



NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF STATE ARTS AGENCIES
2013 LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE
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Chair and Council Member Peer Session Summary

October 17, 2013

[Agenda](#)

Forty-seven people participated in the Chair and Council Member Peer Session. The agenda included a panel conversation with two former state legislators and two former mayors who addressed effective advocacy and leveraging support for the arts at the state and local levels. Each panel member was also a current or former state arts agency council member. Various topical roundtable discussions covered issues most important to councils.

Session Facilitators:

Ben Brown, chair, Alaska State Council on the Arts

Mike Charron, chair, Minnesota State Arts Board

Garbo Hearne, council member, Arkansas Arts Council

Bill Mandicott, former chair, Maryland State Arts Council

See the [peer group roster](#)^M for the full registration list.

Talking with Elected Officials

Panelists: **Mike Charron, Chair, Minnesota State Arts Board**
Former Representative, District 56A, Minnesota House of Representatives

Former City Council Member, Woodbury, Minnesota
Board Member, NASAA

Duane Evenson, Council Member, Wyoming Arts Council
Former Mayor, Gillette, Wyoming

Former City Council Member, Gillette, Wyoming

Lynn Kessler, Former Chair, Washington State Arts Commission
Former Representative, District 24, and House Majority Leader,
Washington State House of Representatives

Former Board Member, NASAA

John Rohman, Former Chair, Maine Arts Commission
Former Mayor, Bangor, Maine

Former City Council Member, Bangor, Maine

Former President, NASAA

Moderator: **Isaac Brown, Legislative Counsel, NASAA**

In this facilitated discussion, panelists shared their insights and advice about arts advocacy and participants shared their ideas, issues and strategies.

How did the arts fit into your first campaign?

Mike Charron: I ran on a public service, nonpartisan platform and learned to make the case for the arts both quantitatively and qualitatively. I wasn't a one-issue candidate. Constituents knew I supported the arts, but my campaign was about the whole community and the arts were a part of that whole.

Lynn Kessler: I was 52 years old before I entered politics, and there was 19% unemployment when I started in the legislature. I have always been an arts supporter, but didn't run on an arts platform. I ran on jobs, the economy and health care.

Duane Evenson: I grew up in eastern Wyoming and felt there were lots of people in my community who were not being represented, so I ran for city council and served eight years before I ran for mayor. I learned to advocate for many things. Although I didn't run as an arts advocate, I loved the performing arts and knew that in Gillette, we needed culture and the arts. One of the first things I did as mayor was to ask the council to create something "pleasing to the eye" and was granted \$50,000 to do this. This remains a line item in the budget and now the city owns about 80 pieces of art.

John Rohman: When I started out in politics I first looked at cleaning up the Bangor waterfront. I knew the arts could tie into that—and that was a part of my platform.

What were some of the best—and worst—strategies arts advocates brought to your office?

Duane: There were some people in Gillette who wanted to turn an old building into an arts center. I didn't initially support this because it was going to cost the city a lot of money, but over the course of a year or so, I became convinced it was the right thing to do. This was a challenge because people who love the arts are lovely, but the arts weren't thriving overall, so if someone had an idea they'd come and see me personally. Eventually the arts blossomed in the community and the programs are still intact.

Lynn: Arts advocates in Washington wanted to go to the House Ways and Means committee chair, and I advised them to stick to the economic value arguments. I also advised them not to mention per capita spending because the committee chair didn't like that. The advocates immediately started talking about per capita and the chair went nuts. She was insulted because the advocates asked for money and accused her of not giving enough. *This was bad.* Another time, the arts council wanted a poet laureate and I was working on a bill that we had to ultimately drop because of bad publicity. I got very negative push-back from my colleagues in the

legislature for dropping a bill. In that instance, I did not lay the groundwork well enough.

John: Downtown Bangor had been gutted and the city turned its back on the waterfront. I wanted to start promoting the arts and arts organizations in the town, but had a hard time getting through to city council members because they were all about fiscal restraint. The reality was that the value of the buildings in our downtown was diminishing. We talked our city council into giving the University of Maine a grant for a performance space. We also started giving grants to other arts organizations. The idea was to help turn the downtown around. It was a fiscal argument that I made to my fellow city council members.

Mike: Minnesota has a strong arts advocacy organization. I had positive experiences in the state legislature and was able to get bills completed in coalition with arts-supporting Republicans.

Other arts advocacy strategies:

- John Divine of Kansas said it helps to have lots of advocates within arts organizations because it makes it harder to cut those organizations.
- Jeff Rich said Ohio uses retail politics. Ohio advocates set up arts fund-raisers throughout the state for the arts-friendly candidates, and the legislature turned in the arts' favor.
- Malissa Shriver said that California council members became friends with legislators, one of whom became the speaker of the house this last session. This speaker had an extra fund, from which he gave \$2 million to the arts at the end of the cycle because he liked the advocates. That helped foundations give more money to the arts. To Ohio's point, it's also a good idea to have fund-raisers for chief state school officers.
- Nola Ruth said that Missouri makes sure the agency funds arts organizations throughout the state—and that elected officials see the funding going to their constituents. Evening out Missouri's funding evened out the advocacy.

What strategies are most effective in building relationships?

Lynn: Certainly money works, but council members should also attend functions where elected officials are going to be. In Washington, commissioners go to a lot of functions and talk to officials about why they support the arts. Economic development and education are two of the best arguments to make. Don't just talk to elected officials on arts advocacy days, which are typically only fifteen minute appointments. Keep paper to a minimum. Meet elected officials in their communities. Never underestimate a personal relationship with your elected officials.

Mike: Are you there to make a speech, or are you there to win someone over? Bring in local data and don't go in with a rote speech. Talk about how much NEA money is going into legislators' districts. To help open doors, give every person a chance to say yes to something. For example, I got Michelle Bachmann to say yes

on an arts issue (she supported the charitable deduction for artists). Don't give people a piece of your mind. Instead, find the thing they can support. For people who might not necessarily support the arts automatically, help them get to yes. Cultivate positive relationships, because you never know where that person is going to end up, for example as speaker of the House.

John: Whoever you talk to, do your homework first. Find how the person's interests coincide with the arts and use this to open the door to dialogue. Don't worry about closing the deal on the first visit. Even if someone doesn't vote in your favor, you may be able to help them become less negative toward the arts, which is a step in the right direction.

Duane: Listen to what constituents are saying. Staff people are so important and often times you can get more done through them. They are doing the work every day.

Other relationship-building strategies:

- Cindy Andrus said that during times when the legislature was not in session, Montana had listening sessions and assigned one legislator to each council member, which helped build relationships. People got to know each other better and council members didn't ask legislators for anything. Then when it came time to call on them during the session, it was easier because a relationship already existed. As a city council member, it means a lot to her when constituents call to ask her to coffee. Building one-on-one relationships is so important.
- Jean Boyer Cowling said that Oregon commissioners recently had a great visit with Congressman Greg Walden and followed up with his aides. Later, he recognized her when she ran into him at the airport. Never fail to connect the threads and think how important the personal connection is.
- Bruce Richardson said that the Wyoming Arts Alliance mapped out which arts advocates knew which public officials, which helped them make the most of existing relationships.
- Nola Ruth said she was assigned to talk to a Missouri representative who wasn't interested in the arts, but when there was a vote on the arts, he called her and she realized he had been paying attention all along.
- Isaac Brown observed that staffers are pulled in so many directions and work long days, so they count on advocates to be resources. Be sure to send staffers or members of Congress a note (or a link) about an article when something happens in your community. The next time the arts come up, the staffer can bring that to their member.

What are the most effective arts selling points with elected officials?

John: Fiscal arguments mean a lot to officials at all levels. The creative economy is a huge part of what we're talking about. Tie the arts to jobs, the community and natural resource development. Maine has done a great job weaving the arts into the conversation about natural resources. Our artists are part of who we are as people

from Maine, and artists are among our natural resources. Our artists and the arts are a part of our state's unique identity—this resonates with legislators.

Duane: Economic arguments about the livelihood of our communities are the most effective arguments to make. This is what elected officials understand. Help elected officials look good by giving out money to your cause.

Lynn: While it's true our basic case is economic, we have to broaden this to include the importance of the arts to our children's development and education. This is important to parents, and most legislators have families.

Mike: We have a great story to tell: the arts improve graduation rates, build character, and boost test scores. NASAA has wonderful information and can help you compile a one-pager.

What are some effective ways to raise the visibility of state arts councils?

- Governor's arts awards are a great marketing tool.
- Ask grantees to put the council's logo on their materials.
- Ask grantees to send a thank-you letter to their legislators.
- Have legislators announce the local grants so that the information appears in the news.
- Let legislators give the big checks—they love it.
- Consider putting the state's first lady on the arts council board.
- Attend the board meetings of your grantee organizations. They often don't know what the arts council does, and this is a chance to educate them about where funding comes from.
- Encourage staff and boards of grantee organizations to become individual members of your state advocacy organization.

Reports from Roundtable Conversations

When a Major Organization Has Major Trouble

Most state arts agencies have had to contend with a collapse or a controversy of a leading arts organization that is also a grantee. What issues does this raise for you as a council? What kinds of conversations, decisions or challenges has this precipitated for you?

- Organizations hit major trouble because of:
 - key benefactor loss
 - shrinking audiences and not developing future audiences
 - lack of marketing skills
 - lack of understanding about return on investment
 - mission drift
 - overbuilding facilities
 - competition for people's time

- Approaches include:
 - learning how to build and retain audiences
 - collaboration
 - giving up proprietary practices
- Possible roles for state arts agencies include:
 - training and convening
 - developing and sharing best practices
 - willingness to let some organizations fail
 - forcing organizations to change by using better research and data
 - help with executive, staff and board development
 - chairs and councils working more closely with staff on major issues and questions

Best Practices for Orienting New Council Members

How can we help new council members hit the ground running and make the most of their service? Share your ideas and experiences for effective council orientation and engagement, and for maintaining momentum when councils turn over.

- Develop an orientation program.
- Chair and staff work together to develop the orientation.
- Organize peer mentoring of new council members.
- Sign up new members for arts advocacy resources, i.e., NASAA, AFTA, etc.
- Talk about NASAA's role and resources, including inviting NASAA to council meetings.
- Engage council members in community engagement programs and with constituents.
- Avoid acronyms early on.
- Consider hosting a retreat.
- Help new council members understand controversial issues.
- Send out agendas in advance, and touch base before meeting.

Creative Economy Partnerships

As we're trying to develop partnerships to promote the creative economy, who understands it and who doesn't? What alliances are proving to be most productive, and where do we need to make more headway?

- The arts grow organically from our communities. They're what make us unique.
- Economic development is at the core of the creative economy.
- Other fields can be viewed as creative, too. It's not just the arts.
- Develop incentives such as tax credits and sales tax remediation in arts districts.
- Consider the roles of arts councils in stimulating creative economy, and discover what's possible.

Is Your Advocacy Group Struggling?

What's the state arts agency role in incubating or jump-starting an arts advocacy group? If you don't have a state advocacy group, what is the council's role in

advocating? How have you dealt with advocacy groups that exist but are undercapitalized, disorganized or ineffective?

- Advocacy groups are often underfunded and poorly staffed.
- Lobbyists are of mixed value.
- It is important to educate people about what advocacy is.
- It is important to be knowledgeable about elected officials.
- Power mapping is an important tool.

How to Plan a Successful Arts Advocacy Day

Most states convene arts advocacy days to rally the ranks of arts advocates and make support for the arts visible. What are your best tactics and bright ideas for making these events as effective as they can be?

- Collaborate with statewide advocacy group.
- Advocate while the legislature is in session, early in the session.
- Extend advocacy outreach beyond one day.
- Stage creative events that showcase arts education.
- Involve constituents.
- Say thank you.
- Host bipartisan house parties/fund-raisers after primaries.
- Give student artwork to elected officials.

Dedicated Sales Tax

- Colorado, Arkansas and Wichita, Kansas, have dedicated sales tax mechanisms.
- Go broader with cultural heritage.
- Make sure that language in legislation specifies *supplement* (not *supplant*).
- Frame the issue as citizens directly making tax decisions.