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[High-resolution images are available here](#)

## Deb Polich, Local Arts + Creative Industries Leader, to Retire

**Washtenaw County, MI** – The status for Deb Polich, president and CEO of Artrain and Creative Washtenaw, will change from employed to retired by the end of 2024. For the last 38 years, Polich has championed the arts + creative industries in her professional, volunteer and personal life.

“Having a career in this creative field has been the journey of a lifetime. I am more than fortunate to have worked with many talented, passionate and dedicated people who believe that above all else, creativity expresses humanity and connects us in community.” Polich said. “Raising awareness that the creative sector intersects with every other sector as it benefits all aspects of our lives became and will remain a passion even as I step down from the day-to-day activities of managing two creative nonprofits. This is a cause that requires ongoing advocacy.”

Polich began her professional career in 1986 at the historic Michigan Theater in Ann Arbor when it was a fledgling nonprofit working to save and restore the facility. As one of the early key staff members, her first assignment was as the box office manager. Polich rose through the ranks to managing director. She served one year as interim director when the executive director, Russ Collins was on leave in Washington DC as a National Endowment for the Arts fellow.

Polich left the Michigan Theater in 1993 to take the lead at Artrain. Under her leadership [Artrain](#) received the National Medal for Museum Service presented by Mrs. Laura Bush at a White House ceremony in 2006. Founded in 1971, Artrain originally delivered its programs on a museum-on-a-train that used America’s rail system. Artrain helped start or strengthen hundreds of cultural organizations first in Michigan and then across the country. Artrain has shared *award-winning exhibitions, art education programs and the world’s finest artists* with millions of people in hundreds of communities. Countless individuals – from schoolchildren to grandparents – experienced Artrain programs and many became art and creative practitioners, consumers, supporters, advocates and/or volunteers. Polich led more than 600 community Artrain visits including a tour to Alaska.

In 2008, as the rail industry restricted access to its railways, Artrain retired and sold its museum-on-a-train. Polich led its transition based upon Artrain’s success in strengthening the field of arts and creativity.

Additionally, Artrain’s board quickly adapted to the new chapter of the organization. It kept its award-winning community building program as it transformed Artrain into a project management, administrative and fiscal sponsorship service business.

Diana Wong, Artrain board chair commented “Margaret Mead, the pre-eminent anthropologist, most famous quote: ‘Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.’ I believe Deb Polich is a leader of many small thoughtful, creative citizens who achieved transformative changes for a brighter and better future in countless communities across our country, especially within the state of Michigan. Deb is a consummate professional in our creative arts community. She worked tirelessly to meet many challenges in order to stimulate, advocate and champion numerous initiatives and programs for the benefit of not just current creative minds but also generate inspiring spaces for others to

carry the torch into the future. We will miss her greatly but the legacy of her light will shine forth in Michigan and across the country. Thank you Deb, on behalf of the Artrain board. Here's to raising a glass to you with congratulations and deep appreciation for your faithful unwavering service to our art and creative community.”

In 1999, Polich was among the arts and community members in Washtenaw County who answered the call to form a countywide arts agency. The Arts Alliance of the Ann Arbor area was founded as a division of the Ann Arbor Chamber of Commerce (now Ann Arbor/Ypsilanti Regional Chamber) in 2002. Polich was the founding chair of what is now known as [Creative Washtenaw](#). She served on its board for a number of years until she was term limited. Her involvement resumed in 2013 when she stepped in for what was to be an eight-week period. That assignment was extended when Creative Washtenaw became Artrain’s client and Polich was named its president/CEO. A regional agency, Creative Washtenaw’s mission is to provide services, support and advocate for artists, creative workers, organizations, businesses, educational and government entities to ensure that Washtenaw County, Michigan – the greater Ann Arbor area – continues to be a great place for all to create, and remain experts leading the sector locally, nationally and internationally.

"During my years as an active member and now chair of the board of Creative Washtenaw I have witnessed firsthand Deb's relentless pursuit for the sustainability, growth and sharing of the creative arts in our community for everyone, regardless of age, race, origin, financial status or education," said Tina Walther, Creative Washtenaw’s board chair. “While Deb’s local mission has made a tremendous impact, so has her engagement at a state and national level -- always learning more and searching for opportunities. Her quick response to the challenges for artists during COVID provided assistance to many that might have otherwise left the creative industry for survival reasons. Being a champion of artists is ever more apparent at the event she created—THE pARTy!, Creative Washtenaw's signature annual benefit event that celebrates the arts and creative industries in Washtenaw County. The event honors those that paved the way in many creative avenues and serves as an inspiration to us all, especially our future young artists. While every good thing must change, I am confident that Deb will continue to be a driving force for our beloved Ann Arbor area as her mission and drive are ingrained in her, regardless of her retirement, and for this we are all blessed."

Since 2017, Polich has hosted [creative:impact](#) on NPR affiliate WEMU 89.1 FM, a show that focuses on the breadth and depth of the creative industries through the creative people, from students to industry experts leading the sector locally, nationally and internationally, with deep connections to Washtenaw County who make the greater Ann Arbor area one of Michigan's strongest and most vibrant arts + creative industry hubs. At this time, Polich has not decided about continuing as the creative: impact host.

Polich earned a B.S. in arts administration with a business minor from Eastern Michigan University (EMU). She serves/has served on the boards of numerous nonprofit arts and community organizations. Polich currently serves on the board of Michigan Works! Southeast and is the Americans for the Arts Michigan state advocacy captain. Polich is a frequent guest lecturer at the University of Michigan and EMU.

The boards of Artrain and Creative Washtenaw are developing plans and will soon announce their intentions to replace Polich.

For more information, contact Artrain at [info@artrain.org](mailto:info@artrain.org) or Creative Washtenaw at [info@creativewashtenaw.org](mailto:info@creativewashtenaw.org).

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