

April, 2009

Letter from South Dakota

When the Governor delivered his proposed budget for FY2010 in December, he called for a modest increase for the Office of Arts. South Dakota was one of the few states that had not yet fallen into recession. By his January 13 State of the State address, things had changed; a large deficit was projected. The Governor referred to South Dakotans' ability to prevail through challenging times (see Dust Bowl) before announcing that he would propose a revised budget on January 22. That revised budget called for the elimination of state funds for the Office of Arts/South Dakota Arts Council (SDAC). The arts rescue mission began before he could finish his speech and continued until the Legislature passed the final budget at the end of March, restoring full funding to the arts. Never in history of the state have the arts enjoyed greater public awareness. It is true in this case that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, so the Dust Bowl reference had some portent.

South Dakotans for the Arts (SoDA) Community Arts Network (CAN)/ SD Alliance for Arts Education (SDAAE) is a legal partnership sharing boards, members, staff and resources. CAN and SDAAE each have statewide advisory councils. SoDA/CAN is a member of Americans for the Arts/Statewide Arts Advocacy Network. SDAAE is a member of the Kennedy Center Alliance for Arts Education Network. SoDA's statewide network includes over 100 arts organizations, active educator contacts in every legislative district, 400 individual members and 1800 subscribers to our weekly arts e-newsletter, CANmail...

Although *CANmail* is not primarily designed for advocacy, it works extremely well. Our advocacy messages were quickly forwarded by subscribers to their own lists, Facebook, and others. Several directors of our larger arts organizations assumed captains' roles, and we immediately had a large, statewide force of very creative, very upset arts advocates.

Our first and continuing challenge was to keep them informed and provide leadership—it can be life-threatening to take to the streets in South Dakota in January. Our first advocacy message urged everyone to contact Legislators and let them know they were expected to lead the way to full restoration of funding for SDAC, the only acceptable outcome. Hundreds did so urge, by email, phone and letter. The network began to accelerate. When the legislators went home for their weekend cracker barrels (open meetings with constituents), two days after the budget address and on every subsequent weekend, they were greeted by friends, neighbors and family quite eager to hear the plan to save the SDAC. This grass roots advocacy never stopped, but we were able to control the flow of messages, collectively – amazing, since our advocacy base quickly multiplied. It was critical to stay in touch with this base. They demanded information, instruction, action, reports and what-next's. We were able to have blizzards of emails, but quieter periods as needed.

Our regular advocacy events and tools were very much in play:

- SoDA's major advocacy event is the biennial Governor's Awards in the Arts, February 17 this year. The Governor presents the State of the Arts address and presents the awards. At the end of his speech, he said he had instructed his staff to work with the legislature to ensure funding

for the arts council. It had hurt him to have to cut it in the first place, and they would find a way. This had the effect of changing a few of the awards recipients' speeches at the last minute. It was a lovely evening, everyone was nice, and we knew it was far from over.

- The winter edition of our arts magazine, *Arts Alive*, generally focuses on arts advocacy, and this year we changed the front page just before it went to press and got it into circulation right on time to use as a tremendous advocacy piece.
- South Dakota Public Radio is a long time partner, and provided excellent coverage, including two noon interview programs for me – the first one featured John Ostrout, National Endowment for the Arts. Local radio was also very helpful with interviews and reports – and the arts became front page news in local papers across the state.

People in the Capitol mattered. I am a registered lobbyist for the arts and arts education, and spent much of the session in Pierre. The SoDA Board, the South Dakota Arts Council (board only – staff could not advocate), the CAN and SDAAE Advisory boards were very influential. They received frequent detailed updates. All made personal contacts with legislators, Governor and others, and many traveled to Pierre to advocate in person. Critical meetings with key legislators, Lt. Governor, the chairs of Appropriations and Taxation committees, and the Democratic Party caucus (Republicans are closed) involved a board member and myself. Board members and artists frequently observed from the balconies of the House and Senate; some were recognized and asked to stand.

We spoke with every legislator at some point during the session. Many became our champions and we made no enemies. This too was critical: this was a very complicated and controversial session, with many issues on the table. Talking points and fact sheets were essential. The Legislators were full of misinformation – lots of different kinds of misinformation. Knowing the facts and figures and mechanics of the SDAC budget and its grant making policies and procedures was relatively easy. Sorting through them to come up with a short but factual answer to a brand new question from a legislator actually became fun. And once the question was asked and answered, the legislator always reconsidered and felt better about it. By the time I testified before the Joint Appropriations Committee and later the Senate Taxation Committee, we had it down. The one question we could not answer was why this elimination had been proposed at all.

South Dakota's Office of Arts (SDAC) is a division of the Department of Tourism and State Development, which also includes Anthropology, History, Tribal Relations, and Housing. The revised budget did not cut departments across the board. Some departments were slated for a percentage cut, apparently leaving them with the tasks and choices of implementation. Tourism and Economic Development were not cut equivalently, the Governor pointing to them as revenue producing agencies, and the state support as investments. However, within the department, Anthropology (about \$350,000) and Arts (\$668,000) were to be eliminated, and History and Tribal Relations significantly cut. When taken with specific cuts of this nature in other departments, the SDAC was among a long list of what appeared to be hand-picked cuts to popular programs, including Birth-to-Three and autism screening programs. The arts and other programs had become part of the Executive/Legislative budget interplay, parts of many often opposing strategies, pawns.

It was in this role that we worked with the Department of Tourism and State Development. Relations between the arts and the rest of the department have been good, with growing recognition of the arts as an economic engine in the state. It became true that no one (save four or five who will not vote for public tax support of anything) wanted to abolish the South Dakota Arts Council. Every legislator assured us that the arts would be taken care of, somehow. No one seemed to know just how.

In the end, the SDAC funds were restored as a part of an increase in the tourism tax, an answer to a bill in the legislature that would have cut Tourism by \$2million. The stipulation that this would restore full funding to the SDAC made the tax increase palatable to many legislators. After initially failing in the House, a resurrected bill passed in the Senate with a sunset amendment, and finally passed by a large majority back in the House. The Governor signed the budget into law, and we were back where we started. Except that people no longer snooze through the SDAC funding statement, "South Dakota Arts Council support is provided with funds from the State of South Dakota, through the Department of Tourism and State Development, and the National Endowment for the Arts."