

Tacoma Poet Laureate/Literary Laureate Subcommittee Recommendations

ABOUT THE LITERARY LAUREATE SUBCOMMITTEE

The Literary Laureate Subcommittee of the Tacoma Arts Commission was formed in October 2019 with the task of looking at whether the Tacoma Poet Laureate position should be expanded into a Tacoma Literary Laureate position. Commissioners Kula, Stowe, Fernandez-Llamazares, Ayala, and Thompson have served on this subcommittee. They met in December of 2019, and January, February and October of 2020 as well as conducted research on their own time.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE

Considering the current times we are in, research gathered to date, timeline, and staff capacity, the Literary Laureate subcommittee recommends that the Commission stick with the current 'Tacoma Poet Laureate' title and program basics for the 2021-23 cycle but better define the genres of literary art that will be considered. This approach will allow staff and the subcommittee to prepare a draft of the 2021-23 Tacoma Poet Laureate Call to Artists for the full Commission to review and approve at the December 14, 2020 meeting with applications due in mid-February, the selection panel in March, and a 'passing of the torch' ceremony in April 2021.

The subcommittee would like to revisit the potential of a "Literary Laureate" program in the future.

SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK COLLECTED FROM PAST POETS LAUREATE

The subcommittee connected with some of our Poets Laureate and asked, "What would be some of the benefits or drawbacks if the role of PL were to showcase other literary art forms besides poetry?" Following are excerpts from their responses. There was no strong case in favor of a shift to a Literary Laureate program.

William Kupinse (2008 - 2009)

Because of its emphasis on live performance, its tendency toward comparatively shorter pieces, and its low bar to entry (a pen and paper is all that's really needed), poetry is particularly suited to building community. It readily lends itself to public readings, open mics, and similar events in which the goal is to be as inclusive as possible.

Changing the position outright would send a confusing message and ultimately harm the program. I recommend that Tacoma's Poet Laureate program adapt to address the challenges that it currently faces, but it is essential that the position retain the title "poet laureate" rather than changing to a title that incorporates "writer" or "artist."

- Consider adding an initial nomination stage to the selection process
- Make the compensation commensurate with the work involved
- Include a project expense budget for the position
- Make an office space available for the Poet Laureate
- Conceive of the geographical area of Tacoma as broadly as possible
- Consider adding a Youth Poet Laureate, 16-25 years of age, with an honorarium and expected duties adjusted accordingly
- If there is still interest among the commissioners in broadening the kind of literary art the position engages, find ways to do this while retaining the term "Poet Laureate"

I could imagine framing the PL position to say something along the lines of "In keeping with the history of the term, we conceive of the role of a poet broadly: we seek a creator of ideas, and builder of community, who speaks to what is unique about Tacoma and is committed to providing opportunities for others to make their voices heard. We welcome applications from creators whose work crosses disciplines and genres, provided that person is able to fulfill the public duties required of a poet laureate."

Josie Emmons Turner (2011 - 2013)

Playwrights or prose writers could be recognized as a “Writer-in-Residence” in Tacoma. There could be something like Seattle’s Hugo House or some kind of literary center in Tacoma where the arts forms are so broad. What about the selection panel? Challenges presented: poet vs. fiction writer vs. creative vs. non-fiction vs. dramatist. The measures and weighing the art forms against each other. How would we weigh the work?

Lucas Smiraldo (2013 - 2015)

In the past several cycles of the Laureate program we have seen our Laureates reach substantially new audiences, first through Thy Nguyễn and then Kellie Richardson as these poets created new platforms for voice and for folks that have often been marginalized. Several events have featured LGBTQi voice. I know that Abby has devoted some of her time to building works from young voices including ones at the Detention Center to create a piece for the Tacoma Refugee Choir. My question is this...with all the current success our past three Laureates have had in creating new spaces for diverse voices, why are we tinkering with it? I have been thrilled by the momentum and by the communities that are now being invited in and it has made the Laureate platform progressive and unique.

Thy Nguyễn (2015 - 2017)

To change it removes the heart of poetry. Poetry captures the creative spirit, which is hard to shift to literary in general. Poetry would be lost in Tacoma because it is already a lost form

I would vote against the change because I think there is danger to broaden it, this can cause an opposite effect especially for younger writers and people of color to speak their truth. Expand to literary has too many layers and poetry is a grassroots genre that all people can relate to and feel welcome in the poetry creative space. The venue is more open to inclusiveness, cultures, history, art, and really opens the room for truth-telling.

Abby E. Murray (2019 – 2021)

As poet laureate, I've had my first experience of a city recognizing and valuing poetry as an art representative of its history and people. It's made room for an art that serves a diverse community... American poetry is beginning to flourish again, and I know this means *people* are flourishing, able to name their worlds and bring that ability into public conversations.

I'd have questions about specifics before I could make a decision. What genres? How would the role change, aside from title and genre? How would service to the community be changed? What is the projected impact on Tacoma's poetry community, particularly its marginalized poets? I'm not sure yet how I feel about the idea, but some logistical things would change, such as the way poets laureate are able to access larger communities (for example, I am applying for a grant from the Academy of American Poets right now, through their Poet Laureate Fellowship; this would not be possible if the role was changed, as is stipulated in their guidelines), and the familiarity of the role (which is on the rise) would likely be set back. Those seem like more of a negative response, at first glance. I suppose, though, a change would mean the role is changed. There would be no poet laureate, but there would be a different artist in residence. I would be sad to see the role go away, but the idea of embracing artists of all genres and mediums is appealing to me, as I believe art and artistic opportunities should be inclusive.