

Tips for Artists Applying for Public Art Projects

By Susan Pontious

The following are a few tips for artists who are interested in applying for public art commissions (particularly from a public agency like a municipality.) While these tips have been developed for artists applying for projects from the San Francisco Arts Commission, most cities have similar application procedures.

The Request for Qualifications: This will include the project description, scope of work for the artist, the budget, and application requirements, and the application deadline. Artists are typically asked to submit a professional resume, a letter of interest, and most importantly, examples of past work. Do not wait until the last minute to try to assemble your application and submit. You should expect that you might have questions, or that the internet might go down 5 minutes before the submittal deadline.

What are Selection Panels looking for?

Artistic Quality:

A cohesive, mature body of work

A unique vision or perspective.

Professional level of skill and execution work: professional quality of craftsmanship, mastery of skills and techniques, professional approaches to processes and presentation

Appropriate for the Site : A good fit between the style, skills, interest of artist and the project goals

Evidence of Sufficient Professional Experience, Skill, Maturity to Successfully Execute the Project.

YOUR APPLICATION SHOULD SUPPORT THESE CRITERIA!

Documentation of Past Work: THIS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF THE APPLICATION! Make sure you have good strong images that communicate on their own, without explanation.

Pick your strongest work and strongest images to submit. If you have a weak image of a good work, leave it out. You want every image to have impact, and the panel can't guess at the quality of a work they can't really see.

Submit only images of work for which you are the original creative artist or, in the case of collaboration, share copyright. Often artists have assisted in the creation of a portion of the work by another artist, and want to show that work as an example of their capabilities. Do not do this as you will have wasted one of your precious slides presenting another artist's work. The appropriate place to note this experience is in your resume or letter of interest.

Do not include text in your slides or compile multiple images within one slide as it is hard to read and distracts from the image.

Do not include more than two images of the same work. You want to provide the panel with a good sense of the strength of your body of work, not just the quality of a couple of pieces.

Select work that has been completed; avoid using proposal images as they don't show well.

Do not submit a specific proposal for the site, no matter how terrific you think your idea is.

Provide a brief description (no more than 2 sentences) about each work. Make sure your slide list corresponds to the order in which your images are displayed.

Resume:

Your resume should not be more than 3 pages.

It should support and document your activity as a practicing professional artist

You may want to highlight any experience that supports your qualifications for this project.

Letter of Interest: In my experience, the letter of interest does not play a very significant role in artist selection, but a good letter can be helpful in providing an overview of your professional experience. Think of the letter of interest as a high level summary of your resume. Write it as if you were applying for a job, because that is what you are doing! Here is my recommended outline for a letter of interest.

One page maximum

Summary of your interest/practice as an artist (3-4 sentences)

Career highlights (awards, important exhibits, etc. list no more than 3 or 4.

Summary of past or current experience that may relate to the skills or experience needed for this project.

Your interest in the project

If you are collaborating with another artist address the rationale for the collaboration.

If you have never done a permanent work, address how you would translate your work into permanent materials. Most calls are for large scale artworks that will be executed in permanent materials and integrated into the site rather than for framed, small scale 2-D artworks. If you are an artist whose primary media is in more ephemeral materials, or easel scale artworks, do not despair! With digital techniques and new architectural materials many such works can be easily translated into permanent materials. Your letter of interest should indicate how you might imagine translating your work into materials appropriate for the project.

DO NOT MAKE SPECIFIC PROPOSAL AS PART OF YOUR LETTER OF INTEREST!!

You've been Selected as a Finalist! Tips for Making a Proposal: You've been selected as a finalist, what next? A typical selection process would result in the selection of 3 or more artists to make a proposal for the site. The proposal usually would consist of a proposal board, a project description or narrative, and a budget. A maintenance plan may also be requested. Proposal boards, or their digital equivalent, are often displayed in public locations to give the public the opportunity to comment.

- Proposal board and maquette: your proposal board should provide a clear visual representation of your proposed artwork and how it will fit into the site. Keep text to the bare minimum so that it does not interfere with the image. For sculptural proposals, you may be requested to present a model or maquette. Remember: you are selling something. The goal is to make someone who looks at your proposal to want it!
 - Caveats: In your desire to be selected, do not promise more than you can deliver for the budget, or otherwise misrepresent what the project would actually look like. My pet peeve is the "levitating artwork" for proposed suspended pieces that do not show the supports or what their aesthetic impact will be.

Descriptive narrative of proposal: this should be no longer than 2-3 pages and include a detailed written description of the inspiration and intent of the project, its dimensions proposed materials. A description of the suitability of the proposed materials, i.e. durability and long term performance of the materials in the proposed application should be included. If you have selected subcontractors, such as other design professionals, fabricators and the like, you should list them here along with their qualifications.

Project Budget: A realistic budget is a critical component for evaluating the feasibility of the project. Below are the standard components of a project budget.

- Artist fee (15-20%)
- Structural engineer and other design professionals
- Insurance: most public agencies will require general liability, auto liability, insurance against loss (fine arts insurance or marine inland floater insurance.) If the artist is an employer, workers compensation insurance will be required. These requirements are also passed down to your subcontractors.
- Travel, studio costs, office costs
- Fabrication
- Transportation
- Installation
- Documentation
- Any other costs associated with the design and implementation of your proposal
- Contingency (10%)

Maintenance requirements: this should describe what the agency will need to do to maintain the artwork, and estimated costs if available. Many agencies require a conservator's report.

Other submittals: these might include product cut sheets or materials samples

□Presenting Your Proposal: You will probably be asked to present your proposal to a selection panel. The typical format is that the artist presents and brief survey of their past work and then presents the proposal. The most effective use of your past work is to present work that may relate to what you are proposing for the current situation. This will help the panel envision what you propose. KEEP THIS PRESENTATION BRIEF. You need to make sure you have time to fully present your proposal and answer questions. Your presentation will be a verbal presentation of the materials you have submitted as part of your proposal. Don't assume that the panel has read your written proposal in advance.

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