pennsylvania
COUNCIL ON THE ARTS

PCA Creative Communities
Letter of Interest Coversheet

Lead Applicant Information

Organization: People's Light

Address: 39 Conestoga Rd.

City: Malvern **Zip Code:** 19355

Municipality: East Whiteland **County:** Chester

Phone: 610-647-1900

Website: www.peopleslight.org

FEIN: 23-7313407

Contact Name: Marcie Bramucci

Contact Title: Director of Community Investment

Contact Phone: 610-647-1900 x143

Contact Email: bramucci@peopleslight.org

Organization Type: Select Organization Type Non-profit 501(c)(3) performing arts/theatre

☒ **By checking the box, you are indicating acknowledgment of and intention to comply with the local government resolution requirement, if your community is selected to participate in the Creative Communities Pilot Program. (See full application guidelines for more information on this requirement.)**

Letter of Interest (LOI) Submission Instructions: LOI deadline, Friday, June 28, 2019. LOIs must be submitted via email to RA-OAcreativepa@pa.gov.

a. Completed coversheet form with acknowledgment of and intention to comply with the local government resolution requirement, if your community is selected to participate in the Creative Communities Pilot Program.

b. Narrative (3 pages max.)
   - Brief community description.
   - Description of any existing cultural plans and/or experience implementing arts-based development strategies.
   - Description of successful community partnerships.
   - Description of community opportunity or challenge the organization would like to address through this program.

c. 3 Letters of Support (local government, planning, convention and visitors bureau (CVB), business improvment district (BID), chamber of commerce, local arts organization, etc.).

To Whom It May Concern:

There is less and less of a geographic center for the community that is central to this proposal. The community in question is disappearing. This for a number of reasons, not the least of which are gentrification and a lack of historic preservation. Throughout and across Chester County, historically black communities are in jeopardy of displacement, and too often they have been but a side note to the dominant historic narrative, if not altogether erased. The two geographic areas we will engage and build a bridge between is that of the Main Line and West Chester, PA.

People's Light, a professional theatre in Malvern, has encountered this erasure head on in its first-hand research as part of the New Play Frontiers (NPF) development and commissioning program which launched in 2013. NPF is a long-term initiative to develop and produce new plays that explore our American identity inspired by stories and concerns in our region. Through the program, the theatre invites nationally recognized playwrights to immerse themselves in neighboring communities in collaboration with community partners. The process for developing this work takes *years* and is deeply embedded in community life. As People's Light aspires to being a center for community gathering, with theatre at its core, this process & NPF has helped to bring the organization closer to that ambition.

This month, the theatre will open the second world premiere production to emerge from this program, called *Mud Row*. Playwright Dominique Morisseau was inspired by the people and places surrounding the Charles A. Melton Arts & Education Center, a community beacon that has served generations of residents in the historically black East End neighborhood of West Chester where the Center is based.

People's Light has a long history of working with the Center –in the late 80s and early 90s – teaching theatre classes, partnering on exhibits. Though in the time is has taken to develop this play (six years…), these two entities have arrived at a new depth of partnership – in the truest sense of the word, partnership based on deep respect and reciprocity, mutual learning and growth.

In the 90s, Peope's Light company member, Kathryn Petersen worked on an exhibit in partnership with the Chester County Historical Society, the Melton Center, and historian and journalist, Miss Penny Washington called *Between Women*, in which Miss Washington and partners gathered images and oral histories of West Chester residents to augment and expand the historical society's collection, especially as it pertained to the African American experience. Decades later, at the Melton Center's 100th Anniversary Gala, People's Light's Director of Community Investment Marcie Bramucci, met Miss Washington and struck up an immediate partnership around *Mud Row.*

Miss Penny's family had been four generations deep in West Chester's East End, before she needed to move out of the borough. She has illuminated through a largely untold and unknown history of West Chester's East End through an extensive walking tour that includes personal

experiences and historical accounts. Noting the damages resulting from gentrification, and lack of historic preservation for the community.

Gathering the stories.
Working in partnership with Miss Penny Washington, the Tredyffrin Historical Society, the Melton Center and other partners and neighbors, theatre staff and artists will facilitate a process to draw out these soon-to-be-forgotten and lost oral histories and accompanying artifacts and images from African American residents of the Mainline (beginning in Berwyn), and West Chester.

Creating platforms.
The Historical Society aspires to digitizing records that may be made more accessible, especially to teachers and students, but ideally to interested residents. People's Light will provide opportunities to host exhibits and to share the stories in a range of events, and to link with partner organizations, like the Melton Center, to host these exhibits in rotation.

Losing African American residents in these communities will also mean losing the record of these individuals, which perpetuates a dominant narrative that sidelines the African American experience. Without a proactive approach to gathering and sharing these stories and experiences we become complicit in societal erasure. This project is a meaningful starting place, for developing a model for deep level community building and healing, using the arts as a vehicle toward historic preservation and education.

Thanks to the generosity and involvement of our many partners along the way, this work holds within it great possibilities for shared community learning, reflection, reconciliation and healing for our path forward.

Thank you for your consideration.

Warm regards,
Marcie Bramucci
Director of Community Investment

June 28, 2019

To whom it may concern,

The Society has taken a strong interest in exploring the history of the local African American community, and in providing a trusted forum for sharing stories that have not previously found a wider audience.

To that end, we have published a growing number of articles in our respected *History Quarterly* publication, and have held a number of presentations on related subjects at our public meetings. These publications and presentations have included noteworthy and successful collaborations with members of the local African American community, as well as others from outside that community who have conducted research and found important stories to tell and facts to share. We would be glad to provide more details about the work completed and underway if helpful.

These collaborations have generally been related to our primary focus area of Tredyffrin and Easttown Townships in Chester County, but we do not view those geographical borders as limiting our interest or ability to participate in projects of wider scope.

After seeing the strong efforts made by Peoples Light to further similar objectives, and recently with some overlap with our own, we would be pleased to be able to engage with them, and possibly others, in a joint project intended to expand upon prior efforts to preserve and share local African American history, as well as fostering stronger lines of communcation within the community.

Sincerely,

John

John O. Senior
President

TREDYFFRIN EASTTOWN HISTORICAL SOCIETY
720 First Avenue Berwyn, PA 19312
WWW.TEHISTORY.ORG

Organizational Partner letter of commitment: From Kenneth D. Winston, Executive Director, Charles A. Melton Arts and Education Center

I want to express the Charles A. Melton Arts and Education Center's full support and commitment to the People's Light (PL) initiative to advance community connections and history-sharing in West Chester through the Creative Communities program. This is a continuation and a deepening of a long-term partnership between the Melton Center and People's Light. The Melton Center has been involved with the Theater's ongoing projects associated with the rich and diverse history of West Chester.

Most currently, the 2019 world premiere *Mud Row* by Tony Award-nominee and MacArthur Fellow Dominique Morisseau takes place in West Chester and was directly inspired by the community surrounding the Melton Center. It was the institutional partnership with the Melton Center that opened so many points of connection to playwright Morisseau and director Steve Broadnax over the course of four years in the research and development of this play.

Over the past eight years, the Melton Center is pleased to be an active partner with People's Light and the students of The Melton Center have benefitted greatly. This is evident by the many theatrical plays that the New Directions After-school Program students have attended including *The Mountaintop, Cinderella* and *Arthur and the Tale of the Red Dragon.*

In October 2018, we commemorated our centennial year with a Gala celebration, which People's Light sponsored and supported as a community partner. At this event – a significant institutional moment – we further highlighted our meaningful partnership, inviting an actress from People's Light to share an excerpt of *Mud Row* as part of the evening's entertainment. Such collaboration between our historic site/community center and a performing arts organization has brought and will continue to bring many different forms of cultural strengths to the West Chester area.

In 2020, People's Light will premiere another work with West Chester roots – about the legacy and life of West Chester native and Civil Rights leader Bayard Rustin, written and directed by *Mud Row* director Steve Broadnax III. We will enthusiastically take part in gatherings toward the development of this play and its world premiere in the summer of 2020.

With this new initiative in collaboration with People's Light and the Chester County Historical Society, we would look forward to sharing the expertise and memories of many Melton Center members and constituents in order to elevate and promote the history of African-Americans in our region.

We look forward to continuing our relationship with People's Light.

Kenneth D. Winston

BOROUGH OF WEST CHESTER
PENNSYLVANIA

DIANNE HERRIN
MAYOR

MUNICIPAL BUILDING
401 E. GAY STREET
WEST CHESTER, PA 19380
PHONE: (610) 696-1452

June 28, 2019

To Whom it May Concern –

I am writing to express my complete support for the People's Light Creative Communities grant proposal.

I have been working with this fine organization for the past six months in support of their upcoming production *Mud Row*, a fictional play rooted in the very real history of our community's historically black East End. As Mayor, one of my primary objectives is to build bridges between the various factions of our racially and economically diverse community, so we may preserve this diversity in the face of pressing societal trends and gentrification. As you may imagine, this is a big challenge for the Mayor's Office.

I have found the *Mud Row* production, and the tremendous community investment made by People's Light in this production, is a rare opportunity to advance this objective. Telling the story of our East End in such an engaging and entertaining way is a bridge that will enable all of the people who live here to come together in a shared understanding of our shared heritage. I will be personally inviting changemakers in our community to this event, and will hold a community conversation about the importance of honoring our heritage and caring for our East End neighbors.

I am grateful to People's Light for their commitment to this critical work, and I will be personally honored if you provide this much-needed support. It will mean a lot to our community, and it will go a long way toward our bridge-building effort.

Thank you for your kind consideration.

Kindest regards,

Dianne Herrin, Mayor
Borough of West Chester, PA