

Testimony of Bruce Fraser, Executive Director, Connecticut Humanities Council before the Appropriations Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly, February 17, 2008

Senator Harp, Representative Geragosian, members of the Committee,

For the record, my name is Bruce Fraser, and I'm the Executive Director of the Connecticut Humanities Council, the state-based affiliate of the national Endowment for the Humanities, authorized by state and federal statute and appropriations for many years to conduct a statewide granting program in the humanities in Connecticut.

While that program agenda has many parts, I want to focus my testimony today on a core component of our work – the Council's "Heritage Revitalization Initiative" authorized by this committee in 2007, quickly sketch its progress, and the potential impact of the Governor's budget proposals on it.

You will recall that in the 2007 session we alerted you to a serious problem – a steady, serious downward spiral in the programming effectiveness and organizational stability of the state's history museums and heritage organizations. We were convinced that our existing granting programs, long funded through the state's hotel tax to ensure their effectiveness as economic resources for the state's cultural heritage tourism program, needed an entirely new business model to remain effective.

You may recall, too, that we used your RBA model to describe the problem, outline our solutions and expected results, and describe the evaluative mechanisms we proposed to employ to measure our success. You evidently found that approach persuasive, approved our request, and after our progress report last year, included a \$500,000 increase to move the program forward. That funding was a casualty of the end game "steady as she goes" budget, further reduced by 5% in the Governor's July rescissions, and the remainder cut in half in the Governor's recent budget proposal. In essence state support for the CHC's work has gone from \$3 million to \$1.15 million in seven months.

In a nutshell, the problem we described in our RBA testimony two years ago was this:

The ubiquity of the internet was rapidly changing the cultural landscape. Potential visitors now had hundreds of educational and entertainment opportunities at their fingertips, and their expectations of what constituted a satisfying museum experience had changed dramatically. Many of the state's

heritage shops were struggling to catch up with these fundamental changes and several were in danger of going under.

We proposed in our 28 page RBA testimony to create a new "Heritage Revitalization Fund" based on a nine-month study of current "best thinking" and "best practices" in the museum field on how to ensure continued museum effectiveness. We recommended that half your funding to go to organizational stabilization - audience assessment studies to determine audience needs, visitor services research on how visitors now expect to be treated in their visits, fundamental reassessments of how to conduct school programs in an electronic age, and most importantly construction of new business models that will allow them to survive and thrive in this new environment: the other half of our support we proposed to allocate to public programs based on this new thinking.

The result we proposed was to stabilize and continue the program effectiveness as a first priority of the state's 43 "tourism-ready" heritage organizations - those with sufficient professional staff and visitation hours to reach significant public audiences.

Two years later, I can report that a remarkable number of the state's heritage organizations have already taken the bait and are now engaged in stabilization planning, and some have already moved on to "best practices-based" programming. The current status of the program is in the appendices of this testimony - a careful, sequential tracking sheet we use to monitor our progress here. Virtually all these institutions are on board and in the early stages of creating new business models to preserve them in these hard times.

This is an effective approach and timely, given the current fiscal crisis. This recession will end eventually, and it is my fervent hope that we'll see the vast majority of these important cultural institutions still standing when it does. Obviously, with a proposal to cut our appropriation in half on the table, the degree to which we can succeed in this effort to stabilize the state's heritage infrastructure declines accordingly, the number of at-risk or failed institutions grows, and once they're gone they're gone. "Resurrection" may be the business model of the New Testament, but I have little faith we'll see any miracles there.

One quick final note. You have an additional stake in the heritage infrastructure game. Over the years, you folks have funded or bonded millions of dollars in capital improvements to these institutions - new heating systems, roofs, parking lots, galleries, and the restoration of treasured historic structures in our small towns into house museums or heritage centers. The impact of this can be seen all across the state. Each one of these shops that goes belly up or sinks into

inconsequence cancels that investment. And at a time of unparalleled challenge, at least in my 32 years on the job, the financial loss here alone in terms of past investment will be ugly without a continued commitment on your part of some substance to organizational stabilization.

With all that said, I make no specific recommendation to you on funding expectations. I think the enormity of the budget crisis and of your task in contending with it would make one both narcissistic and naïve. If I've succeeded in making clear our role in protecting this little micro economy of ours, then the significance of our work in the larger scheme of the many other worthy claimants for support in this room will find its own place in the budget you eventually craft, and things will work out as they should.

Thank you for your attention and patience. I'd be delighted to answer any questions you may have.