

2022 Create the Vote Candidate Survey

Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts on Arts and Culture in advance of the 2022 election. We'll post your responses on our website so that voters can make informed decisions about who will best represent the Arts and Culture community at the legislature.

We ask that you complete the survey by Friday, September 23rd. **We know your time is limited so we understand that your responses will be brief.**

Don't miss out on this important opportunity to be an Arts champion!

Email *

j.desmet@att.net

Please share your name

Jean de Smet

What office and district are you a candidate for?

State Senate District 29

Every town in Connecticut can boast cultural assets that contribute to a vibrant community and improve the quality of life for its residents.

What are some exciting arts and cultural events and organizations that you have experienced in your community?

I don't only experience the events that others produce or fund, I produce cultural events that bring our community together. I am a founder of Willimantic's 3rd Thursday Street Fests. For 19 seasons, we hold 5 monthly events each year in historic downtown Willimantic. With 5 stages of music, 100 vendors (and discounted rates for Makers) and a deliberate policy to include Latin, ethnic, youth as well as classic rock and roll, we attract 5-10,000 people to each event. My favorite experience: a "big band" played on a stage, which attracted a formal dancing crowd. They were followed by a salsa band. The dancers began and were joined by a crowd of diverse dancers "doing their thing." The leader stopped and choked up while he said he'd never played for a crowd that mixed together before: "Unite, unite". I was in tears: this is why we have art. To bring us together. For 2 years, I produced an Arts Fiesta featuring local painters, sculptors and crafters. I produce dance events, concerts. I volunteer at many large concerts at the Shaboo Stage (and before there was a stage). The Breadbox series is also a favorite. Located in a church, one has a "front row" seat to amazing artists. I've been a member of the Windham Regional Arts council for 20+ years, I was an active member of Windham Area Arts Council. I helped to start the Swift Waters Artisans' Collective on Main St, which is a store that sells local makers goods.

On the cultural side, I am an active member of the Willimantic Victorian Neighborhood Association, which annually showcases Willimantic's >800 Victorian-era houses with tours. I volunteer at the Windham Textile and History Museum, and attend many of the historical events that showcase our region.

As a gardener, I am the steward of the Julia de Burgos Poetry Park. I was friends with Sandy Taylor, Juan Perez, and Judy Doyle of Curbstone Press. I have a degree in English and will always value our written and spoken art forms.

If elected, will you work to strengthen the arts and culture community in the town(s) you serve? If so, how? If not, why?

I'm thrilled that the CT Humanities is focusing some of their grants on smaller support grants to help the many smaller organizations that work with volunteers to connect our communities and schools. I will advocate for funding for those types of organizations and museums.

Sandwiched between Boston and New York, Connecticut is often dismissed as a “pass through” state when it comes to tourism. Yet, our state has many world class arts institutions and a rich cultural landscape.

Why do you think arts and culture are important in Connecticut? What is unique about our state’s arts and culture?

In Eastern CT, we need a concerted effort to focus on our history. The many historical homes that are open, the Rochambeau Trail, the unique, authentic wineries and restaurants are special and sought by national and international visitors, but they rarely find out what is here. UCONN and Eastern both have excellent galleries and entertainment venues which are not promoted adequately. Eastern CT is an undiscovered destination even within CT.

I was at an international tourism conference, and the tour guides were looking for places exactly like what we have: quiet country roads, small towns, something of interest all along the route. All they were familiar with was I95 and trying to get from NYC to Mystic, then to Sturbridge on highways. We, all through the state, can offer much more.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, many people discovered that arts and creativity play a critical role in helping us cope with emotional stress and sustain our mental health. Art helped us process loss, fight loneliness, stay connected and feel hopeful.

Can you share a way that the arts have helped you, your family or your community get through the difficult times of Covid? How will that experience influence choices about the arts you would make as a legislator?

The town of Windham and Eastern CT State University collaborated on an outdoor art project called "The Windham Project." People love to be outdoors and discovering art. Outdoor concerts survived and thrived. We were able to visit with friends, at a safe distance and masked, but just to be together in the same place was important. The Windham Arts Project was born and focused on murals and the interactive art of language. We are still doing mural tours. I will emphasize funding creative endeavors on a small scale that appeal to community.

The arts and creativity have a proven track record of economic benefit to our state. The National Endowment for the Arts' Office of Research & Analysis and the Bureau of Economic Analysis report that, in 2020, arts and cultural production in Connecticut added \$8.9 billion to our economy and accounted for 3.2 percent of our gross state product, while the arts and cultural industries employed 49,159 workers with wages and benefits totaling more than \$5.1 billion. (https://nasaa-arts.org/nasaa_research/creative-economy-state-profiles/)

Despite these contributions, the arts have historically been first on the chopping block when it comes to budget priorities. What would you do to help keep arts and creativity funded in our state at a level that recognizes their economic importance?

The state has the wonderful 1% for Art requirement of any new building project. But they never enforce it. That can easily change. As a volunteer organizer of events, I know that those statistics do not begin to reflect the impact of art on our local economies. They don't measure our contributions. We need to make the connections so that the value is more obvious. For example, what is the impact of Victorian Days? Difficult to measure, yes. But we don't even try. When the measurements become more accurate and specific, people will truly understand the impact and support funding arts and culture.

Connecticut has not had an Arts Education Specialist at the State Department of Education (SDE) since 2016, when the last specialist left. This position is critical to assuring that our State and National Arts Education Standards are consistently implemented in all of Connecticut's school districts, especially those in under-resourced communities where students' access to the Arts is often extremely limited compared to affluent communities.

If elected, would you support refilling the Arts Education Specialist at SDE? If not, why?

We need to support Arts in the schools, not just one position! Music teachers are laid off, art teachers are given 1/2 hour to "produce". After school activities are athletic, not creative. Parents are begging for more choices for their children. The state needs to support Arts in Education.

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