Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Sea Research Foundation
Mystic Aquarium – Institute for Exploration – Immersion Learning

Testimony Before the Appropriations Committee of the Connecticut State Legislature

H.B. No. 5014, AN ACT MAKING ADJUSTMENTS TO STATE EXPENDITURES AND REVENUES FOR THE FISCAL YEAR ENDING JUNE 30, 2013.

February 15, 2012

Good evening Senator Harp, Representative Walker, Senator Kane, Representative Miner and members of the Appropriations Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on behalf of The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Sea Research Foundation, which operates Mystic Aquarium, Institute for Exploration and Immersion Learning. We are here to respectfully request restoration of funding for both institutions to Fiscal Year 2013 budgeted of $531,525 and $620,112 respectively.

Jointly, these institutions play a unique role in the state and serve as engines of the Connecticut tourism economy. In addition, they are the primary providers of essential science education to almost every school district in the state, and serve as the state's primary sentinels in protecting our most precious natural and economic resource, Long Island Sound, and the animals that are essential to its vitality.

Connecticut's two aquariums attract over 1,250,000 people on average every year by engaging them in consideration of life forms of Long Island Sound and ocean environments beyond that cannot otherwise be observed by most people. These visits bolster local, regional and state economic activity. In fact, the two institutions contribute $114 million directly to the Connecticut economy.

The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Sea Research Foundation in Mystic are <u>the</u> primary economic engines for Connecticut's tourism industry. Over 60% of Mystic Aquarium's visitors and almost 40% of The Maritime Aquarium's visitors are from out-state, which means that these visitors eat at restaurants, shop in local stores, buy gasoline in Connecticut and stay overnight, all major contributions to Connecticut state revenue. In addition to the $114 million in economic impact they generate, more than 1,730 jobs are directly dependent upon both institutions.

The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Sea Research Foundation, working cooperatively, focus particularly on education programs related to Long Island Sound and other ocean environments

that bring inquiry-based science learning to over 300,000 young students each year, with particular attention paid to inner-city districts, where the riches of an institution like our Aquariums are often not part of family life, and where excellent science instruction is needed more than ever in a state with the largest achievement gap in the nation.

Our education programs go directly into K-12 schools with hands-on learning activities correlated to the state's curriculum frameworks, live animals that inspire kids, after-school programs throughout the state, and numerous on-site programs at each institution that link students with scientists. We frequently bring kids out on Connecticut's rivers, shores and waterways and to study in the State's most remarkable classroom, Long Island Sound.

In fact, evaluations of educational programs at both institutions show that our marine oriented science programs are helping Connecticut school children show significant academic gains, encouraging career exploration in the sciences, and contributing to long-term impact on science literacy and concern for the environment.

Both institutions play a critical role in the protection of Long Island Sound. Mystic Aquarium is involved in rescuing and rehabilitating marine mammals, birds and other sea creatures, leading this effort not only in Long Island Sound but throughout New England. At Mystic Aquarium, a major research laboratory studies the health of marine mammals and is involved in exploring the correlation between marine animal health and human health issues. In Norwalk, The Maritime Aquarium's permanent exhibits focus exclusively on Long Island Sound. A $4 million privately-funded, institution-wide renovation opening this winter has significantly strengthened the impact of the exhibit experience, giving both children and adults numerous new ways to learn about Long Island Sound and take action on its behalf. Last year, it initiated a public education program on the exhibit floor to teach people what they can do in their daily lives to reduce pollution, a program which is expanding. As a result, The Maritime Aquarium has become the widest-reaching educational tool about Long Island Sound in the country.

Over the past decade, both institutions have branched out to look for new revenue opportunities. The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk has an IMAX theater where Hollywood films now complement the classic documentaries that attract many repeat visitors, and renovation plans call for the addition of concessions. Sea Research Foundation opened "Challenge of the Deep", a museum hall dedicated to the work of resident explorer Dr. Robert Ballard, which will open a new Titanic exhibit in the spring of this year. Sea Research also launched a national distance learning program earning licensing fees from other aquariums and museums. Finally, both institutions have significantly improved profitability in their gift shops in recent years, despite the recession, their respective catering businesses are expected to expand, and fee-based visitor programs have been added.

Exhibits and facilities in Aquariums are complex. Maintaining living creatures under water requires expertise in life support systems and continuous operation of pumps, filtration systems and other complex entities. The care of animals, including endangered or threatened species, must always be of primary concern. Since the economic crisis began, both institutions have cut expenses dramatically. Staffs were reduced by approximately 20% at Mystic and 29% at The Maritime Aquarium, travel was curtailed, and maintenance at both institutions has been frozen or reduced. The continuing downturn has negatively affected visitation, which is down 20% across the region and represents the largest revenue source for our institutions. The private giving environment continues to be the most difficult in 30 years, and operating support from foundations, corporations and individuals is falling short of budget. To date, we have not received the full budgeted funding from the State. This is, in effect, a 38% cut, at a time when we are experiencing a perfect storm of revenue decreases in all our other sources.

However, the unique nature of the facilities and mission, and the need to care for animals around the clock, limits the extent to which cost cutting can be achieved to deal with these shortfalls. We cannot shut down exhibits because they are *living* exhibits, nor can we easily transfer animals to other institutions because of regulatory restrictions.

Aquariums are special and unique enterprises. They are a rare type of institution, with only about 15 such institutions in the United States, precisely because of their complexity. Frequently, Aquariums are built and supported by governmental entities in the United States as powerful engines for the redevelopment of local and regional economies. In fact, The Maritime Aquarium was built expressly to anchor redevelopment in South Norwalk, a very successful endeavor that has transformed a formerly blighted neighborhood and attracted $315 million in private development funds.

The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Sea Research Foundation in Mystic are essential economic engines for Connecticut. Other communities and states will look to build these kinds of institutions to spur economic development in a down economy; we are seeking sustained, reliable state support so that we can continue to drive economic activity. The requested investment in these two institutions is critical. It is no small matter that both institutions are seeing other previously reliable sources of revenue eliminated.

Over the last several years, we, among many others, have seen our level of appropriation be reduced in order to be part of the solution to the budget problems. We are grateful for the continued State support, even though it may be less, and we have responded accordingly making certain changes within our own operations and infrastructure to address adequately the budget predicament. Our ability to continue to do so is reaching its limit.

The requested investment of $531,525 for The Maritime Aquarium and $620,112 for Sea Research Foundation in Mystic will return 92 times this amount to the State of Connecticut in direct economic impact, and continue to pay dividends in demonstrated improvement in the academic performance of Connecticut's school children. Both institutions are committed to using state funds to drive economic development; for advertising and marketing aimed at attracting tourism, and for support of educational programs benefiting nearly every child in Connecticut.

Given the critical state we have reached, it is essential to sustain important State support. Changes in mid-cycle, when we have already laid our plans for the next fiscal year on the basis of the two-year State budget, are fraught with risk for us.

Thank you for your attention.