

Scott Palmer
8109 SW Vermont St
Hillsboro, OR 97124

January 31, 2023

RE: Testimony in Support of HB 2459

To Oregon House Economic Development and Small Business Committee,

My name is Scott Palmer and I have been involved in performing arts work in Washington County, Oregon for the past 20 years. As the Founding Artistic Director of Bag&Baggage Productions, Hillsboro's only professional theatre company, and as a current Board Member for the Five Oaks Museum, I have been witness to the highs and lows of performing arts venues in my hometown for decades.

I have also been honored to see the powerful impact that arts and heritage organizations like Bag&Baggage and Five Oaks has had on our community. Prior to the pandemic, organizations like these were working diligently and tirelessly to meet the educational, artistic and community needs of our diverse residents. Both organizations, like so many others across the state, struggled to raise funds from individuals and charitable trusts to support their artistic missions, bringing life-changing access to their work to the diverse individuals and families who call Washington County home. Bag&Baggage and Five Oaks Museum are beloved community resources, and their continued strength and health is an essential part of our community's future vitality and liveability.

It goes without saying that the COVID-19 pandemic not only changed the game for performing arts venues, but the landscape was completely decimated for non-profit organizations who rely on audiences and patrons coming to their venues for their financial health. Closed doors, laid off staff, canceled events, deep uncertainty about the future, and questions about the long-term viability of venues have been the reality faced by these organizations, across the state, for the past three years. I have personally had hundreds of conversations with artists, donors, elected officials, staff members from trusts and foundations, non-profit staff, and board members – all of whom have wondered about the future of our work, and the very real possibility that the time of the performing arts venue had come to a close.

I am deeply grateful for the historic support provided to performing arts venues by the Oregon Legislature in the past. In all honesty, the funds you provided were likely responsible for keeping many venues alive. Without those funds, and without the additional support from the federal government and other charitable institutions, there is no doubt in my mind that Oregon's arts ecosystem would have been irrevocably devastated; we may never have the chance to grow this crucial sector back to pre-pandemic strength if the Legislature and others not acted.

But we are not back to our full strength yet, and the danger of more failures and closed venues remains.

For those, like Bag&Baggage and Five Oaks Museum, who grappled with the hard choices to try and stay afloat, these next few years are just as "make or break" as the first few years of the pandemic. Venues continue to face deep uncertainty about the future. Will audiences return? Will they return in equivalent

“pre-pandemic” numbers? Will there be enough artists and staff to support those venues in the future? How do we make careful, thoughtful choices about our financial futures to protect these invaluable community resources? The truth is that the danger is not yet past, although the immediate threat may have receded.

As someone who has seen the truly life changing impact of the arts on my community, I am writing today in support of HB 2459 and strongly urge you to support this important bill.

As a young man, I had the opportunity to visit the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and the Oregon Symphony as part of my education. Those opportunities changed my life forever, leading me to return to my hometown to start a small theatre company that, within a short ten years, became a nationally acclaimed producer of theatrical work. Just a few years later, Bag&Baggage purchased a derelict bank building in downtown Hillsboro and built a state of the art performing arts facility which quickly grew into a hub of community and artistic activity – a place for diverse people to gather, to share stories, to connect and discuss and debate the most important issues of the day. Young people no longer *had* to travel outside of their hometown to access high quality professional work. Bag&Baggage provided internships and training for students with an interest in the arts, and we also became a major economic engine for downtown Hillsboro, supporting businesses and economic growth for the entire community. Many of the same impacts are true of Five Oaks Museum, and of the powerful experiences people have had visiting the Museum’s location and engaging with their range of exhibits.

HB 2459 is an investment in Oregon’s future; a powerful sign of support from Oregon’s elected leaders that means you value the tangible and intangible benefits of the arts and heritage. It is a commitment to the vision that our state should be a place where the arts play a central role in our daily lives, and a recognition of the crucial role venues play in the economic, cultural and community lives of both residents and visitors.

Audiences will return. We are seeing evidence of that already, not just in Oregon but across the country. Communities are hungry for the connection they get from shared arts experiences. Donors are slowly returning to support those organizations who have survived. HB 2459 will provide the resources necessary to help performing arts venues to be strong and ready to receive those audiences, to help draw those connections, and to prove to donors that their donations are additional investments in success.

I urge you to support HB 2459. Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Scott Palmer", written in a cursive style.

Scott Palmer
Founding Artistic Director, Bag&Baggage Productions
Board Member, Five Oaks Museum