

Written Testimony of Bruce Fraser, Executive Director, Connecticut Humanities Council submitted to the Appropriations Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly, March 9, 2010

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.

I want to focus my testimony today on the potential impact Governor Rell's proposed 40% reduction of the CHC's current state appropriation presented in her recent "deficit Mitigation Package" would have on a core component of our work – the Council's "Heritage Revitalization Initiative." This \$808,000 cut, on top of the \$375,000 in Gubernatorial recessions and appropriation reductions of the last 18 months would reduce the CHC's efforts to stabilize the state's heritage institutions and assist them in constructing new business plans for the future by over \$1,2 million dollars. Even comparatively less onerous reductions of 20% in the current fiscal year would reduce our granting capacity by over \$779,000. With an average grant size of \$20,000-\$25,000 this would prevent us from assisting over 30 heritage organizations across the state to stabilize their finances and increase their capacities to ride out the recession in one piece.

The Council's Heritage Revitalization Initiative has long been of interest to the committee. 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 "Results-based Accountability" model to describe the problem, outline our solutions and expected results, and describe the evaluative mechanisms we proposed to employ to measure our success.

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

The ubiquity of the internet was rapidly changing Connecticut's 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 "mid range" heritage organizations – those with sufficient professional staff and visitation hours to reach significant public audiences. You evidently found that summary persuasive and rejected the Governor's proposed 50% reduction in our FY10 funding contained in her budget.

As I did last year, I can report that an increasing number of the state's heritage organizations are now engaged in stabilization planning and the creation of new business models to preserve themselves in these hard times. Others have finished their self assessments and have moved on to "best practices-based" public programming that promises to expand their community impact.

I'm delighted to report, too, that the Council has joined forces with the Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism to make the CHC's recently launched online "Heritage Resource Center" a more effective resource for Connecticut's cultural community as a whole. We are now jointly working with CCT to expand the recent studies, surveys, articles and other models of heritage museum "best thinking" and "best practice" important to successful stabilization planning now available through the HRC to include resources specific to the needs of the state's art museums and organizations. We are also now serving as a consultant to the CCT to assist them in incorporating the Council's "Results-based Accountability" planning approaches in their own granting initiatives.

We remain convinced that the business models of many of the state's heritage organizations are broken and no longer guarantors of their survival, much less their effectiveness. The solution to their difficulties is not to simply provide continued program funding for them to perpetuate failed business practices, but to provide them the financial incentives and support for a wholesale reappraisal of their current strategies for serving their communities.

The Council is trying to look ahead and plan for the day when these hard times will end. It is my fervent hope that with continued stabilization assistance from the CHC, we'll see the vast majority of these important cultural institutions still standing when the economy rights itself, but obviously, with a proposal from Governor Rell to significantly cut the CHC's FY11 appropriation and others considering lesser but still damaging reductions now on the table, the degree to which we can continue to stabilize the state's heritage infrastructure declines proportionally, the number of at-risk or failed institutions grows, and we face the real risk of a depleted cultural landscape. Once these institutions close their doors, they're gone and they'll never come back.