

Cultural institutions and collaboration



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Collaboration among independent entities is always a tough sell. Whether it's municipal governments, nonprofit organizations, arts venues or historic attractions, the work, trust and organizational logistics needed to successfully execute collaborations can be daunting.

We've long advocated for collaborative efforts among municipal governments as a way to pool resources and save taxpayer dollars. We also recognize that such collaborations can be beneficial to the long-term health and viability of the many small museums, historic attractions and cultural institutions in southeastern Connecticut. In short, at a time when these entities are still struggling from the financial devastation of the pandemic and the toll it took on fundraising efforts, membership and visitor and audience numbers, collaborative efforts may be a key to recovery for these institutions.

In the Hartford area, three venerable arts based attractions in November publicly unveiled plans to collaborate on some themed exhibitions, marketing efforts and possibly even fundraising. Leaders of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, New Britain Museum of American Art and the Hill-stead Museum in Farmington said they decided to embark on the effort after concluding their competition is not one another, but other forms of entertainment such as the burgeoning number of home streaming services to which the public turned during the pandemic.

One collaborative project the three museums are now discussing is an impressionist art-themed exhibition that each museum would host and individually interpret, but which would be cross-marketed and scheduled during the same time period.

While the Hartford-area collaboration is in an early phase, it bears watching and consideration by museums and attractions in southeastern Connecticut.

Wendy Bury, executive director of the Cultural Coalition that serves eastern Connecticut, said cultural institutions worked together and built trust in one another during the pandemic as they lobbied for federal and state dollars to help keep them afloat when all venues were forced to shutter. As the pandemic brought these local treasures to a low point - and as they all now scramble to recover and return to pre-pandemic attendance, membership and fundraising levels - an opportunity exists for continued and expanded collaboration.

Bury said the coalition already has overseen a few successful collaborations in pre-pandemic years. For example, 17 small historic house museums pooled resources to create a brochure that marketed all the museums. Each museum chipped in a small amount of money to develop and print the brochure, which none could have afforded to produce individually.

Another effort brought 22 performing arts entities together to stage a successful event at Norwich Free Academy. The event featured short performances from ballet to music to drama.

The Connecticut Performing Arts Centers Coalition is another collaboration. Formed in the early fall of 2021, it brings together six of the state's largest performing arts venues, including the Garde Arts Center, as a one-stop resource for theater patrons.

Besides these examples, other one-time or shorter term collaborations have also come together. One such event occurred in November when the Garde Arts Center and Goodspeed Musicals collaborated to offer a free public screening of the movie "Christmas in Connecticut," along with a presentation by the Goodspeed team that created the new stage musical of the same name. The event was hosted at the Garde.

We think the time is ripe to expand on such collaborations.

Even in the most robust of financial times, arts and cultural institutions and small museums function with tight budgets. They all compete for the same pool of donors, sponsors and customers.

Inflation is now forcing many residents to find ways to stretch their incomes, meaning that at least some potential donors will no doubt find it necessary to reduce the number of charitable donations they make. This could diminish some cultural and historic venues' fundraising efforts.

Collaborations can be the perfect way for cultural institutions to stretch tight budgets, while better serving their customers. The Cultural Coalition is in place to help coordinate these efforts. We urge leaders of museums and cultural institutions to take advantage of the services the coalition can provide to begin conversations about collaborative efforts that could help ease their individual struggles and better ensure their futures.

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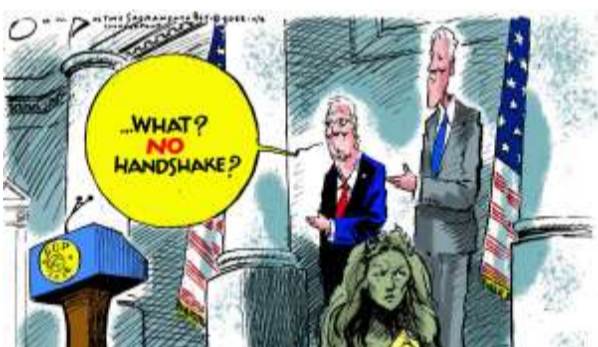
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