



# SUNDAY POST-DISPATCH

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## Records detail group's spending

Regional Arts Commission's expenses included meals, gifts, 'executive coaching'

BY AUSTIN HUGUELET AND JACOB BARKER  
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

The St. Louis Regional Arts Commission, which oversees millions of dollars in taxpayer-funded grants for the arts, has been rocked by allegations it may have broken state law by spending too much on overhead and making questionable purchases.

Internal financial records obtained by the Post-Dispatch help explain why.

The commission's 2024 spending ledger shows roughly \$3 million spent on salaries and administration — about 20% of annual revenue, and above the 15% cap set in state law. Other documents show that share was projected to climb to nearly 30% in 2025, as one-time revenue from federal pandemic aid expired.

The records detail spending on perks, consultants and personal gifts, including tens of thousands of dollars for "executive coaching," \$9,000 for a party to celebrate a mural program, \$1,000 donations in memory of commissioners' late family members, and a \$500 purchase from a consultant's wedding registry.

Separate records introduce another

wrinkle: Vanessa Cooksey, the commission's chief executive, was also running a for-profit urban farming company based at the Urban League campus on North Kingshighway. Cooksey's arts commission salary was about \$191,000 in 2024.

The records echo concerns raised earlier this month by State Auditor Scott Fitzpatrick, who announced an investigation into the commission's expenses and management. They also raise questions about oversight of a commission that distributes millions of dollars each year to artists and cultural institutions across the region.

And they could add fuel to a push by some business and tourism leaders to redirect some of the arts commission's

tax revenue to convention and sports promotions.

Robert Dierker, a retired judge now with the Holy Joe Society — a conservative watchdog group that has been investigating the arts commission — said the findings should spur change. The St. Louis mayor and St. Louis County executive, who share appointments to the 15-member board that oversees the group, need to insist on it, he said.

"Ideally, the mayor and the county executive would step in and tell the commissioners, 'Be a real commission, take charge of this,'" he said.

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### UNIVERSITY CITY

## 'FREE DIRT' COSTLY



LIZ RYMAREV, POST-DISPATCH

Dense fog covers the closed driving range at Ruth Park Golf Course in University City on Feb. 19, 2026. After University City attempted to use leftover dirt from the Market at Olive building project to improve the driving range, complications arose and closed the range.

### Gift from developers was to help bring Target to Olive Boulevard

BY NASSIM BENCHAAABANE  
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

UNIVERSITY CITY — The dirt was supposed to be a gift.

Developers hoping to bring a Target store to Olive Boulevard needed a place to dump thousands of truckloads of excavated dirt. University City offered to take the dirt at its popular golf course's driving range, in hopes it would fix long-standing erosion and

stormwater runoff problems.

The project was supposed to take three months.

The driving range at Ruth Park is still closed today. It's in worse condition than before. And it's on track to cost University City nearly \$900,000 in lost revenue and future repairs.

"The 'free dirt' and golf course improvements turned out to be not so free," Darin Girdler, the city's

parks director at the time, wrote in an internal memo in August.

Records show the project was launched without a contract between the developer and the city, with no written plan for finishing the range after the dirt was dumped and graded, and without clear terms spelling out consequences if the job wasn't done correctly. Instead, city

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## Buyer pitches upgrade for Emerson site in Ferguson

Plans call for turning campus into 'center for technology,' more

BY STEPH KUKULJAN AND NASSIM BENCHAAABANE  
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

FERGUSON — The former Emerson headquarters could undergo a \$1.8 billion renovation in what would be among the largest commercial developments in Ferguson history.

SSL Investments LLC has the 217-acre campus, near West Florissant and Lucas and Hunt roads, under contract to buy for roughly \$18 million. The city could help finance the renovation costs by issuing bonds, according to Ferguson city planning documents. The documents did not specify how much the city would issue in bonds.

State records show SSL Investments' address as Webster Groves-based Onder Law. The firm's chief financial officer, Lisa Frederick, has signed real estate documents on behalf of SSL Investments.

The firm's founder, Jim Onder, could not be reached for comment.

The company would be required to invest at least \$175 million within four years as a requirement of its agreement with the city of Ferguson, documents show.

Plans call for SSL Investments to turn the campus into a "center for technology, energy innovation, advanced manufacturing, office and research activity." SSL Investments could invest an additional \$1 billion to \$7.5 billion in equipment and installation alone.

Copeland, an air conditioning and refrigeration business Emerson spun off in 2023, is expected to remain on site as an anchor tenant, documents show.

The city could help finance the project through the issuance of industrial revenue bonds and 15 years of tax abatement.

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### Par for the course



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