

Testimony to Connecticut Appropriations Committee, February 15, 2012

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Good afternoon, Senator Harp, Representative Walker, Ranking Members and members of the Appropriations Committee.

I am Steve Sigel, a resident of New London, and for the past 24 year's executive director of the Garde Arts Center, southeastern Connecticut's non-profit regional center for the performing arts and education in downtown New London.

I am speaking to you today on behalf of The Garde Board of Trustees, as well on behalf of the many business, education, community and cultural leaders, who along with the hundreds of thousands of residents and visitors to our special place in Connecticut - have been so connected to and supportive of the exemplary civic role the Garde has played since the historic movie palace which opened in 1926 was purchased, saved and transformed in 1985 as the Garde Arts Center.

As an urban arts center which owns and programs significant historic real estate which serves almost every aspect of our City and region, the Garde, like its colleagues, appreciates the support of the General Assembly and our Governor's administration in recognizing that what we do in our different communities is intrinsic and essential to providing the foundation on which economic development is possible, namely a deeply rooted sense of place and the immeasurable quality-of-life which our community, by the very existence of the Garde, demonstrates the value and promise of our region.

The administration and this General Assembly clearly appreciate and value the many ways in which we express the core values of the Garde:

- a commitment to urban reinvestment, ownership, diversity, and vitality,
- being a facilitator and leader in regionalism and community interaction across borders, class, culture, race and political persuasion
- providing educational opportunities for citizens of all ages
- fostering entrepreneurial and creative communication and invention
- providing an economic stimulus to the city and region
- helping to redefine and strengthen city and regional identity in changing times.

These values are expressed in our year-round programming in our 1450-seat historic theater, including touring Broadway musicals, opera, dance, music, theater, film and other special events, and the services provided our tenants and constituent users. These values are also expressed in our ongoing focus on facilities and infrastructure whether it is within the 4 adjacent buildings we own and operate or within the physical and economic infrastructure of our City.

The State has had a historic interest and investment in the success of this regional center for community connection and development including its investment in and support of Garde Master Plan for expansion and renovation of our offices, studios and stages adopted by the State of Connecticut in 1993.

The current support for the Garde Arts Center has been especially critical and deeply appreciated by the City of New London in challenging economic times. The State's support

of the Garde enables us to provide the connective tissue and stimulus to all aspects of our region - small businesses, public schools, major industry, transportation, housing, historic restoration – at a time when creativity, cross-sector collaboration, and regional connection are not merely appealing trends they are the essential tools which characterize the Garde and how all of us live and work together.

We have been able to host almost every kind of public gathering whether arts-related or business related fostering dialogue as much as giving inspiration and hope that the best of greater New London's future is ahead. At a time when the discretionary dollar has diminished, we have been able with your support to open our doors to all kinds of constituencies, regardless of affordability, and provide programs for young people and learning incentives for students in our public schools. We host regional arts organizations and schools, raise money for other non-profits, provide a steady influx of visitors and customers to our City, and showcase the great assets of our community. We have opened a second small intimate venue to focus on jazz and arts education classes. We have worked as a partner with the City of New London in supporting greater visibility and more diverse public programming and services.

Despite the economic difficulties of recent years, restaurants, businesses, galleries and housing rehab and construction have grown dramatically. The Garde by example and direct participation helped create a new magnet school and charter school in the downtown around the corner from the theater. Private developers are investing in new projects, and the Garde continues to be a critical calling card for major developers, innovators and entrepreneurs to make Southeastern Connecticut their home.

We were therefore especially honored when the Garde Arts Center was chosen to represent the State of Connecticut in the New England Foundation for the Arts publication of New England's Creative Economy: Nonprofit Sector Impact as a model of how Connecticut arts organizations, and cultural nonprofits throughout New England, define and maintain a viable "creative economy" by increasing their commitment to stabilize the communities they serve with increased spending and programming, while personal income and employment have temporarily declined.

The Garde, along with other Arts institutions around the State, has been very engaged in recent dialogue with the State about how to best nurture existing arts activity and connect its catalytic energy to the State's economic, housing, transportation, education, tourism, historic preservation and social service goals. To that end we are happy to know that DECD sees the value of a distinct and specific appropriation for arts and culture as a fully budgeted priority. For all of us who for years have provided the creative place-making that never ceases – even in the toughest of times – to nurture the unique assets and qualities of each of our cities and towns, we look forward to helping shape and strengthen the new nimble, resourceful and independent Office of the Arts. The proof of our value is known to each and every one of you. We respectfully and gratefully ask for your continued support and investment in the arts and cultural institutions that define who we are and what we will become.

We were extremely appreciative of the recognition affording us by receiving a line item appropriation in the biennial budget. Needless to say, our programming budgeting over that entire period had been predicated on the presence of that grant for the biennium. We are therefore hopeful and respectfully request that those grant dollars be restored.

I will be happy to answer any questions.