will report to the group’s board of directors.

At San Diego ART Matters, Lehman will oversee the growing regional advocacy group as it continues to push for funding, and guide policy in the county’s artistic and cultural landscape. One of its major goals is to focus on artists and arts organizations in rural, unincorporated and underserved communities in San Diego County.

Felicia Shaw, deputy director for San Diego ART Matters, said: “Bob and I are already connected at the hip in so much of our work — through statewide leadership roles with California for the Arts and California Arts Advocates and as appointees to the County of San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture. Having him join SDAM is an easy fit and natural transition in leadership.”

“Hiring Bob as the next executive director of San Diego ART Matters is a major win for our arts and culture community and our region overall,” said James Halliday, interim chair of San Diego ART Matters and vice president and chief advancement officer for ARTS District Liberty Station.

“A thriving creative ecosystem needs passionate and determined advocates and champions. Having both Bob and Felicia at SDAM brings tremendous capacity and vision to the organization. Their combined experience and perspectives on the work will sustain the momentum generated by the accomplishments of the past year and help us build a foundation for the organization’s long-term success.”

Lehman, known around the region and the state for his collaborative and can-do leadership style, said he is excited to have a more prominent platform to advocate for the arts in San Diego County.

“My priority is to further position San Diego ART Matters as a powerful, coordinated, regional voice for our arts and culture community. I want to take the experience I gained from leading the San Diego Museum Council and use that to have a greater, sustainable impact across all neighborhoods and communities.”

“We have extraordinary cultural assets across our region, from tribal museums and rural arts centers to major institutions and cross-border partners. But too many of these organizations are operating without the resources, staffing or long-term stability they need,” he added. “My immediate focus is to help expand access to funding, elevate the voices of our cultural workers, and build the shared infrastructure that allows our creative sector to grow — not just in the city center, but in rural areas and every corner of the region.”

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