

February 4, 2024

Oregon Legislature  
House Committee on Economic Development & Small Business  
Salem, Oregon

RE: House Bill 4124

Dear Chair Bynum and members of the Committee,

On behalf of the High Desert Museum in Bend, we respectfully request that you join Rep. Nosse in the push for critical revitalization funding for arts and cultural organizations by signing on to House Bill 4124. We, the 32-member Museum Board of Trustees, feel this investment—including \$2 million for a much-needed High Desert Museum expansion to meet the growing demand for our services, and resiliency funding for the arts and culture sector—is critical for the future economic and cultural vitality of communities across the state.

HB 4124 includes important “resiliency” funding for our sector, which was among those hardest hit by the global pandemic. Federal funding largely kept nonprofits afloat during COVID and it’s time for the state to contribute as well to help the sector pivot to new deliveries and new works. Audiences are returning at a slow rate. The sector is adapting to attract new participants and, with a well-timed infusion of state funds, we feel confident not only in the survival but also resiliency for our major arts and culture providers. In 2023, policymakers only recognized the dire impact of the pandemic on live venues – largely the for-profit providers -- who have different financial levers to pull than the nonprofit providers. This was inequitable and incomplete.

For 42 years, the High Desert Museum has served as an essential community anchor that provides educational opportunities to Central and Eastern Oregon. It is today the largest arts and culture institution east of the Cascades—in 2023, we welcomed more than 216,000 visitors, double the population of Bend—and we contribute more than \$20 million per year to the region’s economy. In addition to being a Smithsonian Affiliate, the Museum in 2021 was one of three in the U.S. recognized with the National Medal for Museum and Library Service, the highest honor for museums in the country.

Yet as Central Oregon has grown, so has demand for the Museum’s unique educational experiences. Our K-5<sup>th</sup> grade Kids Camps—a critical childcare resource during summer and school breaks—fill instantly and draw long wait lists. A new public wing will include a state-of-the-art learning center, art gallery and event spaces, creating additional capacity and opportunities for innovative art and STEM experiences not otherwise possible in our primarily rural region. In addition to serving preK-12 students, the learning center will accommodate teacher trainings as well as space for community events.

Our efforts also include a renovation of the area dedicated to the Native peoples of the region, *By Hand Through Memory*. The Museum houses one of the most culturally significant collections of High Desert Indigenous objects in the nation. The renovation is a multiyear, collaborative project with Tribal partners that centers Native voices in the telling of their historical and contemporary stories.

This inspiring expansion at the High Desert Museum will create meaningful access to education and arts opportunities for the next 40 years. We went through a rigorous application and review process to be selected as part of the Cultural Advocacy Coalition of Oregon's amazing slate of projects meriting support. The Museum has raised more than half of the \$40 million needed for the project, and the \$2 million CREF allotment would be an important step toward our goal. We ask the committee to fund the full slate of endorsed projects and prioritize increased access to and expansion of arts and culture in our communities.

Sincerely,



Nelson Mathews  
Board Chair



Dana Whitelaw  
Executive Director