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State investment in tourism urged by industry leaders, elected officials in southeastern Connecticut

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If you had told state Sen. Paul Formica, R-East Lyme, many years ago that he would take a few days off to go to Torrington, he "would probably have laughed." But he recalled spending a couple days in the northwestern Connecticut town, saying he "had a wonderful time," there are so many things to do in that section of the state and it's beautiful.

"Staycations are important, and we need to be able to market to people who may be just tired of being in the house, with COVID fatigue, and may want to take a day trip to Mystic or a day trip to somewhere in Hartford and go to a museum," he said.

He is one of many people (https://www.cga.ct.gov/asp/menu/CommDocTmy.asp?comm_code=ce&date=02/11/2021) in southeastern Connecticut and other parts of the state who would like to see passage of **H.B. 6119**

(https://www.cga.ct.gov/asp/cgabillstatus/cgabillstatus.asp?selBillType=Bill&bill_num=HB06119&which_year=2021), An Act Concerning Arts, Culture and Tourism Funding.

Rep. John-Michael Parker, D-Madison, who is also executive director of the nonprofit Arts for Learning Connecticut, introduced the bill, which would increase the portion of room occupancy tax revenue dedicated to the state's Tourism Fund.

Connecticut currently has a 15% tax on hotel room charges and, of the tax collected, 10% gets put into the Tourism Fund. The bill would increase the share from 10% to 25%.

The legislation also would require that 40% of money in the Tourism Fund be allocated to arts and culture while 60% goes to tourism, and change the name of the fund to the Arts, Culture and Tourism Fund.

The Commerce Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly **held a public hearing** (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCswa_bKFVx4RLXC2JM_2TxQ/live) Thursday on this and other bills.

Formica, who founded the state's Tourism Caucus, said the fund generated about \$13 million last year; \$4.6 million went to statewide tourism marketing and the rest went to support venues such as museums and theaters.

Two points kept coming up as elected officials and people in the arts, culture and tourism industry advocated for increased funding: Studies show that for every dollar the state spends on tourism marketing, it gets back \$3 in tax revenue, and Connecticut is failing to keep up with neighboring states when it comes to tourism marketing.

"When you look at it holistically, investing in tourism is probably about the best investment you can make anywhere right now, and our state, unfortunately, is not competitive with our surrounding states," said Sen. Heather Somers, R-Groton. She added, "It's an investment; it's not an expenditure."

She supports increasing the Tourism Fund allocation from the room occupancy tax to 25% but clarified she isn't in favor of raising the hotel tax, as it's one of the highest in the nation and she thinks raising it would dissuade people from coming to Connecticut.

Multiple people from Somers' district testified in support of the bill.

"Tourists have many choices throughout New England, New York and Pennsylvania, and more needs to be done to keep tourist dollars inside our state," said Bruce Flax, interim director of the Greater Mystic Chamber of Commerce.

Dan McFadden, director of communications for Mystic Seaport Museum, said that New York and Massachusetts are "very expensive markets to buy advertising in to get them here, and we need the state's help to do that. We are a not-for-profit, and we don't have the budget to market to New York and Massachusetts the way we want to."

Tony Sheridan, president and CEO of the Chamber of Commerce of Eastern Connecticut, said that with the COVID-19 pandemic, it's important to get the economy open again, and there's no better way to do it than through small businesses. "This is not just about tourism; this is about our economy," he said. "This is about jobs. People that really have been desperately hurt are the people who are in the arts and tourism business."

Wendy Bury, executive director of the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition, noted that in Connecticut in 2020, the pandemic resulted in \$2.4 billion in lost revenue for creative economy businesses and that 57% of creative workers have experienced a drastic decrease in work, according to data from Americans for the Arts.

She said that the bill helps to address some of the impact of the pandemic but is also a long-term investment, and that this legislation represents recommendations from three years of discussions among people in the arts, culture and tourism industry.

Beyond the economic importance, David Dorfman — of the eponymous dance company — commented that "art is more necessary than ever before. It is how we understand our changing and complex world."

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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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