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To: Appropriations Committee  
CT General Assembly

Re: Funding for Regional Tourism Districts

Date: 1 March 2015

I am a board member of the Eastern Regional Tourism District, (ERTD or “Mystic Country”) and recently retired Director of Economic Development for the Southeastern CT Enterprise Region (seCTer). I also work with, as both volunteer and board member, a number of small museums and heritage organizations in Southeastern Connecticut (SECT); and, am in the startup phase of a small tourism business promoting inbound tours and meetings to the region. In all of these capacities, I am very concerned that the proposed budget of Governor Malloy removes funding for the tourism districts completely.

Since 1982 when (well-conceived) legislation established regional tourism marketing organizations in CT, the districts have functioned to support the many small businesses in CT that very often get lost in the bigger marketing picture of the state. They also serve the municipalities represented on district boards in promoting the small towns and larger cities in CT. The Eastern Regional Tourism District is the primary tourism marketing resource for the many tourism entities, large and small (and there are far more small venues than large in all districts). This representation is critically important to small profit and not-for-profit businesses in promoting themselves to visitors within CT, without our borders and in international markets. Very few small businesses and next to no non-profit businesses have either the marketing expertise or the funds to effectively target tourists to visit their properties. Of necessity, the State Office of Tourism cannot do this. Their mandate is to sell the CT Brand, not the thousands of specific products that support that brand.

The ERTD is able, with a very small professional staff, to immerse themselves in the product they represent, and to provide their small business constituents with opportunities for cooperative marketing, trade show attendance, educational opportunities, and public relations assistance. They do this now with limited resources, and do it very well. In addition to their support of the State office’s initiatives on a broad scale, regionally some of their invaluable assistance to the tourism businesses of SECT follows:

- Partnering with regional Chambers of Commerce, the Greater Mystic Visitor’s Bureau and The Day paper to publish a yearly visitor’s guide - 250,000 copies of which are distributed to potential visitors;
- Supplying and maintaining a robust presence on Social media sites and supplying content for the mystic.org web site;
- Coordinating and underwriting trade show participation and industry sales events for constituent partners;
- Initiating and underwriting cooperative advertising in major publications including the *CT Visitor Guide* and *Yankee Magazine*;
- Responding to over 20,000 inquiries for information;
- Maintaining and distributing to visitors and press a comprehensive Calendar of Events;
- Maintaining contact with travel writers and editors throughout the world pitching story ideas, hosting press visits and providing information on events, small businesses and travel ideas for the region.
- Creating and printing material promoting themed activities or “Trails” within the region, including an Antique Trail, Ice Cream Trail (Sundae Drives), Pet Friendly Trail, Foodie Trail and several more.

All of this activity, and much more, has resulted in the ERTD-Mystic Country region becoming the most visible and most successful region of the state in attracting and entertaining visitors – seniors, families, boaters, campers, history enthusiasts, beach goers, garden and art lovers and so much more. The State’s recently released intercept study of visitors indicates that visitors to Mystic Country enjoy far more than the major attractions promoted by the State office of tourism (the Casinos, Aquarium, Mystic Seaport) including but not limited to Beaches (58%), Museums and Historic Sites (34%), Outdoor Recreation (26%) and Sightseeing (30%).

In my past role as Director of Economic Development for SECT, I was responsible for the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) of the region, prepared for the US Department of Commerce and endorsed by them and by the Governor’s office. The CEDS examines on a macro and micro level the economic drivers for SECT. Six Industry “Clusters” providing the bulk of the jobs and the revenues for the region are identified in the CEDS. Tourism is the largest employer of the Clusters with over 20,000 workers; and sales in the Cluster are only exceeded by Defense sales. It would be truly unfortunate if the small amount of funding allocated by the State of CT to regional tourism promotion were to be removed from the budget. This funding is critical to the support of what is arguably the largest or second largest driver of the economy in SECT.

I respectfully request that you continue to include funding for the Regional Tourism Districts in the State Budget.

Thank you,

Deborah Donovan  
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