


Courtney meets with local arts, cultural officials



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Mitchell College President Janet Steinmayer, arms raised, talks about the performance space of the college's new Red Barn on Monday, July 30, 2018 with members of the Flock Theater Company, from left, Max Pevna, Noah Todd, Max Pevna, Victor Chiburis and Derron Wood, and U.S. Congressman Joe Courtney (D-Conn.), right, and Wendy Bury of the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition, second from right. Courtney is facing Republican Dan Postemski and Libertarian Daniel Reale in November's midterm election. (Sean D. Elliot/The Day)

By **Rick Koster** (/apps/pbcs.dll/personalia?ID=r.koster) Day staff writer

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On Monday, this visitor made a day of it of in southeastern Connecticut, stopping at galleries, theaters and arts organizations.

This was no meandering tourist, though.

At the invitation of Wendy Bury, executive director of the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition, U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2nd District, was on an educational and meet 'n' greet tour with local arts and cultural organizations.

Courtney hit the Groton-New London Airport to see the new "Art at the Airport" exhibit jointly sponsored by the cultural coalition and the Connecticut Airport Authority, then went to New London where he stopped by the new Red Barn and Flock Theater at Mitchell College; saw Expressiones, the nonprofit Latin American cultural center, and ended up at Writer's Block, the nonprofit organization that encourages youth to use writing and performance as tools to address personal and social challenges.

"It's been a good day," Courtney said. "Wendy's group is doing amazing grassroots work and nurturing young artists in this area. If you get that right, you're building a genuine engine. This has always been a great area for the arts, but people are energized in new and productive ways. The theme I've encountered over and over again today is grassroots."

After briefly meeting with principals at each location, Courtney attended a roundtable discussion at Writer's Block with Bury and representatives from Writer's Block, the New London Youth Talent Show, Reliance Health in Norwich, CT Humanities, Norwich Arts Center, Mystic Seaport and the Community Foundation of Southeastern Connecticut.

The legislator was very much an observer, listening as each group spokesman briefly outlined what their organization does and what it needs, and also how their collective interaction is strengthening all of southeastern Connecticut.

Courtney said he was impressed by the great strides in youth development in terms of both talent and diversity — areas of focus in which the New London Youth Talent Show and Writer's Block have been particularly successful. But he also noted that the cross-pollination and fusion of resources among all the organizations were making the arts in general a more efficient and formidable force.

While each of the organization officials talked about great strides in terms of achieving their respective artistic goals — ranging from exploding demographics in diversity to arts as therapy in health and wellness regimens to the positive repercussions of school and young persons' arts programs echoing across entire communities — the daily realities of staying fiscally afloat are also a major concern for them.

"You're competing for resources and tech support and don't always know how to do that," Courtney observed at one point, drawing nods of agreement.

Charlie Chase, chairman of the board of the Norwich Arts Council, described problems encountered as an all-volunteer outfit trying to negotiate tax laws or grant applications. He then told Courtney about the good works being done in that capacity by the coalition.

"We have caring artists and a caring community, but there are so many logistical questions that we've had no answers for," Chase said. "Thank God for Wendy and the coalition because they're pointing us in the right direction to get answers and solutions."

Another area of concern voiced at the roundtable is that, while the region is an established hotbed of emerging artists, many of the them leave for arts scenes and careers in bigger cities.

"The development of talent here is something to be proud of, and that we're a launching pad for Boston and New York City is excellent," Bury said. "But we'd like to keep some of that talent here, too, to become part of the entire process."

The idea of building an ongoing pipeline and an established economy with jobs and opportunities was talked about in different ways.

"It would be nice to level the playing field in terms of opportunity," said Maryam Elahi, president of the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut. "People with great wealth have the privilege of access to facilities and instruction that not everyone has. There's an opportunity gap."

To that extent, the New London Youth Talent Show and Writer's Block have created ways and means for students and young people that perhaps didn't exist before.



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U.S. Congressman Joe Courtney (D-Conn.), left, chats with Mitchell College President Janet Steinmayer, right, after visiting the new Mitchell College Red Barn on Monday, July 30, 2018 as part of a tour of local arts organizations. Courtney is facing Republican Dan Postemski and Libertarian Daniel Reale in November's midterm election. (Sean D. Elliot/The Day)

"It's remarkable what we've seen happen," said Curtis Goodwin, co-organizer/founder of the talent show. "That helps the overall situation in terms of establishing a long-term situation. But, truthfully, if our artists stay or head to New York or Boston, there's no downside either way. This will still be home."

After about an hour, the group adjourned. Referring to what he heard and learned, Courtney said, "What they've accomplished and what they're trying to do, it's all good. And it's inspiring. I really do believe in the talent and commitment of the region, and it's our job to support that. I think at this point that means technical support. We have to do the work to make it happen. It's not the most glamorous work, but it's absolutely necessary. And I think the (Coalition) is helping that to happen through what they've done. I'm all in."

"We're good at getting the data," Bury said. "When we started, we didn't have the information on who we are or represented; how much money there was or was needed; and what the impact was on the region. People wanted to know those things, and that's understandable.

"Well, these groups provide value and they're passionate. But they're not marketing executives. Now, we've assembled the data and we can provide information. And it was so important to have Rep. Courtney here today to see what we're doing," she added.

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