

Appropriations Committee Public Hearing
Testimony of Donna M. Curran, Development Director
Discovery Museum and Planetarium, Bridgeport, CT
Re Governor Rell's Proposed Deficit Mitigation Plan
Wednesday, December 9, 2009

Good evening, **Sen. Harp, Rep. Geragosian, Distinguished Members of the Appropriations Committee:**

EDUCATION

Elected to Bridgeport's City Council in 2005, I sat on the budget, contracts and education committees. I witnessed first hand the dynamic interplay between education and economic development. I also witnessed first-hand the tremendous need, the tremendous opportunity.

When I joined Discovery, I knew it to be a science resource for the region's teachers, home of NASA's Challenger Learning Center—only 52 in the world—and the duPont planetarium.

You can imagine my happy surprise to discover its substantive and timely *science education outreach* aimed at defeating science illiteracy.

According to **2008 CONNCAN Report**, "Already the highest in the country (50th out of 50 states), Connecticut's achievement gap increased...Fifth and eight graders...performed worse in science than in reading, writing and math."

At Discovery Museum, we address that gap everyday. Our programming meets State Department of Education curriculum standards to improve benchmark test scores.

But the sad irony is our budget is being cut even as the need for our mission grows.

While our budget is being cut:

In one week our staff was in Bridgeport area public classrooms 25 times, exciting students with hands-on, mind-on demonstrations, turning them on to physics, the stars, and protecting Planet Earth;

While our budget is being cut:

We provide 400 plus Bridgeport students *each week* after-school science instruction in a safe haven, off the streets, via the Lighthouse program;

While our budget is being cut:

We provide inter-district programming—more than 1,000 pre-K children from the suburbs and the inner-city learn about science as they learn about each other;

While our budget is being cut:

More than 900, Fairfield County pre-K-7th graders attended our 3-day workshop on environmental sustainability and green technologies;

And very significantly, while our budget is being cut:

Discovery science magnet school is under construction and will serve 500, pre-K through 8 graders, from Bridgeport and the suburbs. Discovery Museum, the city, and Sacred Heart University have partnered in this new education model. What happens to the synergy if Discovery is not there to deliver its critical component?

The President of the United States has been eloquent and consistent in his belief that science and technology are the keys for our country, our children, to get ahead in an

increasingly competitive, global economy. His most recent STEM initiative (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) has been our focus almost 50 years!

Thomas Friedman in his *New York Times* column (April 22, 2009) stated because the U.S. ignored the science achievement gap reported in 1983, 'we are no longer a nation at risk; we are now a nation in decline.' Even children in our modern, suburban schools lag their international peers.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Discovery Museum attracted 75,000 visitors and touched 45,000 students last year. According to the Governor's February budget report, "Culture, tourism, film and historical programs, important elements in the state's economic development in 2008, had significant impact...\$9 billion dollars supporting 110,000 jobs"!

Why cut funding to programs that delivered this golden egg? How can the State benefit from stay-cations—an effective way to exploit a bad economy--if our major attractions are closed?

We applaud the consolidations Governor Rell has made to streamline and cut costs. However, the Governor *is recommending another 35% cut to a budget already cut 14% and 5% respectively.*

We ourselves have cut staff and taken pay cuts an average of 10% across the board. If the Governor's plan passes, we will not be able to function. It's that simple.

For the record, we have been good fiscal stewards of the State's investment: During the last 5 years, our education program grew by 40% with a 65% increase in services to Bridgeport public and parochial schools. We receive no Federal or local funding.

What is OPPORTUNITY COST?

It is the cost of the Foregone Alternative.

It's a key economic principle that accountants don't have to deal with—but thoughtful legislators do.

Opportunity cost acknowledges that attractive choices compete for limited resources. If we choose to spend there, we can't always spend here.

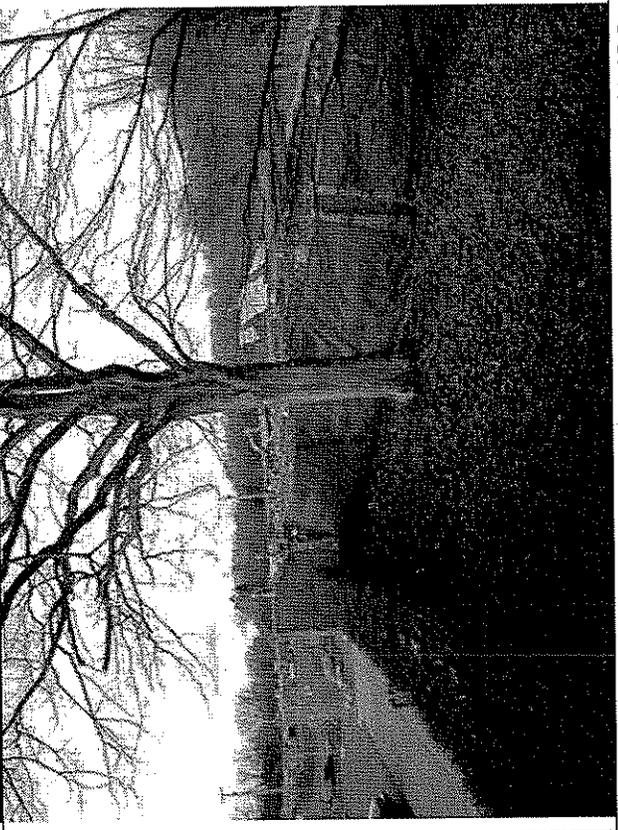
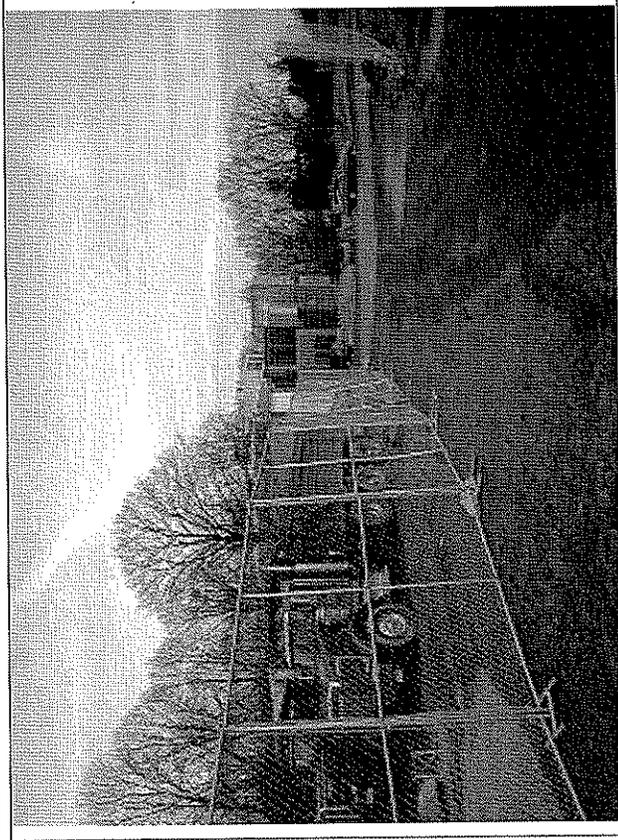
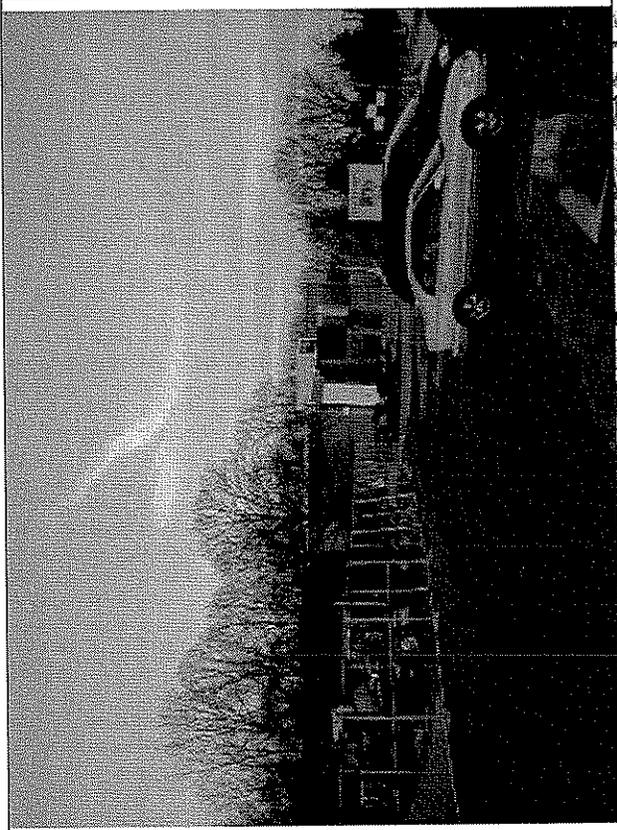
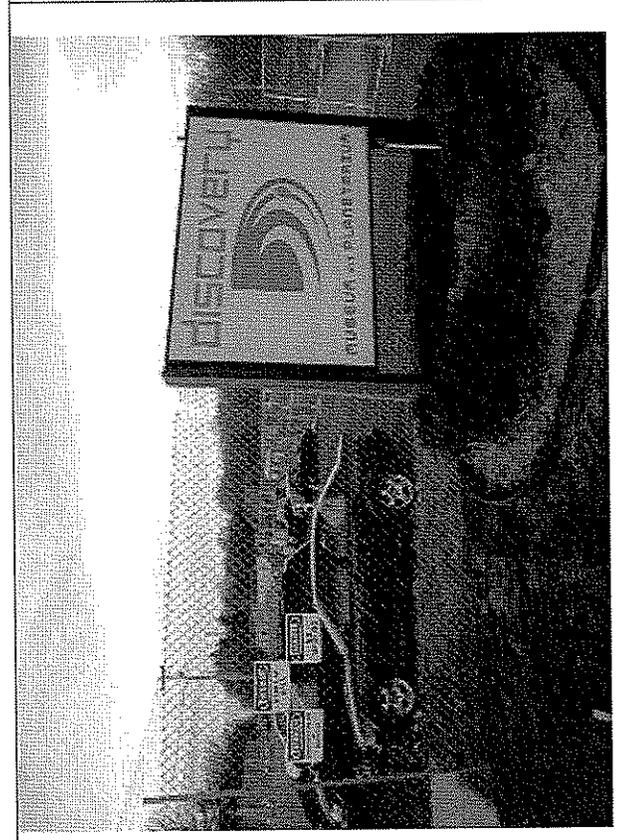
For example, we know the social benefit of spending \$1 on pre-school education—The Minnesota Federal Reserve Bank found each \$1 invested generated a 16% ROI in society's favor—a child more likely to stay in school, stay out of jail, get a job. An opportunity cost or foregone alternative was *saving* those millions of dollars but incurring negative social costs far more expensive than the cost of the program itself.

Has anyone done the societal math for the opportunity cost of eradicating positive, educational influences in the lives of those children who need it most and have few--if any--*positive* alternatives? Has anyone stopped to calculate the opportunity cost of that one imagination that remains uninspired? Has anyone calculated the cost of classrooms of children who will not experience the spark of discovery that was their due and was to fuel them intellectually for a lifetime? I have a feeling the opportunity cost will be much, much greater than the 35% saved by mitigation.

Don't eliminate the engines that generated \$9 billion revenue and 110,000 jobs. Don't push our children further down the economic scale trying to fill a budgetary hole.

We cannot gamble with our children's minds or the quality of their futures. And please remember, most importantly, only if *we* speak, will *their* voices be heard.

NB: Attached photos show how Discovery's revenues will be reduced further because of unsightly construction conditions and compromised access to parking and entry. 2011 is scheduled completion date.



Discovery Museum Parking and Building Entrance during Magnet School Construction 12/9/09