

Shiela Hayes

HB 6824: AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET

Dear Senator Bye, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriation Committee, my name is Shiela Hayes and I reside in the City of Norwich, which is located in Eastern Connecticut, one of the largest cities in the tourism district known as Mystic Country. I am a Professional Volunteer and I have worked with various historical societies, museums, art galleries, theaters, cultural organizations and municipalities since 2006. I am asking you to restore the funding for the State of Connecticut Office of Tourism and the Eastern Regional Tourism District that was eliminated in the proposed budget.

What has changed in almost ten years in Eastern Connecticut? First, the economic climate and stable economy ten years ago allowed Foxwoods Resort Casino, Mohegan Sun Casino, Slater Memorial Museum, Leffingwell Museum, Norwich Arts Center, Garde Arts Center, Spirit of Broadway Theater, Mystic Aquarium, Mystic Seaport and other tourist attractions and venues to attract visitors to Eastern Connecticut with modest marketing and advertising funding. Many of the businesses and organizations mentioned above were receiving funding from private donors, grants, foundations as well as the State of Connecticut. Today, this funding has been either been drastically reduced and/or totally eliminated due to the recession and loss of businesses and jobs in the region. Many corporations, businesses and foundations are directing their limited funds towards feeding children and adults, housing and other basic needs for families. The loss of funds from private donors and foundations for the culture, arts and tourism in Eastern Connecticut has almost been eliminated.

Second, the Marketing and Promotional Advertising was mainly provided by print and radio outlets to local residents and on a regional level. Today, the Marketing and Promotional Opportunities have expanded vastly due to social media. The print and radio advertising is still very much in demand but it comes with at a higher price to utilize this type of advertising. In addition, the skills, time and technology needed to utilize social media is very demanding and can be costly as well. Developing Websites and creating/maintaining Facebook, Instagram and Twitter Accounts is placing a high demand on limited resources for many of the businesses and organizations that provide tourist attractions and venues.

Third, volunteers and volunteer hours have been drastically reduced due to the economic conditions of today. In the past, many of our financial institutions, small businesses and municipalities afforded their employees the opportunities to serve on boards of cultural and art organizations and many of them provided volunteers to assist with organizations hosting events. Today, many of these volunteers and volunteer hours have either been drastically reduced and/or eliminated. I am currently working with several local cultural and arts organizations assisting them with identifying and securing board members to provide specialized skills and

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talents to assist them with just maintaining their programs and events. In addition, I am training high school and college aged students through a program called “Mobilizing Our Future Leaders” to become active and provide leadership to our local organizations who so desperately need their talents and skills.

What needs to be provided today in order for the Eastern Connecticut to grow and increase its viability as a tourist destination not only to residents in Connecticut but to visitors and potential visitors outside of the region? Tourist attractions and organizations hosting events need to strengthen the partnership with the Office of Tourism and the Eastern Regional Tourist District through Marketing and Promotional Outreach Opportunities that extend beyond local print and radio advertisement. The Office of Tourism and the Eastern Regional Tourist District have the skills, technology and capabilities to expand the print, radio and social media marketing and advertising nationally and internationally. Many of the theaters, art galleries, museums and tourist attractions just do not have the marketing and advertising funds and/or personnel that would allow them to reach out to visitors and potential visitors to this extent.

No, I am not asking you to move funding from one line item to another. What I am proposing is that for every State Dollar invested in the Office of Tourism and the Eastern Regional Tourism District there must be a rate of return back to the State of Connecticut in the form of Revenue. The various tourist attractions and events must direct visitors to local hotels, restaurants and merchants who collect Sales Tax and therefore increase revenue to the State of Connecticut. The local cultural arts and tourism organizations must provide employment and business opportunities for residents and potential residents to increase revenues back to the State of Connecticut as well. The tourist attractions and events in Eastern Connecticut must be a part of Economic Development Opportunities for the State of Connecticut as its attracts large to medium size corporations to locate and/or expand their businesses in the State of Connecticut by providing quality tourist venues and events for the entire family.

In closing, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to address the Appropriation Committee and ask you to consider restoring the funding to the Office of Tourism and the Eastern Regional Tourism District.

Respectively Yours,

Shiela Hayes
288 Central Avenue, Unit 1
P.O. Box 185
Norwich, CT 06360