

Members of the Appropriations Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly

Subject: Funding for Arts, Culture & Tourism

Submitted by: William Hosley, Terra Firma Northeast, Enfield, CT, Meralis Lewis, Sherman, Rita M. Schmidt, Mystic, Janet L. Serra, Litchfield,

TESTIMONY

HB 6119:

AN ACT CONCERNING ARTS, CULTURE AND TOURISM FUNDING

Oppose Tourism funding for the following reasons:

1. The relationship between the Office of Tourism and the tourism districts has broken down. Despite the statutory requirement whereby towns appoint members to the district boards, the Office of Tourism dictates the budget process creating a conflict of interest.
2. The Office of Tourism's contract with each of the districts demands that the partnering organization be a Chamber of Commerce, effectively dissolving district staff, control, and operation. There is no evidence of a Chamber anywhere in Connecticut ever doing tourism work prior to this change in 2018.
3. The current set-up of three chambers overseeing regional tourism is not aligned with the regions we know well. Northeast Connecticut has its own distinctive flavor that is different from southeast. Hartford and New Haven are distinctly different and not especially aligned with Middletown where the Chamber happens to be. Connecticut needs five or six districts. These can be adequately funded with the present budget. Why? Because it is essential that tourism personnel have a granular knowledge of their regions.
4. All tourism promotion - state and regional - has been outsourced to advertising agencies with staffs that don't know the content on the ground they are promoting. Everything is dictated by the Office of Tourism. With the dismantling of our longtime regional tourism districts and the transition

to chambers and ad agencies, our tourism effort has lost its connections to the very places we purport to promote.

We recommend that the current regional tourism district system be defunded and dismantled. The three current regions don't make any marketing sense, especially considering that the Office of Tourism promotes FIVE districts on its website.

We propose a task force be developed to come up with coherent tourism policy involving a clear division of labor between the State Office and the districts. The task force should be comprised of half a dozen individuals - each with substantial and relevant expertise - excluding those concerned with sustaining their earmarks and annuities.

With the current lockdowns and regulations there is very little tourism coming to the state and even less room tax revenue to support it, so this is a perfect time to explore best practices that have worked in other states and reform our structure accordingly. Under the current system tourism in Connecticut will never grow and the campaigns and promotions will be ineffective.