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Candidates mull how to help arts organizations in pandemic recovery

Published October 20, 2020 7:26PM

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The day after Gov. Ned Lamont **announced the availability of \$9 million** (<https://www.theday.com/local-news/20201019/state-to-provide-covid-aid-to-nonprofit-arts-groups>) in grants to nonprofit arts organizations, and hours before taking the stage at the temporarily closed Garde Arts Center for an audience-free debate Tuesday night, Paul Formica and Martha Marx were among the eight legislative candidates participating in a forum about support for the arts.

On Tuesday afternoon, the Connecticut Arts Alliance held its fourth of **five regional Create the Vote forums** (<https://ctartsalliance.org/candidate-forums/>), this one in partnership with the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition, Shoreline Arts Alliance, and Windham Arts.

"The very first thing we have to do is make sure we control this virus," said Martha Marx, the Democratic challenger to Formica in the 20th District. She added, "We're never going to be able to open up everything fully and really get the arts we need until we get our public health funded and set."

Formica said it will be challenging to fund tourism marketing because that comes from the hotel tax, and people aren't staying at hotels, so the legislature will have to protect the tourism fund.

The forum served as a window into the role of the arts in candidates' lives, considering the first question was about how candidates benefitted from the arts and what local experiences they've missed most over the past six or seven months.

Formica, for instance, loves dancing the Argentine tango and said it "drives me crazy" he hasn't been able to do so since the pandemic started.

Sen. Heather Somers, R-Groton, spoke of getting back into painting and watching musicals during the pandemic, while Democratic challenger Bob Statchen spoke of taking advantage of the Coast Guard Academy band, and how his kids have played French horn and trombone.

John-Michael Parker, running against Rep. Noreen Kokoruda, R-Madison, has particular familiarity with the topic, as executive director of the nonprofit Arts for Learning CT and conductor for high school musicals.

Kokoruda said not enough people realize the jobs that are in arts and culture, and legislators must convince people in Hartford that it's an economic driver.

"I always take the arts as not just a social occasion but more of an intimate way to express yourself," said Sen. Cathy Osten, D-Sprague, citing how the arts helps people with trauma, whether it's children who are abused or veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder.

She and Formica noted the struggle of rebuilding consumer confidence to rebuild arts and culture institutions in Connecticut.

Given that nonprofit arts organizations support 23,000 jobs and generate \$800 million annually, the second question was about how candidates will "harness the power of the arts for CT's economic recovery."

Somers said she'd like to see more collaboration with the local chambers of commerce, saying maybe they could offer arts organizations things like office space or bundled health care.

"I would not support a budget if it did not contain money for the arts and culture," she said. "I think that is crucial to who we are as Connecticut citizens and where we want the state to move forward."

She called the \$9 million a "drop in the bucket," while Marx said it's "not going to go very far for the amount of arts we have in Connecticut." Sen. Christine Cohen, D-Guilford, said it's "not going to help every single organization in Connecticut that is really struggling to stay afloat."


Statchen said it's important to make sure organizations are eligible, structured and ready to take in funds. Parker said three pieces to consider are data collection from organizations, communication and investments.

These two questions were from a questionnaire to which some participating and non-participating candidates already responded. The organizers ran out of time to get to the other three questions from the questionnaire, but **responses from candidates are available online (<https://ctartsalliance.org/candidate-questionnaire-responses/>)**.

From southeastern Connecticut, that includes responses from Republican candidates Formica and Robert Bell (46th District), and Democratic candidates Statchen, David Rubino (23rd District), Cate Steel (37th District), and Sen. Norm Needleman of Essex.

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As a business reporter, I write about small businesses opening and closing, manufacturing, food and drink, labor issues and economic data. I particularly love writing about the impact of state and federal policy on local businesses. I also do some education reporting, covering colleges in southeastern Connecticut and regional K-12 issues.

What questions - or story ideas - do you have about workforce issues in New London County, small businesses, or business-related legislation and taxes?

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