



Annual Business Meeting Report

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National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA)

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Thank you, Arni [NASAA President Arlynn Fishbaugh, Executive Director, Montana Arts Council].

As we all know, over the past 10 years, two extended recessions have strangled revenues from state sales tax, income tax and property tax. Deficit budgets at all levels of government—as well as doubts that government programs are effectively addressing some of our society's most stubborn economic and social problems—have triggered a broad-based philosophical reassessment and close scrutiny of every government investment, including public support for the arts.

Meanwhile, how people participate in the arts is being affected by the continuing digital revolution. Expectations are high for leisure time experiences that engage the participant as an action hero, not a watcher or listener; that are interactive, meaning the participant responds to and reshapes the experience as it is happening; that are customized to the individual specifications of the participant; that are selected, sequenced and, in effect, self-curated by the participant, like, for instance, tunes on a portable player; experiences that stimulate multiple senses and are intense; and experiences that offer a variety of social options, cocreating with others, competing or multitasking.

The level of stress upon artists to be creative, to adapt to the digital environment, to change the way they create and distribute their products and experiences, to be innovative, is extreme. But I have to say that I have never seen more energy, more creativity, or more exciting art being produced by not-for-profit, commercial and amateur artists and arts groups.

Organizations are sharing spaces, marketing collaboratively, creating art that crosses disciplines. Artists are offering audiences and supporters customized experiences, new member benefits, and new ways to integrate experiencing art and social networking. So we see innovative models of arts organization, in which artists are the creators, performers, administrators and distributors of their art. A large commercial venue is inhabited by not-for-profit and for-

profit ventures that will produce any idea a customer has in the form of a product or experience. Two theater companies produce a virtual play in which actors remain in character for weeks and the audience follows and interacts with the unfolding drama through Twitter. Some symphonies invite amateurs to perform with their professional musicians and others encourage social networking during performances. Digital social networks gather participants for events in a matter of hours, some of whom produce and perform, while others play the role of audience.

And the same is true for state and regional arts agencies. Never have I seen more energy, more creativity or more innovative ways to support participation in the arts as a public good—meaning as artifacts and experiences and places that provide benefits for everyone in a community. State arts agencies have "place making," arts education, capacity building, underserved and decentralized funding strategies planned to be effective in each of their unique environments. In addition, I see state arts agencies initiating new and innovative partnerships with the transportation agency, the military, with companies like VH1 and Comcast, with community colleges and universities, with the farm bureau and the state fair, with state tourism agencies and private-sector travel industry groups, with museums, the department of historical resources, heritage agencies and humanities councils, parks departments, a city police department, foundations, and foreign governments.

State arts agencies are inventing programs to provide musical instruments to schools throughout the state; developing suicide prevention programs using the arts; connecting arts professionals with professionals in creative aging, health and wellness and adult residences; saving arts facilities and making capital improvements, and fostering civic engagement.

Never have I seen more energy, creativity, or innovation to communicate the public benefits of the arts, and to increase the willingness of a state's decision makers to provide public support for the arts. States are measuring the performance of their arts education strategies, they are integrating the arts and "creative industries" in state economic development plans, they are developing apps that indicate where public art is. State arts agencies are widely engaged in using Facebook, Twitter and other social networks to engage constituents in planning, to communicate program information and to network stakeholders. They are asking grantees to help make the case for the agency's work by notifying their board members that a grant has been made, by documenting project activities, by telling stories of how the grant results in public benefits and by communicating with legislators.

For fiscal year 2013, 31 state arts agency budgets are increasing and 11 more are holding at the 2012 level. While not every state has a billion and a half-dollar surplus like North Dakota, I heard the feeling expressed in more than one session at this Assembly that things seem to be turning around. But whether they are or not,

a NASAA Assembly is a special time, when we gather together, not only to learn from each other and from colleagues with expertise beyond our own, but to remind each other why we continue to do the work that we do, and to celebrate our collective commitment.

And what is our collective commitment? Certainly it is to broaden and deepen participation in the arts, certainly it is to provide the public benefits that return from investing in arts activities, and certainly it is to ensure that every child enjoys and profits from the benefits of arts learning. And here we should note that learning through sensory imagery—along with numeracy and literacy—is necessary to enable students to learn everything else. Those of us who advocate for public support of the arts have in common the belief that the benefits of the arts are so important that they are a public good—when anyone gains from the arts, we all gain, and when anyone is deprived of the opportunity to experience, learn and appreciate the arts, we all suffer a loss. A commitment to public support for the arts is premised on belief in the principle of equity in opportunity, of basic fairness, which is a foundational value of American democracy.

I think the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies bond is so strong, that our members work so hard as volunteers and professionals, that you made the extra effort to be here with your colleagues because deep down you are wedded to some of the values that define American democracy. I want to highlight another.

The poet William Carlos Williams wrote "It is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there." Well, we need to ask, what is found there, in poems and in art, the lack of which is worse than deadly?

It is an individual voice.

As a poet in the schools for the Kansas Arts Commission, I learned that my young students could not distinguish between images they had seen on television a few days earlier and their own dreams. Without practicing their own imaginative language, without learning to tell stories in visual images, without learning to play an instrument, they were well on their way to becoming the prey of any picture on a screen, any message delivered in music, any image in any medium selling a product or an idea.

An individual voice learns what makes it unique, what it is able to say, what it wants to say. When an individual voice recognizes another voice as individual, we call it empathy. An individual voice can join a majority or dissent. An individual voice can reflect on what it said in the past and can take issue with, while respecting, what it understands is another individual voice. In *E pluribus unum* ["Out of many, one"], the pluribus is made of individual voices.

Take heart and gain courage from knowing that your stewardship of public support for the arts is preserving the individual voices of our people and, most importantly, our children. Their ability to express themselves through the arts will give them and our nation the gift of the speech that sings, the speech that doesn't just find beauty, but creates it, the speech that insists there are many colors in the rainbow, the speech that curses and the speech that blesses, the speech that dramatizes the tragedy and the divinity in our lives, the speech that you say with your tongue, your eyes, your ears, your entire body, the speech that will put the shape of our heritage and our ambition in the public square, and will make a space for contemplation and discourse, the speech that says here is how speech works, the speech that will outlast us.

In the democracy we dream of, this is what the arts are and what we do with them, and the bond and the beauty of the family we are, here assembled, is that we are the ones who have answered the call to work together on that dream.

I owe a special debt of thanks to NASAA's exceptional chiefs, Kelly Barsdate and Laura Smith, to Jessica Galvano who keeps the three of us on track, to Tom Birch and Isaac Brown for their guidance in advocacy this year; this meeting is, of course, a showcase for the wondrous Sharon Gee. I'd like to ask all of NASAA's staff to stand. I need to applaud them, so please join me. I am grateful to the gracious and generous Judith Terra and her commissioners, to the immensely capable Lionell Thomas, Lisa Richards Toney and their fantastic staff for their partnership in producing this Assembly. For your good work and for your support, I thank NASAA's fabulous president Arni Fishbaugh, our Executive Committee, board, other committees and advisory groups, and each of you in this room. I am honored to serve you.

Madame President, that completes my report.