

**APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
PUBLIC HEARING**

February 19, 2020

**TESTIMONY OF STEVE SIGEL, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
THE GARDE ARTS CENTER (New London)**

In association with The Warner Theater (Torrington), Shubert Theatre (New Haven),
The Bushnell (Hartford), Palace Theater (Waterbury), Stamford Center for The Arts

**H.B. No. 6439: AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING
JUNE THIRTIETH, 2023 AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFORE**

Summary:

The Garde Arts Center, grateful for the ongoing legislative support for its critical role as the prime community-owned cultural activity generator and economic catalyst for the City of New London and Southeastern Connecticut, is requesting, due to severe pandemic hardship as detailed below, the current legislatively-directed Local Funds Program allocation of \$155,961 to the Garde return to its \$300,000 allocation of September 2011.

Background:

The State of Connecticut is blessed with six (6) urban-based regional performing arts centers that are recipients of legislative-directed grants. The Warner Theatre and Garde Arts Center grants are identified in the DECD budget as **Performing Theaters Grants**, which includes the Garde allocation of \$155,961

The Garde Arts Center, southeastern CT's nonprofit home for the performing arts, film, and education, is located in the heart of downtown New London. The Garde owns and operates a block of historic buildings with offices, classrooms, retail establishments, and, its central asset, the historic 1400-seat Garde Theater.

The Garde has been nationally acclaimed for its creative economic, educational, and civic development strategies, and as a model of inventive and collaborative success in fueling the region's creative economy, due in no small part to the State's investment.

In the previous two years, the Garde served over 120,000 constituents, presenting and hosting 400 days of performances, film, civic events, meetings, and rehearsals. With its diverse presenting program the Garde serves primarily 63 towns in greater New London County. The largest cultural employer in the City and the region, the Garde Arts Center provides jobs and internships throughout the year for production staff, stage crew, event managers, area students,

and local artists. Based on multipliers from the CT Arts and Economic Report IV, the Garde's annual economic impact exceeded \$5,000,000 including audience spending, household income impact, and state and local revenues, and created 93 FTE jobs in the region.

As part of Connecticut's six urban-based regional cultural and civic facilities, pre-COVID, in aggregate, our six performing arts centers generated annually:

- 750,000 in attendance, 88% of which are residents of Connecticut
- \$58.5 million of direct local economic spend, and with industry-standard economic multiplier the impact approaches \$350 million
- 112 Full-Time Jobs, 317 Part-Time Jobs, 702 Seasonal Workers, 1905 Volunteers, and 1140 contract workers
- Facility use and services for about 426 regional organizations, schools, and smaller arts nonprofits, as well as businesses and civic organizations.

The Need

The Garde and our colleague urban performing arts centers are unique community-owned non-profit regional activity generators. We own and operate critical downtown buildings that provide the connective tissue and stimulus to small businesses, public schools, major industry, and invention and innovation, all essential tools for economic and psychosocial recovery post-pandemic.

Since March 13, 2020, when business as we know it ceased to exist, our six regional performing arts centers have been working together collaboratively, to help wade through these difficult, challenging, and uncertain times.

Despite our best efforts, as of December 31, 2020, our six performing arts centers have collectively lost almost \$7 million in revenue and 2,165 jobs. Since March 2020, we have closed offices, reduced/eliminated staff, and provided hundreds of thousands of dollars in ticket refunds to patrons, for the numerous events canceled and/or postponed.

We have actively pursued private support from donors and sponsors to generate funds to offset the dramatic overhead costs associated with maintaining our historic venues. Now, almost a year after we were the first to fully close, with a shutdown estimated to last at least to fall of 2021 - our combined monthly losses, over an 18-month period, could exceed \$16 million. With an estimated collective \$6 million private fundraising, we would be left with a combined shortfall of \$10 million.

Even though the Garde cannot be open to the general public, with a skeletal part-time staff, and resource-depleting utility costs, the Garde has responded to our community to alleviate pandemic impacts. We have provided a safe haven every day of the week for New London

students who can't do a hybrid program from their home. We have brought in-house three minority-led youth cultural programs and organizations. We have opened a bookstore to ensure that important voices can be expressed through the printed page. We have partnered with the City to promote Census 2020 and Foreign Trade Zone #208 participation. We have streamed state senatorial debates and provided a platform for young local voices to reach the community. We have begun to make significant changes to the facilities for ventilation and other public safety needs that will be required for reopening.

While some Federal programs were helpful in the past, such as PPP, we cannot be confident that our organizations will be the beneficiaries of any further significant Federal support. We remain woefully underfunded. Given significant health and safety ramp-up costs to ready our facilities and staff, the protracted nature of the closure and our consistent overhead expenses, and concerns of consumer confidence and vaccine efficacy, State support is critical to saving the Garde.

The Request

We are grateful that Governor Lamont has again included our designated funding in the biennial budget. Although these dollars are welcomed and will, as always, be wisely used, the reality is that the current identified level of funding is insufficient to address the economic crisis facing the State.

With a significant increase in designated support, the Governor and State legislature can ensure the Garde and our colleague regional performing arts centers are ready to operate when they will be most needed by the State. Otherwise, the State runs the risks of further losing its decades of investment in these urban-based regional convening centers, threatening the regional and state economic recovery for years to come.

The Garde Arts Center appreciates its current level of funding, yet respectfully asks your support for an increase to \$300,000 each year to not only survive the pandemic but to be ready and able to take a lead in the State's recovery when called upon.

