

East Bay RI

Question 5 bond would power arts-driven economic recovery



Lynne Collinson, 2nd Story Theatre's executive director, hopes voters will support Question 5, which could provide much-needed funding for 2nd Story and arts and preservation groups across the state.

When the subject of Rhode Island's economy is raised — that is, all day, every day, across every strata of society in every corner of the state — it is too often a gloomy lamentation on the loss of our manufacturing sector. For years, community leaders have touted the importance of the arts as a way of enriching and beautifying our communities and attracting investment. But for the average Rhode Islander, allocating resources to aesthetic pursuits during an economic downturn may have felt like a bit of an indulgence. Fortunately, the state's economy had its own agenda — Rhode Island's arts and cultural industry grew by 21 percent since 2006, making it one of the fastest-growing economic drivers in the state.

In fact, Rhode Island is home to 2,696 arts-related businesses that employ 12,623 people, and is third in the nation in the number of arts related businesses per capita, according to Americans for the Arts 2014 Creative Industries Report.

On November 4, Rhode Islanders will have an opportunity to vote on Question 5, the Creative and Cultural Economy Bond, which would authorize the state to borrow \$35 million (triggering the influx of \$35 million in additional matching funds from the private sector) to build and improve arts facilities and historic sites around the state. The Question names nine organizations including 2nd Story Theatre in Warren and the Rhode Island Philharmonic and Music School in East Providence. The larger coalition for Arts & Preservation, which is working to support Question 5, includes several additional local organizations, including Blithewold, the Bristol Theatre Company, Firehouse Theater, Imago, Island Moving Co., and the Newport Historical Society. The bond would also provide \$5 million in State Preservation Grants which repair public historic buildings like town halls, theaters, museums, and libraries—a program that was suspended in 2008 due to a lack of funds.

For Lynne Collinson, 2nd Story Theatre’s executive director, funds from the passage of Question 5 would allow the group to finish work they began a dozen years ago, restoring their Market Street home to its historic use. The former Cercle Jacques Cartier, the local French Club, the 100 year old building was once a gathering place for a large part of the town of Warren. “It was where folks came to spend time; weddings were held here,” Collinson said. “As a theater, it’s a marriage of art and architecture. The restoration work supported by this bond is important for both the permanence of our cultural institutions and beautifying the neighborhood.”

David Beauchesne, Executive Director of the Rhode Island Philharmonic, is also hopeful for passage of Question 5 to help provide funds to complete much-needed upgrades to their East Providence headquarters. While not a historic town centerpiece like 2nd Story’s property, the Philharmonic devotes 50 percent of its budget to public education and community engagement, bringing thousands of people (students range in age from 6 months to 91 years) through their doors every day. They also house nearly a dozen other community music groups and provide music therapy programs through Bradley Hospital and the Rhode Island Autism Project. “We are the largest orchestra in the country with a community education program, serving over 20,000 people each year.” Beauchesne says. “We are here for everyone who wants to learn and explore music.” These arts organizations already account for nearly \$150 million of economic activity annually, and have an undeniable impact on local restaurants, shops, and galleries. The state’s investment would also create thousands of jobs in the local construction industry, something Collinson knows first hand. “We make a point of hiring local tradesmen, from the contractor to the electrician and the plumber. We try to create economic impact right here,” Collinson says. “It’s an investment in the home team.”

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