

REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL

Community Giving Program Strategy & Development

Armory Arts and Music Center (AAMC) · Duluth, Minnesota

RFP issued: Wednesday, September 9, 2026

Deadline for questions: Wednesday, September 23, 2026

Responses to questions provided: Friday, September 25, 2026

Proposal submission deadline: Wednesday, October 7, 2026, 5:00 PM CST

Finalists present in-person or virtually: Week of October 19, 2026

Partner selected: Week of November 1, 2026

Anticipated Project Kickoff: Tuesday, December 1, 2026

Anticipated Engagement Term: 6 months

AAMC reserves the right to modify this schedule as necessary.

Primary Contact: Deb Schaber, Executive Director, Armory Arts and Music Center: dschaber@dulutharmory.org

1. Background

The Armory Arts and Music Center (AAMC) is restoring Duluth's historic Armory, once home to the National Guard and Naval Militia. Built in 1915, the Armory has served the community for more than a century as an emergency refuge center staffed by the Red Cross during natural disasters and epidemics. And, the Armory has also been a cultural and musical hub, including a memorable 1959 performance by Buddy Holly.

Going under an approximate \$55 million restoration, the AAMC plans to reopen the Armory in Fall 2027 as a vibrant, year-round community destination. The restored building will be a venue for live music, performances, weddings and community events, music education via the Music Resource Center (MRC), artist studios and galleries, community gathering spaces, offices and potential coworking spaces, and a food hall.

The MRC, a long-established program of the Armory Arts and Music Center, is an inclusive program for students to explore music performance, recording, and artistic expression and will be housed in the Armory.

The vision is to preserve the Armory's history while creating a welcoming place for people to gather, experience music and the arts, learn, create, and celebrate.

While AAMC will continue pursuing major gifts and institutional funding, it also seeks a way for individuals and families to support the Armory at levels that are meaningful to them.

The AAMC is seeking a qualified consultant or firm to develop a community giving program that welcomes both one-time gifts and recurring annual support. The program does not yet have a final name; naming and identity development are part of this engagement.

2. The Opportunity

The Armory is moving from capital redevelopment toward becoming an active, year-round community asset. The selected partner will help AAMC answer one central question:

“What would make someone feel proud to be part of the Armory's community of supporters?”

The program should go beyond transactional membership perks. It should make supporters feel they are helping preserve an important piece of Duluth history, shaping the Armory's future, and part of something larger than themselves - whether they give \$25 or \$10,000 a year.

3. Objectives

- Build a broad base of community support alongside AAMC's major-gift efforts.
- Create a strong program name and identity that gives people a clear reason to participate and support the Armory resulting in sustainable revenue streams through one-time, recurring, and annual gifts.
- Clearly establish a clear donor journey that deepens engagement and giving over time.
- Build an ongoing program, not a one-time campaign, that grows alongside the Armory's 2027 reopening.
- Deliver a practical roadmap that AAMC staff and volunteers can realistically execute and sustain.

4. Project Considerations

AAMC is not looking for a traditional membership program built around dues and discounts. The goal is to create a giving program that encourages participation, building a strong emotional connection to the Armory, that can be sustained over time.

Respondents should consider the following:

- Broad participation matters. Entry-level supporters should feel meaningfully included, while the program should also create natural pathways for building deeper giving over time.
- Belonging should carry more weight than perks. Recognition, access, and experiences should strengthen a supporter's connection to the Armory, rather than create an expensive benefits structure.
- The program must be practical to operate. Recommendations should account for small, nonprofit staff capacity, volunteer involvement, costs, and the need for consistent year-round stewardship/relationships.
- The launch should build momentum toward the anticipated 2027 reopening, while creating a program that remains relevant once the Armory is fully operating year-round.
- Priority audiences currently include existing donors, Twin Ports residents, families, young professionals, military, historians, musicians, artists and local businesses. Respondents should recommend which audiences to prioritize at launch and whether different groups may require different messaging or outreach.

5. Expected Deliverables & Working Approach

The selected partner should provide AAMC with a practical set of tools and timing that can move directly into implementation.

At a minimum, the response should address the following deliverables; respondents may recommend refinements based on their proposed methodology.

- **Discovery findings and opportunity summary:** Provide a concise evaluation of stakeholder input, donor/audience insights, comparable-program research, and the key opportunities or barriers that should shape the framework of the program.
- **Program Strategy & Architecture:** A defined giving framework (annual, membership, or hybrid) that outlines:
 - The value proposition for participants.
 - Integration with the broader AAMC brand.
 - Alignment with the capital campaign and major gift efforts.
- **Giving-level and donor-journey framework:** Establish recommended levels, recognition and benefit structure, recurring-giving approach, upgrade pathways, and the donor journey from first gift through welcome, renewal, deeper engagement, annual touchpoints and advocacy.
- **Engagement and signature-experience recommendations:** Proposals should include recommended traditions, events, access opportunities, and recognition ideas to build a sense of belonging for donors. Please provide guidance on costs and staff effort for AAMC that are realistic to launch and sustain.
- **Branding and campaign strategy:** Develop the program name, identity, messaging, and launch communications strategy. Deliverables should include recommended name options with rationale, identity

direction, possible key messages, sample content or creative direction, and recommended recruitment channels.

- Production-ready design, copywriting, printing, or other executions should be priced separately if not included in the base scope.
- **In-Building Donor Recognition:** Recommend meaningful and creative ways to recognize and celebrate supporters within the restored Armory, including potential donor displays, recognition walls, plaques, digital recognition, or other permanent or rotating opportunities.
- **Measurement and communications:** Propose KPIs and outline an annual cadence for welcome, stewardship, renewal, impact reporting, and other ongoing donor communications.

Deliverables should distinguish between what is essential for launch, what can be phased in later, and what would require additional budget, or outside production support.

AAMC anticipates a 6-month engagement beginning Tuesday December 1, 2026. Respondents should describe how they would work with AAMC during the engagement, including the expected meeting or review cadence, major decision points, and the AAMC staff or board participation needed to keep the project moving. The final scope and sequencing may be refined with the selected partner during the contracting period.

6. Information AAMC Will Provide

To support the selected partner's discovery and strategy work, AAMC will make available, as relevant: organizational and Armory history/archival materials, current brand and marketing materials, existing donor/membership data, current donation and CRM platform details, website and digital analytics, capital campaign materials, and board/leadership contacts. The selected partner is not expected to replace AAMC's existing technology; recommendations should work within or reasonably build on what's already in place.

Respondents should identify any key assumptions, dependencies, or AAMC staff/board time required for their approach.

Any recommended technology, paid media, printing, event, or other third-party expenses should be identified separately from professional fees.

7. Desired Agency Qualifications

AAMC is interested in firms with experience in one or more: annual giving fundraising, creation of membership programs, community-building or cause marketing experience, arts, culture or historic-preservation nonprofits clients, and brand development. Experience with organizations undergoing major redevelopment or reopening is a plus.

AAMC is open to firms, independent consultants, or collaborative teams. Respondents do not need to provide every discipline in-house, but should identify any subcontractors or partner firms, the work they would perform, and who will be accountable for the overall engagement. Preference will be given to a partner based in the Twin Ports Region.

8. Budget

AAMC has allocated dedicated funding for this project and is seeking an approach that is effective and realistic for the budget. Respondents should provide an itemized fee proposal (strategy, research, creative, campaign development, launch support, and optional ongoing services), hourly rates by staff level, and any anticipated third-party/outside costs.

Please provide tiered pricing options within this framework, including a baseline scope, a recommended optimal approach, and an expanded scope with enhanced services.

9. Proposal Requirements

Submit a digital proposal, a maximum of 15 pages in PDF format to Deb Schaber (dschaber@dulutharmory.org) by 5:00 PM CST on Wednesday October 7, 2026, including:

- Executive Summary
- Agency/Firm Background
- Relevant Experience & Case Studies (at least 2 examples: Challenge, Strategy, Results)
- Proposed Team (Individuals, Roles, Experience, Partners)
- Proposed Methodology - outlining the approach from discovery through launch and measurement
- Initial Strategic Perspective: A brief response to “What would make someone feel proud to be part of the Armory’s community of supporters?”
- Work Plan & Timeline
- Key Assumptions & Dependencies, including expected AAMC staff/board participation and third-party needs
- Financial Proposal (itemized, per Section 8)
- References from at least 2 comparable clients
- Availability & Capacity: ability to begin Tuesday, December 1, 2026, and any known scheduling constraints through the first half of 2027.
- Optional / Out-of-Scope Services: Clearly identify recommended services or production costs not included in the base proposal
- Conflicts of interest, if any.

10. Evaluation Criteria

- Understanding of AAMC's mission and this opportunity.
- Strength and creativity of the proposed strategic approach.
- Relevant nonprofit/fundraising experience and relevance of case studies.
- Qualifications and experience of the proposed team.
- Feasibility of recommendations for AAMC’s staff capacity, budget, and long-term operations.
- Fit within nonprofit budget realities.
- Overall value

Finalists selected for the next stage will be invited to present their proposal either virtually or in person before a final selection is made.

AAMC reserves the right to request clarification or additional information, conduct finalist interviews, negotiate scope and fees with one or more respondents, reject any or all proposals, and select the proposal that it determines provides the strongest overall value and fit. Issuance of this RFP does not oblige AAMC to award a contract or reimburse respondents for proposal-preparation costs.

11. Questions & Contact

All questions must be submitted in writing to Deb Schaber, Executive Director, at dschaber@dulutharmory.org by Wednesday September 23, 2026. Questions submitted along with corresponding answers will be shared by email on Friday, September 25, 2026. AAMC will share responses to substantive questions with all respondents participating to ensure a fair and consistent process.

Building tours are available on September 16, 2026, at 9:00 A.M., Noon and 4:00 P.M. with advance sign up with Deb Schaber, Executive Director, at dschaber@dulutharmory.org.