

INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF ARTS & IDEAS

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Committee on Appropriations
Testimony of Mary Lou Aleskie

Good evening Senator Bye, Representative Walker and members of the General Assembly Committee on Appropriations.

I am Mary Lou Aleskie, Executive Director of the International Festival of Arts & Ideas, one of the premiere performing arts festivals of the world, located right here in Connecticut. Thank you for your partnership over the past 20 years. Together we have accomplished a lot. CNN recently referred to this Festival as one of the Top Fifty must visit destinations in 50 States. And that is just a piece of the story. Recently, I was recently elected by my peers to be the global chair of the International Society of Performing Arts, a membership organization of 600 of the world's leading cultural organizations from 50 countries. In addition the Festival was invited to be a founding member of the Global Cultural District Network, a network of like-minded new cities programmers in London, Shanghai, Sydney, Montreal and now New Haven. These are important opportunities for our City and our State. I look forward to finding even more ways for the Festival to add value and attract further investment to Connecticut.

The international festival of Arts & Ideas is a globally recognized cultural attraction sought out by artists and ministries of culture, trade and tourism from around the world. They come to us willing to invest their money with the Festival to bring the best of the world to Connecticut. In turn, we add value to our State by producing life changing experiences, empowering our neighborhoods through the arts and producing a world-class event that is a game changer for our community and those who participate. Our Festival generates on average \$20M in economic value each year attracting 100,000 attendees to 300 events during the last 15 days in June. The largest segment of our audience are families who rely on the Festival for free/low cost high quality cultural activities.

We are a valuable customer to many small businesses in Connecticut. Printers, rental companies, advertisers, food providers, as well as 600 - 700 hotel bed nights each year to house our artists alone, are part of the Connecticut summer economy thanks to the Festival. Visitors come from every town in the state, 15 % of our audience travels beyond our state borders to be here. We feature artists this year alone who traveled from 12 countries and every continent except Antarctica. 1195 artists in total were on our stages in 2015, 700 of those were from Connecticut. 175 employees built and produced this Festival, their employment added essential value to the summer economy and tax dollars to State coffers.

The Festival understands the seriousness of the state's fiscal problems. We have struggled to maintain a high percentage of free quality programs for families even with the 50% cuts we have endured, half of these cuts have occurred in the

last 4 years. We must again testify to the value the Festival brings to the people of Connecticut, and how the state's investment in the Festival adds substantially to our economy. In fact, in many ways we are part of the solution to the fiscal issues; not an extension of the problem.

This year the Governor moved our funding to the Comptroller's office while cutting arts funding by 25%. Beyond the cut itself which is devastating especially in light of dramatic cuts in recent years, I am concerned this move will delay payments to the festival and further disrupt an already fragile sector. The Comptroller's office has never been directly involved with the disbursement of these funds. As we learned this year from delayed state payments, slow processing of payments is crippling to our vendors and creditors. Our commitments for the upcoming Festival are already in place. Our creditors expect to be as much a part of it as our artists and audiences. Please do everything you can to not put any further economic pressure on this Festival, it's artists and its creditors by maintaining our funding and returning it to the Department of Economic and Community Development.

Thank you for your support and attention.

Mary Lou Aleskie
Executive Director
International Festival of Arts & Ideas