

Gubernatorial hopefuls discuss issues facing the arts sector




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Five candidates for governor participate in the Create the Vote CT, a public gubernatorial candidate forum about arts, culture and the future of Connecticut's economy, held at the Mainstage Theater in the Cooperative Arts & Humanities High School in New Haven, Conn., on Tuesday, July 31, 2018. From left, Ann Nyberg moderates, and candidates Ned Lamont, Tim Herbst, Oz Griebel, David Stemerman and Joe Ganim participate in the forum. (Tim Martin/The Day)

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New Haven — In the first gubernatorial forum of its kind, five candidates took the stage in a crowded auditorium at New Haven's Cooperative Arts & Humanities High School on Tuesday night to discuss the broad topic of art and its place in Connecticut's economy.

The forum was hosted by Connecticut Art Alliance and Connecticut Alliance for Arts Education as part of their Create the Vote initiative, a public education campaign to raise awareness among voters and gubernatorial candidates on the statewide importance of art and related issues. Ann Nyberg of WTNH TV moderated the forum.

From the invited candidates who made it to the event — which included Democrats Ned Lamont and Joseph Ganim, Republicans David Stemerman and Tim Herbst, and unaffiliated candidate Oz Griebel — audience members heard responses addressing art and its relation to economic development and education, among other issues. Though the candidates' willingness to participate in the forum was not lost on the audience, many were not able to offer hard solutions to a problem that, in reality, may continue to be pushed to the wayside as the state faces bigger financial hardships.

When directly asked which significant actions each would take in their first six months as governor to support Connecticut's creative communities, many candidates skirted around the question by tossing up the overarching solution of "solving the state's deficit."



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Five candidates for governor participate in the Create the Vote CT, a public gubernatorial candidate forum about arts, culture and the future of Connecticut's economy, held at the Mainstage Theater in the Cooperative Arts & Humanities High School in New Haven, Conn., on Tuesday, July 31, 2018. From left, candidates Ned Lamont, Tim Herbst, Oz Griebel, David Stemerman and Joe Ganim participated in the forum, with Ann Nyberg moderating. (Tim Martin/The Day)

"The next governor needs to recognize that if we are going to make investments in the arts, if we are going to recognize the tremendous return on every dollar put in ... there has to be a recognition that we have to dig out of this hole," Republican Herbst said, before stating that he plans to address the state's arts funding issue by sending a "budget repair bill" to the legislator in his first 45 days.

“We have to recognize that if we don’t deal with our budgetary problems in a forward-minded way, in four years, we will be gathered here talking about further reductions to arts,” he said.

Democrat Lamont might have supplied the most direct response out of all the participants to that particular question. “I’d get the arts community together with the business community. ... Get the business community back involved with the arts.” He did not elaborate further, however.

And though the gubernatorial hopefuls were not able to concretely answer that particular question, each demonstrated a willingness to hear and learn about the concerns facing the arts within the state. Each also made sure to make clear his understanding of the many benefits — such as a considerable return on investment, retention of talent and supplying a well-rounded education to our youth — that the state could gain from investing in the arts.



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Chloe Lomax-Blackwell, center, briefly performs a reading just prior to five gubernatorial candidates participating in Create the Vote CT, a public gubernatorial candidate forum about arts, culture and the future of Connecticut's economy, held at the Mainstage Theater in the Cooperative Arts & Humanities High School in New Haven, Conn., on Tuesday, July 31, 2018. Candidates David Stemerman, left, and Joe Ganim look on. (Tim Martin/The Day)

“There is no question that arts education has to be a priority. The challenge we face, however, is where is that money going to come from?” said unaffiliated candidate Griebel, a former Republican who offered some of the more realistic points to work off of.

“We are not going to have money to create new positions in schools. More cuts are real,” he said, before stating that arts organizations may have to take initiative by connecting with the private sector for funding and linking their organizations into public school programming to further support arts education.

Republican candidate Stemerman, who relied on several personal stories to connect with the audience throughout his responses, stated at another point that he hopes to bring a train to New Haven that would travel to and from New York City in 60 minutes. The initiative, he said, would help creative talent to thrive in both cities.

Bridgeport Mayor Ganim took many opportunities to espouse his long-term support for the arts over the course of his political career, stating that he was working on such initiatives in Bridgeport when Herbst, who is now 37 and the youngest of the candidates, was just 2 years old. He also said that Republican candidates may not live up to their promises to support the arts once elected into office, as has been the case, he said, with President Donald Trump.

Southeastern CT Cultural Coalition Executive Director Wendy Bury, who oversaw much of the planning that went into organizing Tuesday's event, also sought to address candidates about the need to attract and retain a young workforce in Connecticut through the arts.

Before Tuesday's forum, however, Bury was responsible for meeting with candidates to thoroughly discuss issues within Connecticut's art sector and to address Connecticut's now \$4.2 million annual arts budget.

"Over the past few years, we've seen that need for increased advocacy," she said by phone last week of her work pushing these issues with the candidates. "The (state's art) funding has been cut. In general, there has been a huge decline in the past 10 years in arts funding."

At the center of this forum and at the Create the Vote Initiative, which Bury also co-chairs, are the findings from a national survey conducted by Americans for the Arts in 2016. The study found that nonprofit arts and cultural organizations and their patrons generated \$168.4 million in economic activity in 2015 in southeastern Connecticut, while the state generated \$797 million. The numbers that southeastern Connecticut generated alone, Bury explained, surpasses numbers generated in some small states — a staggering result that she argues can't be ignored.

"While there are big issues that the state faces — certainly the financial issues, transportation issues, issues that take billions of dollars and lots of time — the arts industry is really nimble. We want to make it clear that while we are working on the larger issues, which will take years and billions of dollars, with small investments made (to the arts) all over the state, we can actually make change."

That call, at the very least, seemed to be heard loud and clear among all five forum participants Tuesday — a positive start, Bury said, in helping the gubernatorial candidates recognize and address the issues facing the state's art sector today.

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