

Testimony of Daniel Forrest
Joint Committee for Appropriations
February 17, 2009

Honorable Committee Members:

I am here today to express my concerns about Governor Rell's proposal to eliminate federally-funded staff positions at the Commission on Culture and Tourism (CCT) and to move the Commission to the Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD). My concerns relate to two critical issues that will arise if this proposal is approved by the legislature. First, the CCT serves as the Connecticut State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), and carries direct responsibility for the review of federally-funded and/or federally-permitted undertakings in our state. The National Historic Preservation Act and the National Environmental Policy both require federal agencies to evaluate the effects of their activities on cultural resources. For example, all undertakings receiving funding from the Federal Highway Administration, which includes an enormous percentage of Connecticut's Department of Transportation projects, and all projects requiring a permit from the US Army Corp of Engineers, *must* be reviewed. Under current federal regulations, federal agencies are *required* to consult with SHPO during the course of these evaluations to identify potential effects to significant historical and cultural resources. Further, states are *required* to maintain SHPO offices to review the effects of all federally-funded projects. SHPO evaluations are necessary components of mandated Environmental Impact Evaluations (EIE) and Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA). The intent of the federal government in providing funding for staff positions at SHPO is to enable review to be accomplished in a timely manner and to prevent unnecessary delays in the execution of projects. The governor's proposal will eliminate critical staff positions at no cost savings to the state government while simultaneously crippling the SHPO's ability to provide such timely review. This issue can not be over-stressed. At a time when our state desperately needs federal dollars, Connecticut may be hampering its ability to put newly available federal funds to effective use. Failure of SHPO to provide substantive review of federal projects may result in these projects being referred to the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation (ACHP) in Washington D.C. The current review period for ACHP is over nine months, due to an enormous backlog. We can not afford such delays.

My second concern relates to the proposed incorporation of the CCT into DECD. The Connecticut Environmental Policy Act (CEPA) calls upon CCT to evaluate potential effects of state-funded undertakings on significant cultural and historical resources. Moving the Commission to DECD, a department through which many of the largest state projects are pursued, raises the issue of independence. The Commission must review every proposed DECD undertaking. It is hard to understand how the Commission can accomplish meaningful review when it is a subsumed in the very agency proposing the activities under review. Several years ago your committee reviewed a proposal to move the CCT (then the Connecticut Historical Commission) to the Department of Environmental Protection. The issue of independence was raised at that time, and the proposal was withdrawn. The current proposal is far worse, in that the DECD is far more directly involved in advocating and administering projects that will affect our state's precious historical and cultural resources.

I am very much cognizant that the Governor's office and the Legislature are facing difficult decisions in regards to the distribution of dwindling state funds. It is my belief that the governor's proposal is intended to reduce the cost of managing the state's resources, but the actual effects of this proposal will be to increase delays in the use of federal stimulus funds and place Connecticut's precious historical resources at risk of needless destruction.