

## Testimony HB6824 – Re: Elimination of Regional Tourism Districts

As Chairman, a volunteer position, of the Eastern Regional Tourism District (ERTD), I am writing today to ask the Legislature to reverse the Budget proposal to eliminate the three Regional Tourism Districts. The ERTD is a very active organization serving as the primary tourism marketing resource for the tourism industry in Eastern Connecticut, to the State of Connecticut, to the business community to the visitor and, to the residents. The ERTD represents all businesses, attractions, destinations and entities that identify themselves as involved in the tourism industry, a major contributor to the state's economy. Currently, there are 1,600 businesses represented by the District including 42 towns, 70 hotels and 68 small Inns and B&Bs. A recent economic impact study completed for the State Office of Tourism indicates that the tourism business generates \$16 billion dollars in revenue and taxes annually. Eastern Connecticut represents a large portion of that revenue generation. The ERTD works collaboratively with the Chambers of Commerce within the District, private tourism based organizations including the Greater Mystic Visitor's Bureau (GMVB), New London Main Street, The Last Green Valley (TLGV), Putnam Business Association to develop a consistent, consumer-focused message encouraging individuals, groups and conferences/meetings to visit the area.

Who would be hurt by eliminating the ERTD? Not the big-name organizations such as the Casinos and the National Chain Hotels that the state needs to support state tourism conferences and meetings. Rather, it is the small businesses, museums, ice cream stands, outfitters, and Private-Not-for-Profit groups and the myriad of "Mom & Pop" tourism businesses that have worked diligently in a bad economy to be successful in attracting visitors to Eastern Connecticut that will be left without a cohesive support system to market and promote their businesses and tourism. The State Office of Tourism does a great job of promoting statewide tourism but, lack the staff and expertise to adequately address questions about the smaller venues, eateries and accommodations. The ERTD is adept in assembling weekend itineraries that encourage visitors to see many sites in a small area. They create attractive day-trip packages for wedding parties, class reunions, large family gatherings that show the best of the area. The small but knowledgeable staff can easily answer phone inquiries about what there is to do in any given area of the District and, has been very successful in hosting international guests, bus groups from out-of-state. All of this will be unavailable to the visitor if the District is eliminated. Special Trail brochures such as the *Sundae Drives*, *Antiques*, *Pet Friendly*, *Foodie Finds* that list places of interest for specific tastes will no longer be produced. Tourism guides, maps and other marketing pieces will cease to be distributed in the district. Gone too, will be the thousands of Facebook photos and posts, Twitter feeds, Pinterest posts and all of the social media and web site information.

The tourism industry, the visitors and, the people of Connecticut will lose so much more than they will gain if the District budget of \$1,500,000 (\$500,000 per district) is eliminated. Please consider the consequences to the business community and, reinstate the funding for the Tourism Districts.

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