

**Assembly 2007
Peer Session Report
Chairs and Council Members**

***Advocacy and Public Value:
The New Jersey State Council on the Arts***

**Carol Ann Herbert
Chair, New Jersey State Council on the Arts**

December 8, 2007
Baltimore, Maryland

In 2003 Governor James McGreevey invited me to be a Member of the New Jersey State Council on the Arts...and then he announced through his proposed state budget for 2004 that the Council's budget of \$18 million was to be completely eliminated, thereby doing away with the Council.

Also slated for elimination was the \$10 million budget for the New Jersey Cultural Trust and the \$4 million budget for the New Jersey Historical Commission. Governor McGreevy planned to fix a state deficit of \$5 billion by eliminating all state aid for arts, history and cultural organizations and the state agencies that support them.

Needless to say, the leaders of these agencies quickly came together and along with ArtPride New Jersey, the state's arts advocacy organization, mobilized the arts community to speak up—and speak up loudly.

ArtPride New Jersey opened up their web site and connected people to the resources they needed to understand the full picture and to send their legislators their opinions. In less than one month over 8,000 emails were sent by district constituents to their elected officials denouncing the cuts.

All the while a die-hard advocacy effort was underway "on the ground". A core group of arts leaders—including chairs and staff of ArtPride New Jersey, New Jersey State Council on the Arts, New Jersey Cultural Trust, New Jersey Historical Commission and Advocates for New Jersey

History—met weekly to assure the clarity and consistency of their message and then they got out there and delivered:

They

- ceased every opportunity to deliver curtain speeches at theatres and performing arts centers
- wrote op-eds and letters to the editors of all the papers
- took out a full page add in the Star Ledger signed by hundreds of supporters
- did radio interviews
- drew up petitions and resolutions

And they made every piece of the advocacy message available for the public to use at any time by posting it for download on the Art Pride New Jersey web site.

They pulled out all the stops. The effort finally culminated with a rally of more than 1,000 arts supporters and featured speeches by legislators, union leaders, celebrities and artists including John Amos, Eric Bogosian, Kiki Smith and Ben Cameron.

The hard work paid off and, in the end, the funding was restored.

The budget for 2004 included nearly \$16 million for arts funding through a dedicated revenue source thanks to new legislation. The Hotel/Motel State Occupancy Fee was put in place for the first time and allocated, in varying percentages, portions of the taxes charged for overnight stays to the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, the New Jersey Historical Commission, the New Jersey Division of Travel & Tourism and the New Jersey Cultural Trust. It was acknowledged that, among many other things, the arts and history are great generators of cultural tourism dollars and now they would get to benefit from some of the money they bring in to the state.

The advocacy effort was tireless and resulted in what promised to be dedicated funding for the arts and history in New Jersey. In 2005 the Arts Council's budget was at an all-time high of \$22.68 million. In just one year, the same folks who towed the line and fought hard enjoyed great success.

But we all know that the battle is never over. We are constantly challenged to provide justification for our state appropriation and to reinforce the importance of our work to our authorizers. As Board Members and Chairs we are responsible for communicating with our constituencies and the public about the power of the arts and the value of the work of the State Arts Council we represent.

This is not an easy task. Just like those who led the advocacy effort when faced with budget cuts, we must make sure that our messages are clear and consistent. We must be accurate, fact-based and relevant. It's important that we know who to speak to, when, where, and about what.

I was a new Council member in 2004, in the wake of the budget crisis, and I recognized the need to organize and standardize our value messages. We soon created a new standing committee devoted to just that, and we called it the Public Value Committee.

The Committee's mission and goal was and is to prepare Council members to educate the constituency and public about the value of the arts and to advocate support of the arts and the work of the Arts Council, in a consistent and systematic manner.

Over the past two years we have focused our efforts on improving communications with elected officials and leaders within federal, state and local government, as well as with Board Members of grantee organizations.

To that end we have maximized efforts that were already underway and began implementing new ideas. For example, we were already publishing e-News, a monthly electronic newsletter targeted to legislators and supporters of the arts. Further refinement of the message and the topics helped make e-News a powerful tool for communicating with legislators about how their state appropriation supports the work of artists and arts organizations that address quality of life issues across the state.

The Committee also worked closely with Council staff to redesign the Council's web site which now prominently highlights the public value of the arts and has increased our capability to be advocates around the clock. We have received tremendous positive feedback about the new site and we continue to make improvements. One of our main goals is to continue to build upon our "Issues and Trends" area which highlights issues high on the civic agenda such as education, cultural

tourism, economic and community development, and so on. Through this resource we hope to further inform the arts community and public on how the arts industry creates and sustains public values in a wide range of important ways, both intrinsically to the lives of the people and instrumentally to the advancement of communities.

For the second year in a row the Public Value Committee and the rest of the NJ Arts Council members and staff held a reception at the New Jersey State House at which Legislators were given an opportunity to meet with constituents from their districts honored with the Council's highest mark of distinction as Major Arts groups and recipients of Citations of Excellence. There, the Legislators also received information on the impact of the work of the Council. This year Board Chairs and Directors from nearly four dozen arts groups participated as did 24 Legislators, more than twice the number that attended last year, and we hope for an even greater turn out this March when we'll host the event again.

In preparation for this reception, talking points about the public value of the arts and the Arts Council were developed for all Council Members, thereby maximizing the time spent with legislators. Clear, concise messages, quick facts about the arts community, key public benefits and notable statistics were highlighted for Council Members to communicate. The backdrop of the event was a scrolling presentation that featured powerful images and key facts and figures about the overall impact of the arts on New Jersey. This presentation has since been used independently as a tool for communicating the public value of the arts.

The Committee also made notable improvements to Council publications including the Annual Reports and the Guide to Programs and Services, which were then disseminated to the Governor, Cabinet Officials, Municipalities and funders, as well as all constituents.

These are just a few examples of the many accomplishments the Committee has made in just a few years. Currently we are focusing special attention on widening our Council attendance of grantee events and increasing communication with Board Members of grantee organizations. To that end we have formally introduced ourselves in a letter mailed to all Council grantees. In this letter we've encouraged timely communication about events and explained our intent to increase dialog later in the year with their Board and staff leadership.

Going forward, the Committee will continue to strategize about new materials and opportunities for communication about the public value of the arts and the important work of the State Arts Council.

In 2003 New Jersey's arts community banded together to prove the importance of state funding for arts, culture and history. We learned some valuable lessons during that time of crisis, namely that advocacy is crucial. Public value messages and quick facts about the Agencies we represent are powerful tools in helping to dispel any doubt about the importance of the arts to our communities. Articulating the value of our work is something we should be prepared to do all the time, proactively, and not only in times of crisis.