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Testimony in support of HB 6119, AAC Arts, Culture, and Tourism Funding

February 11, 2021

Senator Hartley, Representative Simmons, Senator Martin, Representative Buckbee, Senator Cohen, Representative Rochelle, and the distinguished members of the Commerce Committee,

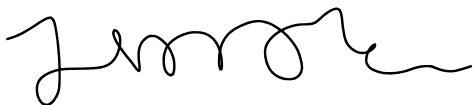
It is a privilege to testify today in support of HB 6119, An Act Concerning Arts, Culture, and Tourism funding. Others from across this sector—artists, organizers, entrepreneurs, small business owners, educators, restauranteurs, and advocates of all stripes—will speak to their personal experiences and what is possible if we choose to invest in this critical and urgent work. I admire their advocacy and thank you for thoughtfully engaging with their testimony. As an introduction to this bill, then, I'd like to make just a few points.

First, I want to explain the proposal, which is the result of years of work and collaboration, and represents a shared priority across the industry. HB 6119 would increase the percentage of the state's lodging tax that is set aside for this sector from 10% to 25%. This money would otherwise be sent to the general fund—and to look at our last full year before the pandemic as an example, would represent an increase of \$13.1M to \$32.8M. Such an increase would bring CT on par with our neighboring states in terms of arts, culture, and tourism investment, and would return the industry to the levels of support it received before 2008. The proposal would also rename the Tourism Fund to the Arts, Culture, and Tourism Fund to better reflect its actual investments, and would codify the current practice of allocating 40% of the fund for arts and culture and 60% for tourism.

Second, I want to speak to the breadth of this sector, and the strength of this coalition. Today you will hear from Democrats and Republicans, including House Minority Leader Candelora and the founder of the legislature's Arts, Culture, and Tourism Caucus, Senator Formica. This issue—and this bill—are bipartisan. You will also hear from a diversity of individuals and organizations who participate in this sector. The budget line we're hoping to grow supports three important statewide offices: CT Office of the Arts, CT Humanities, and CT Office of Tourism—each of which benefits from dynamic and visionary leadership and hardworking, committed teams. And through these offices and their grants, investments, and other initiatives, hundreds of thousands of individuals are served. I encourage you to think expansively when you consider this sector: it includes the hotels and restaurants, the museums and the performing arts institutions and the cultural centers, yes—it also includes educators and healers and activists and community leaders. Arts, culture, and tourism is a force for economic and workforce development, for public health and education, for equity. Through this bill we can make CT more desirable and marketable and economically viable; we can also make it more beautiful and resilient and just.

Finally, I want to speak to the current moment. Others will articulate the challenge this sector faces in the time of COVID-19. I'm grateful that the Governor has already demonstrated a commitment to pulling this sector through the pandemic with a variety of initiatives and investments—including yesterday's announcement of an additional \$9M to offset the current and projected losses to the lodging tax. I believe, then, that this is an opportunity to build momentum and look toward the future, for as the state rebounds—and with it the lodging tax that supports this fund—we can move forward with a long overdue, and critically important, investment. There are important conversations to be had about the continued impact of COVID-19 on our state budget, the appropriate timeline for this proposal, and how the additional 15% of investment will be allocated, precisely. I look forward to being a part of those conversations throughout this process and am confident that we can arrive at mutually beneficial solutions, and I welcome questions and feedback from this committee. Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John-Michael Parker". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

John-Michael Parker