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A self-inflicted wound

Why massive cuts to cultural spending are counterproductive

By **EDITORIAL** | May 20, 2009

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Layoffs, salary reductions, and budget cuts have become distressingly commonplace. There is simply not enough money to meet operating expenses. Sacrifice is more than the order of the day; it is a survival tool — one employed by businesses, nonprofits, and government to combat their shared problems.

Tough choices, however, do not mean that budget cutters should shoot themselves — or their customers, employees, and constituents — in the foot. Which is what the 57 percent cut in funding for the Massachusetts Cultural Council (MCC), originally proposed by the State Senate Ways and Means Committee, would have done.

The MCC plays a major role in the state's culture and tourism business, supporting 17 of our top 25 attractions with grants for operations and facilities.

Economists years ago determined that the arts contribute more to the Massachusetts economy than all of Boston's professional sports teams combined. This fact is forgotten in times of economic crisis. Culture is deemed "soft" and therefore expendable. But nothing could be further from the truth.

Tourism is the state's third biggest industry, supporting 120,000 jobs. According to the latest available figures, it and travel contribute \$14.2 billion to the Massachusetts economy per year. Those are hardly squishy numbers.

Still, Massachusetts is losing tourism market share to such states as Texas and New Jersey, which are acting smarter. Over the last eight years, it lost \$5 billion — equal to \$200 million in tax revenue — because of penny-wise but pound-foolish thinking.

What's culture have to do with this? Visitors who come to Massachusetts to sample its history and use its cultural institutions spend twice as much as the average tourist. Those are leverage dollars, yielding a return on public investment of more than five to one. In good times that would be reasonable. In bad times it should be gold.

To the average Joe and Joanne in the street, the MCC's original budget of \$12.65 million may sound like a lot. In reality, it constitutes less than one tenth of one percent of state spending. Cuts across the board are needed. But big reductions, under any circumstances, are unreasonably disproportionate.

As the *Phoenix* goes to press, the State Senate has restored \$4.3 million, leaving a more manageable gap to negotiate. That's a move in the right direction.

Throughout the budget struggle, however, the performance of State Senator Sonia Chang-Díaz, of Boston, has been disappointing to the point of shameful in this regard. As chair of the Joint Committee on Tourism, Arts, and Cultural Development, one would think that she would be leading efforts to reverse the ill-conceived budget cuts. That job has fallen to State Senator Robert O'Leary from Cape Cod.

Chang-Díaz's district receives a bit more than \$1 million in MCC funds, a sizable portion of which goes to innovative educational programs aimed at assisting at-risk youth. These programs constitute a vital sub-category of MCC spending. If the greater good of the state is not enough to motivate Chang-Díaz, perhaps political self-interest will.

The bigger budget battle

All sorts of suggestions for raising revenues have been bandied about on Beacon Hill; everyone seems to have a different solution.

State senators have now joined their House colleagues in opting for a large sales-tax increase — moving up from 5 percent to 6.25 percent and expanding the base on which sales taxes are paid. But, remarkably, the two chambers are more than a quarter-billion dollars apart in their estimates of how much revenue that increase would generate. The State Senate, which is counting on just \$633 million, also added a retail liquor-sales tax and a local-options meals tax, which will let Boston and other municipalities raise their own extra revenues. It will be interesting to see whether the House goes along with those additional taxes.

Both chambers, however, have rejected the much more sensible gas-tax increase proposed by Governor Deval Patrick — who was in Washington yesterday for the historic announcement of new national fuel-efficiency and emissions standards. The White House ceremony demonstrated that agreement is possible when working on reducing gasoline consumption. The state legislature has not gotten that news.

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