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To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council
From: Councilmembers Sophie Hahn, Mark Humbert and Ben Bartlett (Authors)
Subject: Budget Referral and Technical Support for La Peña Cultural Center

RECOMMENDATION

1. Direct the City Manager to work with La Peña Cultural Center to offer support during a post-pandemic time of temporary financial crisis, with all technical and financial assistance and any and all other resources at the City's disposal. Further request the City Manager connect La Peña Cultural Center with any potential outside resources and funding.
2. Refer to the November Budget Process a one-time emergency grant of \$150,000 to La Peña Cultural Center, pending an evaluation of the organization's current financial situation and plans for long term recovery by the City's Economic Development and Civic Arts team.

SUMMARY STATEMENT

La Peña Cultural Center, a beloved and valued Berkeley institution, is facing a financial crisis that threatens the organization's survival due to multiple factors: the COVID-19 pandemic, the end of COVID relief funds and multi-year grants, shifts in funding portfolios of longtime supporters, and unanticipated staff transitions in key fundraising roles at a critical time. These challenges reflect a broader trend impacting Bay Area cultural and performing arts spaces, such as the Bay Area Children's Theatre, Aurora Theater, the Crucible, and Brava Theater.

This referral requests the City Manager's Office to provide technical assistance to the La Peña Cultural Center. La Peña has previously accessed City resources that helped the organization grow and serve the community. An emergency grant of \$150,000 would further enable La Peña to close part of the gap necessary to survive, thrive, and continue contributing to the cultural life of Berkeley and the Bay Area, and the economic life of South Berkeley.

BACKGROUND

Since its founding in 1975, La Peña Cultural Center has been a vital space for the Bay Area's Latinx, Caribbean, and Indigenous diasporic communities to preserve and celebrate cultural traditions, present new interdisciplinary creative works, and nurture grassroots social justice movements. Inspired by the original concept of a "peña"—a space of food, music, and political support for resistance movements in South America—La Peña has championed marginalized

communities and challenged dominant narratives for nearly five decades. Today, on the eve of its fiftieth anniversary, it remains the last such peña in existence.

Since its founding, La Peña has used art and music to advance social justice movements at local and global scales, organizing alongside the Third World Liberation Front, the American Indian Movement, the Black Panther Party, and more. La Peña's stage has played host to world-renowned artists and local luminaries including Pete Seeger, Ana Tijoux, Angela Davis, Holly Near, Mercedes Sosa, Lila Downs, and many others.

Today, all of La Peña's public programs—spanning concerts, classes, performances, film screenings, open mics, lectures, and community organizing events—are dedicated to uplifting BIPOC communities by providing the platform, tools, and infrastructure for them to shape and share their own cultural narratives and creating spaces for connection, understanding, and collective action. By fostering creative expression, mentoring and training BIPOC mediamakers, and holding space for community organizers, La Peña cultivates an ecosystem of high-impact arts and social justice organizations both in the Bay Area and beyond.

With a current core staff of just five people, La Peña also employs around 40 teaching artists, sound engineers, light technicians and other event staff, administrative staff, interns, and contractors. Each year, La Peña collaborates with over 400 artists, contributing more than \$70,000 in artist fees to the local creative community. La Peña also supports job pipelines for underserved Berkeley residents, including youth and people of color, through paid production and audiovisual training opportunities. Additionally, for the past 10 years, La Peña has leased its restaurant space to Los Cilantros, a family-owned restaurant spearheaded by Chef/Owner and West Berkeley resident Dilsa Lugo.

La Peña was closed to the public for nearly two years during the pandemic. Since reopening, La Peña's team has worked hard to rebuild its programs and revitalize La Peña's longstanding relationships with community members, attendees, stakeholders, and collaborators. The center has responded to the new post-pandemic array of community needs, experiences, and priorities by improving the building's safety and accessibility, creating digital programming for long-distance engagement; streamlining IT, financial, and production systems; and growing classes and events offerings to pre-pandemic levels.

While many performing arts organizations are struggling to bring people in the door, La Peña has managed to maintain its historic audiences while bringing new generations of artists, organizers and arts lovers into the space for a wide range of cultural programming and intergenerational community-building activities that include monthly series, roots arts classes, community jams, free organizing space for social justice movements and community fundraisers, film screenings, and more. Through this work, La Peña is currently bringing over 10,000 audience members into the space per year and —within the last fiscal year— it has doubled its earned income through increased programming offerings, ticket sales, new collaborations, space rentals, and community memberships.

In 2022, La Peña received funds from the City of Berkeley to complete a long overdue building renovation project that brought the center's restaurant kitchen up to code and allowed tenant and partner restaurant Los Cilantros back into the space. The costs of these necessary facilities updates more than doubled compared to the pre-pandemic estimate, and the organization was forced to move a significant portion of the operations budget and savings into the building project to supplement funds received from the City of Berkeley. Despite the costs, these investments have yielded exciting new opportunities for the organization. In September of last year La Peña's family-owned and operated partner restaurant, Los Cilantros, reopened its doors. This phase was critical to ensuring consistent earned revenue, yielding approximately 8% of total annual support.

However, the increase in earned income through program growth and the restaurant reopening hasn't been enough to offset a series of institutional challenges. La Peña has faced a significant decrease in contributed income, due to the sunsetting of Covid-relief funds and other large multi-year grants, plus transitions and changes in philanthropic portfolios and priorities. Several of La Peña's longtime major funders have seen changes to their leadership and grants portfolios over the past year, with grant cycles on pause. However, based on conversations with consultants and program officers, La Peña expects to see some of this funding restored within the next two fiscal years.

In addition to the philanthropic challenges, La Peña has gone through multiple internal transitions within the last year that have created gaps in the fundraising and development department during a critical period. In this context, Consuelo Tupper Hernández, who stepped into the Executive Director role this spring, has worked diligently to improve the structural foundation of the organization with new systems to increase efficiency despite the reduced team and to develop, with the support of the board, consultants and community allies, a plan to set the organization on course for programmatic sustainability and financial viability. Unfortunately, the current financial situation prevents La Peña from making the necessary investments in personnel and institutional resources in order to execute this plan.

The situation is unsustainable, but temporary. Within the last year La Peña has put a number of emergency initiatives in motion that reflect the deep support La Peña has from the community, including fundraising campaigns and community-led fundraising events resulting in \$46,000 of contributed income that allowed the center to avoid furloughs. The center is also developing new individual giving strategies, including the formation of an "Old Guard" funders group, a fast-growing new membership program, and a planned 50th-anniversary fundraising campaign in 2025. La Peña is also recruiting new board members with fundraising expertise and working with consultants to develop a multi-year strategic plan focused on mission, sustainability, and staff retention. The center's Fall Season is now about to start with highly anticipated community events such as Fist Up Film Festival, the Empowering People of Color Open Mic series, Día de Muertos, Thangs Taken: Rethinking Thanksgiving, and much more.

La Peña has a proven track record of responsible partnership with the City of Berkeley. This request for technical and financial assistance would continue this spirit of collaboration and support. La Peña has a clear plan to pull through the current crisis it is facing. In early 2022, La

Peña received \$23,000 from the Berkeley Arts Recovery Grant program. In fall of 2022, La Peña received a \$150,000 allocation to support necessary repairs to the building's restaurant space. The project was successfully completed last summer, and their restaurant partner reopened last fall. The organization has also received allocations from the Civic Arts Grants Programs, including \$9,000 in general operating support and \$7,000 from the Community Festivals Grant allocated to be used in 2025.

RATIONALE FOR THE REQUEST

La Peña has been a cornerstone of artistic creation, community building, and cultural resistance in Berkeley for almost five decades. The demand for its programs far exceeds its current capacity, but without the ability to fill staff and revenue gaps, the center cannot sustain programs or operations. An emergency grant of up to \$150,000 from the City would allow La Peña to rebuild its staffing structure, stabilize operations, and continue its essential role in Berkeley's cultural and economic life.

With technical and financial assistance, La Peña can overcome its current challenges, implement its strategic plan, and achieve long-term sustainability, ensuring its continued contributions to the community for years to come. While the need for assistance from the City is temporary, losing a vibrant cultural center on the eve of its fiftieth anniversary would be a permanent blow to the cultural and economic life of the City, which is unlikely to be remediated in the near future. With intensive counseling and support for the City's Arts and Economic Development staff, and an emergency grant of \$150,000, the City can meaningfully help La Peña move forward with its 2024-2025 program, continue to reach new audiences, and achieve long term viability.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

N/A

FISCAL IMPACTS

Staff time for intensive counseling and assistance and a one time emergency grant of up to \$150,000.

CONTACT

Councilmember Sophie Hahn: (510) 981-7150

Attachments:

1. [At La Peña's 50th reunion party, Chilean president makes a surprise video appearance](#)



ARTS

At La Peña's 50th reunion party, Chilean president makes a surprise video appearance

Half a century after its founding, and now facing a perilous financial crisis, the South Berkeley cultural center held a lunchtime party where early members celebrated old times.

By Iris Kwok

Sept. 13, 2024, 4:11 p.m.



Attendees pack the theater at La Peña Cultural Center in South Berkeley during a lunchtime reunion celebration Wednesday.

Credit: Kelly Sullivan

La Peña Cultural Center, which has taught generations of Berkeley residents to sing and dance and helped exiled Chileans feel at home, is celebrating an uneasy 50th birthday this year, with the organization in “emergency mode” **amid a financial crisis** that’s led to lower staffing levels and has leaders questioning if the center can hold on.

But the mood was generally festive at a lunchtime reunion party held Wednesday at the center, which was founded exactly a year after the 1973 military coup in Chile. About 90 people — La Peña’s earliest members, many now in their 60s and 70s — reminisced over chicken and cheese enchiladas about the center’s history as a space for music, art and activism.

“This place has been an amazing story — unique in the world — and I’ve been around Europe, Latin America and North America,” said Berkeley filmmaker and musician Hector Salgado.

“Connected with the theme of Chile and solidarity with Chile, there is nothing like this, there’s no other place.”

During a formal program following the luncheon, Salgado introduced a surprise speaker: Chilean

President Gabriel Boric, talking to the small Berkeley crowd in a pre-recorded video message. A series of “wows” echoed from the audience when he appeared on a projector.

RELATED



La Peña Cultural Center is facing a financial crisis

The South Berkeley hub for music, art, and activism has been in “emergency mode” since COVID-era grant funds ran out. It’s hoping to raise \$50,000 by September

August 2, 2024



Chilean president Gabriel Boric speaks to the crowd via video message. Credit: Kelly Sullivan

“I have had the opportunity to meet some of you on occasion during visits to the United States or some of you here in Chile, and I know you are celebrating your anniversary,” Boric told the group in Spanish. “After so much time, so much exile, you have managed to keep this flame alive, this difficult Chilean identity, with so much history, often painful, but also filled with love and hope.”

From failed French restaurant to a hotbed for political activism



A banner outside La Peña reads “U.S. Hands Off Nicaragua” in this undated archival photo. Credit: La Peña Cultural Center

On Sept. 11, 1974, a small group of young activists filed the paperwork to legally incorporate La Peña.

Most of the group had met the year prior, in April 1973, at a leftist Chilean solidarity event in San Francisco, shortly after Chile’s first socialist president, Salvador Allende, was democratically elected. Two of the seven founding members (Patricia and Hugo Brenni) were Chilean expats. The remaining five (Leenson, Norman Bucklin, Craig McCaleb, Janis Teruggi Page and Leslie Thomas) were non-Chilean Americans.

Then came the **1973 coup in Chile**, in which Allende was overthrown and replaced by the authoritarian right-wing dictator Augusto Pinochet, who detained, tortured and killed political opponents. The activists, previously optimistic about the direction Chile was moving in, were devastated.

La Peña was their response, and the founding date, Sept. 11, was chosen to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the coup. The goal was to create a community center in Berkeley modeled after Chilean

peñas — places that offered food and drink, fueled activism and encouraged conversations about politics, social justice and intercultural understanding.

“We wanted to say we’re here and we’re going to be an act of resistance,” co-founder Eric Leenson said during his onstage remarks to the crowd at the reunion. Behind him, a projector displayed a slideshow of black-and-white archival photographs from La Peña’s early days.

For La Peña’s founders, it wasn’t easy at first to find a suitable location.



The Oakland Tribune reported on the opening of La Peña Cultural Center in 1975. Credit: Oakland Tribune/Newspapers.com

The breakthrough moment came after a long night of drinks. As the group headed home after a fundraising event at then-new Irish pub The Starry Plough, they noticed a “for rent” sign on the shuttered French restaurant next door. They signed a month-to-month lease at 3105 Shattuck Ave. La Peña hasn’t moved since.

La Peña’s doors officially opened on June 7, 1975, with a buffet dinner and program of poetry and music by Bay Area artists, according to a report that ran in the Oakland Tribune.

In South Berkeley, La Peña fit right in.

Its neighbor, The Starry Plough, was **founded in 1973** by volunteers as a safe space for political prisoners from Ireland, Chile and Honduras. Across the street, at 3106 Shattuck, was one of the Black Panther Party’s early headquarters.

La Peña’s space was large enough to hold concerts, came with kitchen equipment — including a walk-in fridge filled with moldy food — and more importantly, rent was cheap. (In 1978,

La Peña’s leaders decided to purchase the building for \$185,000.)

In the early days of La Peña, Leenson said, there were few Chileans at the center. The founding activists were supporters of internationalism, believing all people’s struggles for peace and freedom were intertwined.

“We saw Chile as a prime example of the aspirations that people had and how it was thwarted by imperialism,” Leenson said. La Peña, for example, was a meeting space for the Iranian Students Association, which was fighting to overthrow the Shah.

La Peña's Chilean identity solidified in the late '70s and early '80s, when Chilean refugees fleeing Pinochet's dictatorship began to move to the U.S. "As refugees began coming, La Peña became a natural place for them to congregate," Leenson said. There, they could find both employment opportunities and a cultural home.

The center continues to regularly host film screenings, dance classes, Spanish conversation groups, book talks, fundraisers and concerts. Upcoming events in September include one of its popular "Baila!" dance parties, a concert featuring the Argentine composer and guitarist Lautaro Tissera Favalaro and weekly rehearsals of the long-running La Peña community chorus, founded in 1979 by Chilean refugees.

A space not to be taken for granted



Anniversary celebration attendees sit down to lunch. Credit: Kelly Sullivan

At Wednesday's reunion, as cheery Latin music played over the speakers, La Peña's early members shared hugs and conversation over a hearty meal from Los Cilantros, the Mexican restaurant inside the center. After lunch, the group migrated into the main theater to share personal memories of La Peña.

Tom Miller, the lawyer who in 1977 helped them convert the flailing business into a nonprofit organization, received a long round of applause. As did Paul Chin, a Third World Liberation Front student activist who spent 35 years working on the staff of La Peña.

One co-founder, Janis Teruggi Page, flew in from Chicago, where she lives now.



Co-founders Eric Leenson and Janis Teruggi Page at the reunion. Credit: Kelly Sullivan

Page told Berkeleyside the reunion was a “wonderful” opportunity to spend more time with her longtime friends, including La Peña co-founder Eric Leenson, who she first met as she sought justice for and grieved the loss of her elder brother **Frank Teruggi**. Teruggi, an anti-Vietnam war activist and U.S. citizen was taken to the National Stadium in Santiago and killed by the Junta in September 1973.

“[La Peña] was created the same time I had that loss,” Page said. “It was ... an engagement for me to focus all of my emotions and energy into something positive.” The distance has made it difficult to remain as involved in the community as she once was.

As the **center faces financial challenges**, Page, a public relations expert, said she hopes to become more

involved with its fundraising efforts, which include a request to the city for \$150,000 in emergency grant funding.



Chilean refugee and long-time La Peña member Hector Salgado speaks onstage.

Credit: Kelly Sullivan

Salgado, like many other members Berkeleyside spoke with, met his romantic partner at La Peña.

Salgado was arrested in Chile at 16 for joining a protest and was imprisoned for three years. After international pressure pushed Pinochet to release political prisoners, Salgado, then 19, was exiled and moved to New York before settling in Berkeley to join the Grupo Raiz, a musical ensemble at La Peña that toured internationally and spread awareness of the political situation in Chile.

The music career didn't last — the band went on hiatus so its members could attend college and never got back together — but the relationships did. Salgado majored in international relations at San Francisco State and fell in love with filmmaking, while working as an interpreter for the California Public Defender's Office, working on death penalty cases at San Quentin. (As we spoke, passersby patted Salgado's shoulder to congratulate him on his film being in consideration for the Sundance Film Festival.)



The mural “Songs of Unity” in the La Peña facade depicts prominent Latin American leftist figures, from Chilean Folk singer Victor Jara and Salvadorian Archbishop Oscar Romero to American Labor leader Cesar Chavez. Credit: Ximena Natera, Berkeleyside/CatchLight

In a 2005 essay published in the Berkeley Daily Planet, Chilean exile Fernando A. Torres, a poet and musician who also played in the Grupo Raiz, recalled his experience moving from the East Coast to California in 1979 to play charango at La Peña, a job he had heard about from a fellow exiled Chilean who volunteered there.

He described La Peña as a “welcoming place run by angry-gringos in a crazy city called Berkeley.” “The music, the colorful mural, the paintings, the poetry, the politics, and the wine (not Chilean wine because we had the — Nothing for/Nothing from Pinochet — boycott those years),” he wrote. “I felt at home immediately at La Peña.”

Younger generations of Chilean expats found community at La Peña, too. La Peña recently appointed as executive director Consuelo Tupper Hernández, who was born and raised in Chile before coming to the Bay Area in 2019 to pursue a Masters of Fine Art at the California College of the Arts. She said she

credits the center for helping her feel less isolated from her home country during the 2019 Chilean protests related to economic inequality.

She had tried, to no avail, to find other Chileans in the Bay Area to commiserate with. She looked for groups on Facebook, only to be rejected when she began to bring up Chilean politics. “We don’t talk politics here, we just sell empanadas,” she recalled being told.

“The fact that a space like this exists today ... it’s not something we should take for granted for a second,” Tupper Hernández told the crowd.



Executive Director Consuelo Tupper. Credit: Kelly Sullivan

2 comments