

**Written Statement of Mary Lou Aleskie, Executive Director  
International Festival of Arts & Ideas**

Committee on Appropriations  
February 17, 2009 Public Hearing

Senator Harp, Representative Geragosian, Senator DiBecella, Representative Miner and Members of the Appropriations Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to testify this evening.

My name is Mary Lou Aleskie and as Executive Director of the International Festival of Arts & Ideas I want to thank the committee on behalf of our Board of directors, our employees and the vast network of constituents we serve, for your past support of this proven private/public partnership. A partnership that has generated outstanding results for the State of Connecticut for the last fourteen years both culturally but more importantly today, economically.

These are results that have included the region's largest international cultural event attracting audiences and investment to our state while creating jobs and training opportunities that continue to grow each year. Festival results are documented and measured by an independent study conducted by Quinnipiac University. Unfortunately, these are results that are in jeopardy at a time when we cannot afford to lose opportunities and jobs.

If the legislature adopts the Governor's proposed budget for festival funding, much will be lost. Maybe even the festival itself; but most certainly our ability to serve our state as broadly and effectively as we have in these past years.

The Festival's year round activities that have included visible statewide initiatives like the National Endowment for the Arts funded Big Read project culminate each June in a 15 day internationally acclaimed festival that is a tourist attraction, community celebration, catalyst for economic activity, and advancement of jobs and employment.

You have made a sound investment in the Festival. This past June the Festival generated nearly \$20 million in economic activity for our State. That is a 20 to 1 return on the state's investment. This investment helps restaurants, vendors, employees and stagehands. It helps actors and artists and children. This investment helps lift the spirit of a state with enthusiasm and culture at time when we critically need it.

Named one of the top 100 destinations in North America by the American Bus Association; featured cultural attraction in October's USAIR Ways Onboard

internationally circulated magazine; featured tourist attraction for Elderhostel national and many times named Connecticut Magazine Best of, this Festival brings visitors and dollars into our state while making stay at home vacations ideal for our citizens. Last year over 100,000 people visited the Festival.

Our 300 plus events annually, that's right 300 are made accessible to the broadest possible audience. Noteworthy to mention is that more than 75% of our events are free and open to every resident in this state. The prices for our ticketed events are extremely modest by industry standards and enjoy great attendance year in and year out.

The Festival employs hundreds of Connecticut artists each year and each year we reinvest in our non-profit community through facility rental and staff support.

We offer opportunities to 120 summer contract employees who would otherwise leave the State for summer Festival work. These are 120 people not collecting unemployment benefits but working on their dreams. Moreover, we are broadening the impact of the State's investment even further. This year the Festival will collaborate with the Office of Work Force Competiveness Film training program offering paid internships to graduates in positions where skills overlap film and live performance.

In addition, artists and companies travelling from abroad to perform at the Festival increasingly come with the support of their governments. In recent years support for travel, cargo, per diems and housing have come to the Festival from the UK, Ireland, Hungary, Australia and others. These are direct investments from foreign ministries of culture that send dollars into our State with their artists. Last year artists alone travelling to the festival booked 1200 hotel nights and took advantage of the favorable exchange rate shopping and eating in our shops and restaurants.

There are very few success stories in our economy today. The Festival is a proven attraction. The Festival has been prudent in its planning. We have minimized costs and maximized return as much as possible. Our budget has remained static for the past seven years. We have stretched and made our work possible through extraordinary collaborations, international investment and creative approaches to producing. But it has only been able to work through the consistent support of the Connecticut Legislature and its members with support from the Governor..

I urge you to follow the lead of our Congress who included the arts in its economic stimulus bill last week. Recognize that arts jobs have value.

In fact, this fall as industry sector after industry sector in our state lost ground, it was entertainment and hospitality that held its own, steadily contributing to our state tax roles.

Please do not turn away from one of the few opportunities we know to positively contribute to our economy and recovery. We ask you to restore Festival funding in 2010 and 2011 to \$1M each year as it has been for the past fourteen years.

**Thank you for your consideration.**