

COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

PUBLIC HEARING ON PR-694, “Commission on the Arts and Humanities Dr. Heran Sereke-Brhan Confirmation Resolution of 2020”

October 8, 2020

Testimony of Alma Hardy Gates

Chairman Mendelson and Members of the DC Council:

Please accept this written testimony in support of the confirmation of Dr. Heran Sereke-Brhan as Executive Director of the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities. As you are aware, this hearing was initially scheduled for April 7, meaning the Commission has been without a confirmed Executive Director for more than six months. Nevertheless, Heran has been acting in that capacity since October 2019 and demonstrating her many excellent qualities and capabilities for Members of Council, the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities and staff and the public to observe. I am unaware of any major reason the Council should not unanimously approve this nomination.

Since joining the Commission eight years ago, I have worked with a series of four EDs, each with their own management style. Heran has a vastly different style, educational background, and hands-on experience than her predecessors that put her in a class of her own. Her personal work ethic is admirable. As a member of the Commission’s Selection Committee, which reviewed the resumes of numerous candidates, it was clear to me that Heran was the obvious choice. As a former staff member, she has a clear understanding of the mission and workings of the Commission and has had an opportunity to get to know staff well. Those assets are not the norm when an Executive Director is chosen. Over the past twelve months, there has been no rush by Heran to make changes or to redesign the day-to-day operations of the Commission. Rather, Heran has spent time on personal growth and preparation for her new position. Under her leadership, programming priorities and purpose have maintained their integrity, despite the fact staff is working at home. WebEx meeting capability has helped maintain the necessary cohesiveness for overall program success. The grant review panel and funding

process has continued to ensure artists and arts organizations can better meet their goals for the coming year.

Heran demonstrates that issues and planning are well thought-out under her leadership. These priorities were clearly demonstrated throughout the uncertainty of the budget review and approval process and distribution of the NEA Cares funding. Successful passage of these initiatives required the “extra mile,” given the challenges that have occurred because of the pandemic. While the normal herding of cats occurs when staff and the Commission meet jointly, it is much more challenging with everyone working remotely. Again, meetings to approve committee recommendations and funding approvals have occurred without fail and on time.

Heran has an innate sense of responsibility which is expressed in her ability to ensure Commission objectives are met by staff. She has no need to be loud or imposing. She is warm and friendly and one of the most thoughtful individuals I know. That said, Heran does not hesitate to offer her opinion when necessity requires that she exercise strong leadership. She can provide necessary guidance without hesitation. I have seen a level of respect from staff that was often missing under previous leadership. She was known by staff before she stepped into the “Acting” shoes and she knew staff. As a result, the most recent transition between EDs has been relatively seamless and it feels right.

Heran works well with the Commission Board. Her reports are thorough, and she is ready to address questions and concerns which may occur. She can balance the fine line between “need” and “want,” without rancor. She and the Commission Chair, Kay Kendall, communicate often and present a united position on issues. Heran has respect for the position of Commission Chair, which has not always been the case. At the committee level, where I have worked most closely with Heran, she provides helpful input on influences which may not be known or anticipated. She has endeavored to learn the public art side of the Commission’s operations.

Without hesitation, I recommend the DC Council approve the passage of PR23-694 – the appointment of Dr. Heran Sereke-Brhan as Executive Director of the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities.

Alma Hardy Gates
DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities
Chair, Public Art Committee