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'Fragile yet resilient' arts and culture sector looks toward sustainability through pandemic

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As New London moves from emergency funding for arts and culture organizations battered by the COVID-19 pandemic toward sustainability, Felix Reyes said we're at the point where "we're not buying fish; we should be buying fishing poles."

"These are the sectors that keep our restaurants full, that improve our consumer confidence, that bring the foot traffic, that support these businesses whether it's indirect or directly," said Reyes, director of economic development and planning for the city.

He said the best ways to utilize American Rescue Plan Act funds for arts and culture include protecting existing public art that's starting to chip away, focusing on creating a sense of place, and providing grants to local artists. He encouraged municipalities to not be "so gripped around every single penny," saying they'll get better results if they allow artists and organizations "creativity and a little bit of authority."

Reyes was one of many speakers in a packed agenda for the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition's Arts & Culture Outlook 2022 on Tuesday, which focused on sustainability during what coalition director Wendy Bury called a "fragile" time for the sector.

"We're now sort of starting to shift from sort of the emergency assistance, rescue phase of the economy of this country, and we're now going to look at more sustainable funding levels from the federal government," Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2nd District, said in a recorded message. He added, "We've got to make sure this boost that came surging through with the Rescue Plan doesn't just evaporate and we're sort of back to where we were before."

He said it's nice to see people advocating a mix of arts and culture, economic development and social justice, calling arts "the perfect place for those three strands to come together."

One project the Cultural Coalition highlighted Tuesday was **Public Art for Racial Justice Education** (<https://www.theday.com/local-news/20211231/from-statues-to-diptychs-group-promotes-racial-justice-through-art>), which does educational programming, holds talks and is creating murals in southeastern Connecticut.

Jac Lahav of PARJE said the group will be talking about Inuit explorers with kids at Mystic Seaport Museum this weekend, and previous events have been held at Mystic Aquarium and the Sikh Art Gallery in Norwich.

The Cultural Coalition also is holding an online **community conversation** (<https://www.theday.com/local-news/20220212/online-discussion-planned-for-feb-17-on-public-art-in-norwich>) about public art in Norwich on Thursday from 6 to 7:15 p.m.

Looking back, forward

Bury noted that a U.S. Census Bureau survey reported that arts, entertainment and recreation businesses are among the most likely to take more than six months to recover from the pandemic, but she thinks it will be more like two or three years.

Two lessons she learned last year were that the region missed out on state and federal funding due to a lack of shovel-ready projects, and that municipal governments lack a strong infrastructure to support arts and culture.

The Cultural Coalition's priorities for the current legislative session include planning for the next session to maintain consistent support for the arts, and seeing ARPA funds used for an Arts & Culture Workforce Development Assessment Study and seed money for cultural district commissions.

Elizabeth Shapiro, director of arts, preservation and museums in the Connecticut Office of the Arts, echoed Bury's comments, calling the sector "fragile yet resilient." She said almost \$49 million came through the office and the nonprofit **CT Humanities** (<https://cthumanities.org/>) this fiscal year, and the proposal for next year is nearly \$38 million.

Jason Mancini, executive director of CT Humanities, said the organization awarded more than \$19 million to 632 organizations and five statewide partnerships. CT Humanities is getting \$10.7 million this upcoming fiscal year and will unveil a grant program in the coming months.

"Thank your legislators," he said. "They've done amazing work to get us these kinds of resources."

Some legislators were on the call: Sen. Heather Somers, R-Groton; Rep. Holly Cheeseman, R-East Lyme; and Rep. Kevin Ryan, D-Montville. Also in attendance Tuesday were New London Mayor Michael Passero and Norwich Mayor Peter Nystrom, local chamber of commerce presidents and representatives of local arts, historical and economic development organizations.

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