

ARTS ADVOCATES IN THE LEGISLATURE: A LEGISLATIVE CAUCUS ON THE ARTS

Volume XI, Issue No. 2



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Whether it is called a joint committee on the arts, a legislative arts caucus, or a state cultural caucus, a special legislative caucus or committee on the arts affords a focal point for advocacy in the legislature on arts policy and budget issues.

Caucus members are self-designated arts advocates in the legislature. They extol the value of public investment in the arts; they provide leadership to their legislative colleagues on arts policy; they inform their colleagues in the legislature about the benefits of the arts in their state.

Arts caucus members become important allies for arts advocates. An arts caucus can be a convenient—and favorable—point of entry for arts advocates into the legislative process. It offers the potential for advocates to enjoy greater political influence in the legislature.

activities

Promoting Legislation

The advancement of good arts legislation should be the primary purpose of the caucus. Its members promote a legislative agenda for the arts in the legislature and build consensus around arts budget and policy issues. As arts advocate in the legislature, the caucus can:

- set an agenda on priorities for arts legislation;
- provide legislators with specific information on the arts;
- advocate funding for the state arts agency;
- scuttle troublesome legislation; and
- gather sponsors for a bill.

Overall, the caucus works as a study group to advise the legislature on arts policy and promote worthwhile arts legislation. At times, disagreement within the caucus may prevent its members from taking a position as a group. Nonetheless, a powerful caucus chair who chooses to sponsor arts legislation can, through the force of personal persuasion, gather a coalition of vocal supporters to move legislation forward.

Researching Arts Policy

Working as an arts policy research group in the legislature, a special committee can examine any number of topics—dedicated taxes, health insurance coverage for artists, state lottery support for the arts, vanity license plates, the economic impact of the arts—that can lead to the drafting and passage of legislation favorable to the arts in the state.

The state arts agency may share in funding research projects sponsored by a special legislative committee. While the primary jurisdiction of the special legislative committee is the arts, the committee also may consider important issues such as the state role in implementing arts education standards, and policies in the humanities, historic preservation, libraries, cultural tourism and other public policy issues related to the arts.

Advancing the Arts

As an arts advocacy group within the legislature, the arts caucus or special committee raises the visibility of the arts on the legislative policy agenda. When a group of dynamic legislators discusses the arts with the same enthusiasm and knowledge applied to issues like the environment, highways and taxes, the arts claim a serious hold on the public policy agenda.

The advocacy activities of a special committee may include presentations and field trips to educate legislators about the work of the state's cultural organizations. The committee sponsors breakfast meetings, for example, for legislators and constituents during the legislative session. The arts caucus might bring arts presentations into the capitol building. Caucus members can be called on to host the state's annual arts congress, or the annual statewide arts advocacy dinner.

formation

Motivated Leadership

The initiative for establishing a special legislative committee on the arts often comes from the leadership of a single individual—“a super visionary who is the sparkplug,” as one state arts agency director described the state's arts caucus founder—usually a member of the legislature with a particular interest in arts policy.

The initiative might also come from the governor of a state, or from the director or chair of a state arts agency or the head of a statewide arts advocacy group. The common thread is the singular motivation to develop a group of legislators who will work as advocates for the arts from within.

The formation of a special legislative committee may require the enactment of a resolution by the state legislature. On the other hand, a caucus on the arts in the legisla-

ture could be set up informally, through the invitation of a leader in the legislature soliciting the participation of colleagues interested in promoting the arts.

Evolutionary Development

One state's joint legislative committee on cultural affairs grew out of a governor's task force on the arts, which included legislative members appointed by the governor. When the task force completed its assignment, its legislative leaders continued with a similar focus within the legislature. The high level of visibility enjoyed by the governor's task force enhanced the status and credibility of the new joint legislative committee. At other times, an opportunity may arise with the reorganization of legislative committees to create a special committee in which the arts enjoy a new-found priority.

State Arts Agency Role

In most cases, the state arts agency plays a role in the development of a legislative arts caucus. The state arts agency may be in a particularly good position, for example, to identify potential caucus members from legislators who represent districts where the arts are significant in the community or who have strong voting records in support of the arts. The state agency can guide and encourage legislators to confirm their commitment to arts advocacy through membership in the caucus.

The caucus leaders serve as the key legislative contacts for a state arts agency. When the state arts agency includes that leadership at meetings for reports on legislative issues and discussion of arts policy topics important to the state arts agency, the agency helps to elevate the involvement of legislators in state arts policy.

structure

Advocacy Is Bipartisan

The arts are a bipartisan issue, and support for the arts is not restricted to one political party. The membership of a legislative caucus on the arts should reflect the bipartisan nature of arts advocacy essential to legislative success. In addition, a caucus composed of an equal number of legislators from both chambers, though not critical, has proved to work well, with both parties fairly represented. Including—indeed recruiting—caucus members from diverse backgrounds who nonetheless share a common interest in the arts can strengthen the power of the caucus.

A special legislative committee of the house or senate, or a joint committee of the legislature, typically consists of a fixed number of members appointed by the house and senate leadership. In one state, the joint committee on the arts only meets when the legislature is not in session, offering a forum for ongoing discussion of arts issues among legislators.

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Selecting members for a caucus on the arts, in contrast with a special legislative committee, is usually less formal and is often open to any legislator who is interested in participating or attending programs sponsored by the caucus. Again, it is important to achieve a bipartisan balance. Members of the finance and budget committees who will be making the final decisions in drafting legislation on funding and policy can be especially valuable as caucus members.

Essential Key Leaders

A committed leader who is active and willing to be helpful is essential to the success of a legislative caucus or special committee. In some states, committee members elect their own chair; elsewhere, the legislative leadership appoints the chair. The state arts agency is sometimes consulted to suggest legislators for the special committee or for the positions of committee chair and co-chair.

The stature of the legislators is also important to the standing and credibility of the special legislative committee. In a state legislature where the members of the special committee on the arts are not those who are influential or powerful, the committee may be regarded as nonessential or ineffectual. The arts, as a policy issue, can suffer by the company it is perceived to keep.

Important Committee Assignments

The regular committee assignments of the legislators on the special arts committee are critical to the committee's influence. States often require that a joint or ad hoc committee on the arts draws at least some of its members from the regular legislative committees on finance, budget and education. These legislators have a working knowledge of the legislation that will most greatly influence arts policies. They are well placed to advance their advocacy for the arts from a special arts committee or caucus toward leading the drafting of legislation for the arts in their regular committee work.

The perception of the arts as an important public policy concern is critical to the success and standing of a caucus or special committee. In one state, a special committee on cultural relations had been considered low status until it was given additional authority over international issues. Powerful legislators began taking interest in the special committee's activities and it became a prestigious assignment. The arts benefited from the additional attention.

Staff

Good staff is important to the success of a special legislative committee, although not all states have adequate, full-time staff. It is more useful to a committee—and to the arts community—that the legislative committee staff person has a strong background

in politics and legislation and is not limited by a background only in the arts. In some states, the state arts agency acts as staff for the committee or caucus on the arts, drafting briefing memos, announcements and letters for the signature of the caucus members or committee chair. It may seem like extra work for the state arts agency, but the effort is an important piece of arts advocacy.

jurisdiction

Beyond Drafting

A special legislative committee on the arts or a legislative arts caucus, by definition, does not have jurisdiction over drafting and reporting bills. Though lacking specific legislative jurisdiction—typically, for example, bills are not referred to it for consideration—the special committee works to keep the standing legislative committees informed on arts legislation under their purview.

A special legislative committee, which does not draft legislation, may in fact receive arts-related legislation for consideration and response to other committees. Arts bills may go here first for review and comment, depending on the charge to the committee. In that case, the special committee serves as a study group on arts policy, drawing on the committee members' expertise on arts issues.

Developing Legislation

The caucus can be invaluable to the state arts agency in making sure that important legislation gets enacted. As a result of their special understanding of legislative arts policy, members of a caucus or a special legislative committee often take the lead in sponsoring or introducing legislation and drafting bills on arts issues which will then be taken up by the appropriate committees in the legislature. In this way, the advocates within the legislature are influential in the development of legislation in the arts. Likewise, a legislative caucus on the arts, while barred from introducing legislation as a committee would, may still turn to its members to sponsor and introduce bills of interest to the arts caucus agenda.

relationships

The Arts Community

The value of a special legislative committee depends upon its responsiveness to the arts community as a channel for information between legislators and arts advocates. The opportunity for convenient, informed communication with members of the legislature is important to the development of reasoned policy and good arts legislation. Recognizing that, at times, the committee and the arts community may disagree on how best to approach an issue, the committee nonetheless is a key point of entry into

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the legislature for the state arts agency and other arts advocates in the state.

One of the most important features of the relationship between a special committee and arts constituents is the chance to work together on legislative strategy. The committee can be especially useful in convening meetings with the arts community on legislation and budget matters. Communication is important to build collaboration and develop strategy. These strategy sessions provide a constructive forum for sharing information and tactics involving the state arts agency, the state arts advocacy group and others in the arts constituency concerned with the development of public arts policy.

Other Legislators

The caucus or special legislative committee can educate other legislators on arts issues. Often the arts caucus receives information from statewide organizations and arts institutions, which it then makes available to the entire legislature. In that way the caucus or committee becomes a credible, useful source of information on arts policy for all legislators, while conveying information that may have been prepared for that very purpose by the state arts agency or the arts advocacy community.

In addition, the special legislative committee provides a forum through which arts advocates in the state can communicate directly with legislators. For example, the arts caucus might sponsor a briefing for legislators on a particular arts topic, with presentations made by members of the arts community.

challenges

Leadership

Leadership and follow-through are essential to the success of the caucus or committee. The role of the inspiring leader is so central to the success of a special arts committee that when the key legislator has retired from politics, a leadership vacuum in the arts could spell the dissolution of the arts caucus or ad hoc committee. It is essential always to cultivate new leaders who will take on the role when a leader steps down.

Obstacles

Problems persist. A joint legislative committee on the arts in at least one state decided at the outset not to get involved in the state arts agency's budget discussions; the decision limited the committee's benefit to the state agency. If the committee lacks forceful leadership, it may not be capable of following through on advocacy issues. Without adequate staff—either on the committee or in the state arts agency—the committee may create extra work for the state agency, arranging field trips and legislative testimony with little to show in significant results.

Lowered Expectations

Without dynamic leadership from legislators, or lacking the engagement of the state's arts agency or the statewide arts advocacy group, the legislative arts caucus can become moribund and of little use.

Do not form unrealistic expectations about a legislative arts caucus or special committee. It may produce nothing more than serious discussions on arts policy that never existed before, on a regular basis, within the legislature.

Convening regular meetings with the caucus may not work. Considering the competition for legislators' time, the caucus—though valuable as a voice for the arts in the legislature—may in fact be a body which doesn't meet.

results

Knowledgeable Legislators

In states with a special legislative committee on the arts, advocates for the arts rate the committee as helpful and supportive in acting as a sounding board and an advocacy drum for the arts within the legislature.

As a result of being more knowledgeable about the arts, committee members are well prepared to report to the legislature about the arts. In the process, they generally develop a loyalty to state arts funding programs. The committee or caucus becomes the vehicle for giving legislators ownership of arts issues.

Expanded Legislative Advocacy

Legislators who serve on special committees can be recruited for other assignments in arts advocacy and policy making. Members of a special committee can be tapped for legislative representation on arts steering committees and task forces outside the legislature, or to serve as ex officio members of the legislature on arts council boards.

Improved Legislative Review

The arts committee serves as a home for the review of issues that come up during budget committee or general legislative discussions. Having a group of legislators well informed about arts policy means an opportunity for a more rounded discussion of issues. This can lead to the identification of opportunities for funding the arts outside of the regular state arts agency budget, identifying additional funding for the arts in the state budget. A caucus can provide an opportunity for the state arts agency leadership to ensure a place for the arts on the public policy agenda when the issue is broader than the arts.

Trust and Expertise

With an active arts caucus in the state legislature, an arts advocate should enjoy easy access to important legislative leaders to discuss arts issues. In turn, legislators should become familiar with the arts policy experts for consultation and guidance on legislative issues. Arts advocates should be able to form close relationships with elected officials through channels that were not previously available. Legislators should better understand the facts about state arts funding and how the arts benefit the state. The arts should become part of the overall picture in the legislature.

references

In a dozen or more states, arts advocates and the state arts agency enjoy a special relationship with their state legislators through a legislative arts caucus or special committee on the arts. For additional information on organizing legislators as arts advocates, contact these state arts agencies:

Colorado

Legislative Arts Caucus
Colorado Council on the Arts
1625 Broadway, Suite 2700
Denver, CO 80202
303-892-3802

Massachusetts

Joint Committee on Tourism, Arts and Cultural Development
Massachusetts Cultural Council
10 St. James Ave., 3rd Floor
Boston, MA 02116
617-727-3668

South Carolina

Legislative Arts Caucus
South Carolina Arts Commission
1800 Gervais St.
Columbia, SC 29201
803-734-8696

Washington

Washington State Heritage Caucus
Washington State Arts Commission
711 Capital Way S., Suite 600
PO Box 42675
Olympia, WA 98504
360-753-3860