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Cultural Policy: The Voice of State Legislators

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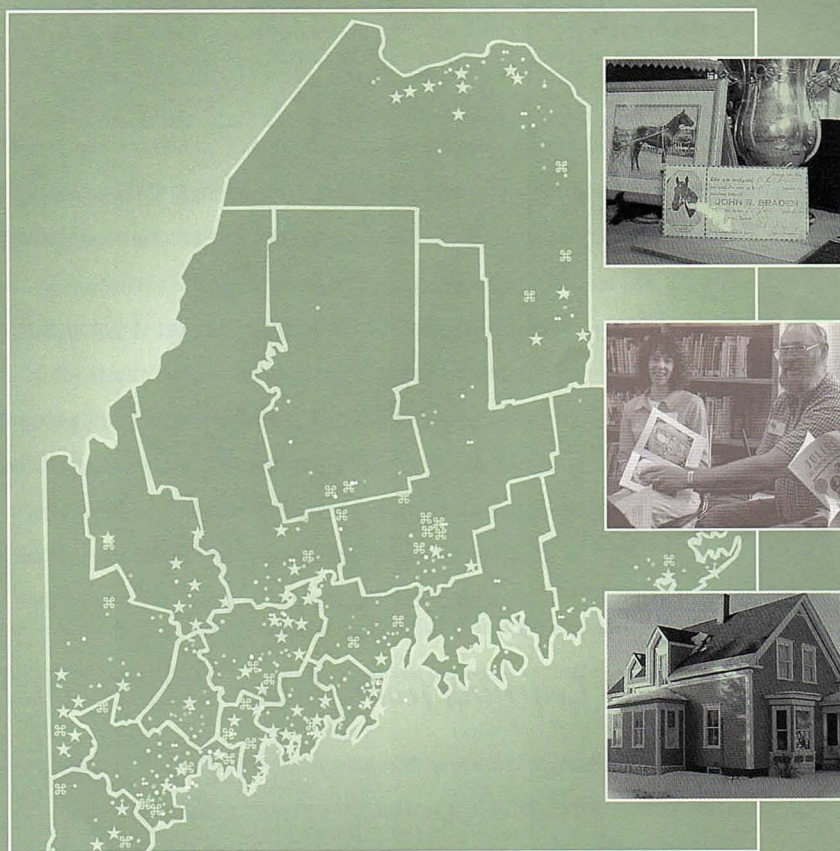
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CULTURAL POLICY:

*The Voice of
State Legislators*



*Results of a Structured Survey of Maine State
Legislators Involved in the New Century
Community Program*

*The Maine Cultural
Affairs Council (MCAC)
is a collaborative made up
of the Maine Arts
Commission, Maine
Historic Preservation
Commission, Maine State
Library, Maine State
Museum, Maine Historical
Society, Maine State
Archives, and the Maine
Humanities Council.*

The New Century Community Program: Rebuilding Maine through Arts and Culture

In 1998, the Maine Cultural Affairs Council (MCAC), a collaborative made up of the Maine Arts Commission, Maine Historic Preservation Commission, Maine State Library, Maine State Museum, Maine Historical Society, Maine State Archives, and the Maine Humanities Council, worked to develop the New Century Community Program (NCCP). The Program's grantmaking, direct service, and technical assistance activities focused on three areas: (1) advancing the economic and social development of Maine's communities by strengthening their arts and cultural resources; (2) expanding access to educational resources; and (3) preserving Maine's historic resources—properties, artifacts, and documents.

The NCCP was created by an act of the state legislature in 1999 following a year spent on program design and educating policymakers. \$3.2 million was appropriated for one-time funding of the program. The members of the MCAC used this funding to support approximately 742 projects in 183 communities in Maine. The projects ranged from \$500 grants to small historical societies to help in the preservation of documents to major renovation projects of public libraries and historical buildings throughout Maine. During the 2001 legislative session, with Maine facing a serious budget shortfall and with numerous competing priorities, the NCCP was reauthorized, received an additional \$1 million in funding, and was changed in its budget classification from "one-time funding" to "ongoing." In April 2002, the state legislature decided to allocate an additional \$200,000 to the NCCP because of its belief that the program was an important and effective state investment.



Learning from Maine — The Legislators' Perspective

The policymaker education program behind the NCCP defined "arts and culture" broadly, in an accessible fashion, presented a range of convincing arguments, and communicated those arguments effectively to lawmakers through print materials and one-on-one interactions between legislators and constituents. The success of the effort to create the NCCP demonstrates the far-reaching potential for gaining support for arts and culture funding initiatives on the state-level, if: (1) a large and committed constituency is engaged in the process; (2) the initiative appeals directly to legislators' personal and constituent values; and (3) its importance is effectively communicated in ways that reflect those interests and values.

Purpose of Analysis

As part of a larger case study and evaluation of the NCCP, interviews were held with Maine state legislators in order to accurately understand and document which arguments and what information were effective in assisting

the legislature in its decision to twice include the NCCP in the state budget. The interviews shed light on how the authorization process worked, and provided much information that organizations in other states can look to when launching their own efforts to increase state funding for cultural initiatives. While the purpose of the interviews was to seek legislators' response to broader cultural policy issues, most of the legislators focused their comments on the specific factors related to the authorization and reauthorization of the NCCP. The notion of cultural policy in the abstract did not resonate with those interviewed.

Methodology

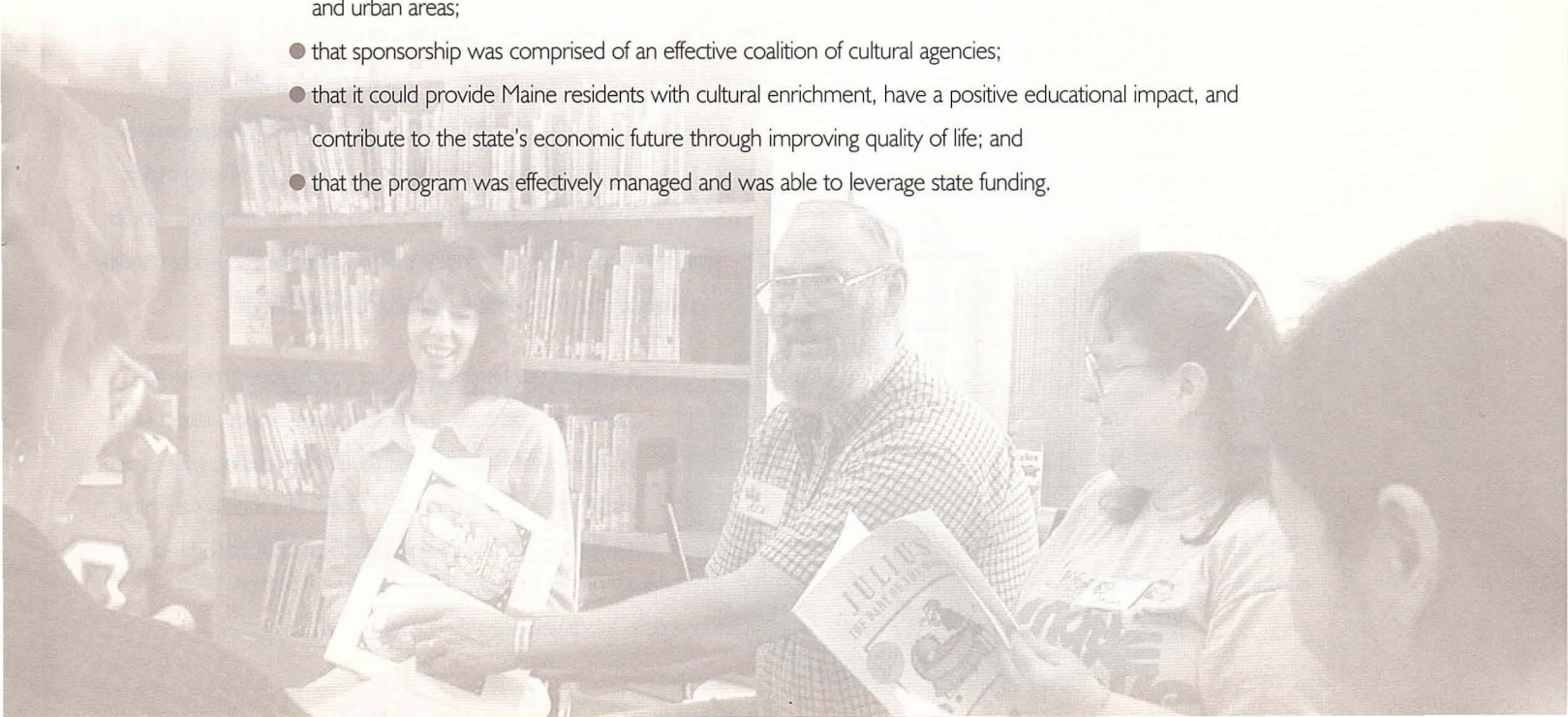
The 20 legislators interviewed for this study were relatively diverse, representing both houses of the legislature, both political parties (and one independent), and all geographic areas of the state. Most of those interviewed were in the legislature during both the authorization process in 1999 and the reauthorization in 2001. A survey instrument was developed that included open-ended questions, and questions that asked respondents to rank some issues as "not important," "somewhat important," or "very important." Interviews were conducted *after* the completion of the 2001 legislative session to ensure that the interviewing process did not affect the outcome.

Reasons for Legislative Support

While the great majority of interviewees in this study considered themselves supporters of the NCCP, our research gave us no reason to think that the Maine legislature overall is either particularly receptive or unreceptive to providing public support for arts and culture. A number of interviewees said they personally, or their constituents, had a legislative interest in arts and culture, but few cited it as a front-burner issue—education and economic issues topped their priority lists.

Despite competing interests for funding, legislators supported the NCCP for a wide variety of reasons, key among them:

- that funds provided through the NCCP would be widely dispersed in small grants to groups in both rural and urban areas;
- that sponsorship was comprised of an effective coalition of cultural agencies;
- that it could provide Maine residents with cultural enrichment, have a positive educational impact, and contribute to the state's economic future through improving quality of life; and
- that the program was effectively managed and was able to leverage state funding.



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Sponsoring culture in the country

Wide dispersal of NCCP funds was cited by every legislator as a reason for supporting the program. It was the only aspect of the program that all 20 interviewees stated was "very important." For many, the statewide nature of the initiative, which made a commitment to wide geographic dispersal, and equitable accessibility of funding to small, rural organizations, played directly against the stereotype of urban highbrow programs, and was crucial in gaining legislators' support. For many, the statewide nature of the program reflected a recognition of the fact that culture comes in all sorts of forms and is not available only in cities. "The people who worked on this realized that the arts [sector] is not just the theater, and there were ways to sponsor culture in the country," was how one legislator put it. This was particularly important in Maine where there is a great divide between the more urban areas of southern Maine and the rest of the state, which is more rural.

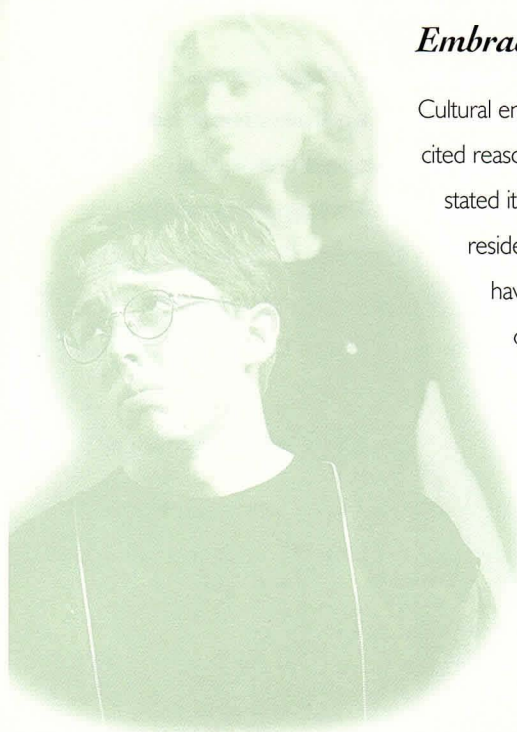
Getting beyond the bake sale—serving the needs of small cultural organizations

A key element in garnering support for the NCCP was the coalition's commitment to awarding a broad range of small grants. Legislators felt strongly that awarding relatively small grants could have a significant impact on both small and large organizations, albeit in different ways. Small community-based organizations would be able to enhance and/or develop new arts and cultural activities, raise their profile in the community, and reach new audiences, with a relatively small amount of funding, while a small grant awarded to a large organization could be utilized as "seed capital," serving as an incentive for leveraging funds from other sources. A few legislators specifically stated that they would not have supported an arts and culture program that awarded large grants to large organizations. "The list of grants—lots of tiny grants and few big ones—indicated that the funding was available to organizations that rely on bake sales," one legislator said approvingly.

Embracing their history

Cultural enrichment for Maine residents was the second most frequently cited reason for supporting the program; 17 (85 percent) of interviewees stated it was "very important." Interviewees felt that by offering Maine residents increased exposure to the arts and culture, residents would have the opportunity to increase their knowledge and understanding of arts and culture, which is valuable in and of itself.

The cultural and historical traditions of Maine came up frequently, and, as such, the historic preservation aspect of the program was viewed as particularly important, given a pervasive sense in many parts of Maine of a rapidly vanishing cultural legacy. Interviewees discussed the importance of



preserving the history of Maine's early settlers including the Finnish, Shakers, Native Americans, French, and Italians; as well as the importance of restoring and preserving the vast number of historically important documents currently held in communities throughout the state.

Taking politics out of funding

The unified front the coalition of seven cultural agencies presented made a strong, positive impact on the legislators. Legislators stated that their unified front was effective in making the coalition's campaign for funding stronger, and made their work regarding the allocation of funding for arts and culture easier. Legislators were able to designate a single, large appropriation for arts and culture to the coalition, turning the distribution of funding over to those whom they perceive to be "experts" in the grantmaking process—experts who had committed to distributing the money equitably throughout the state. As one legislator noted, "The attractiveness (of the NCCP) for me is that I have a general belief that the legislature doesn't do a good job of allocating resources where there are groups competing. So when the groups have already come together, it's a huge relief and we can go forward and all we have to do is figure out how much money we will give." Noting an additional benefit to allocating funding in this manner, legislators remarked that it essentially took politics out of the actual grantmaking process.

Appealing to legislator interests: education and economic development

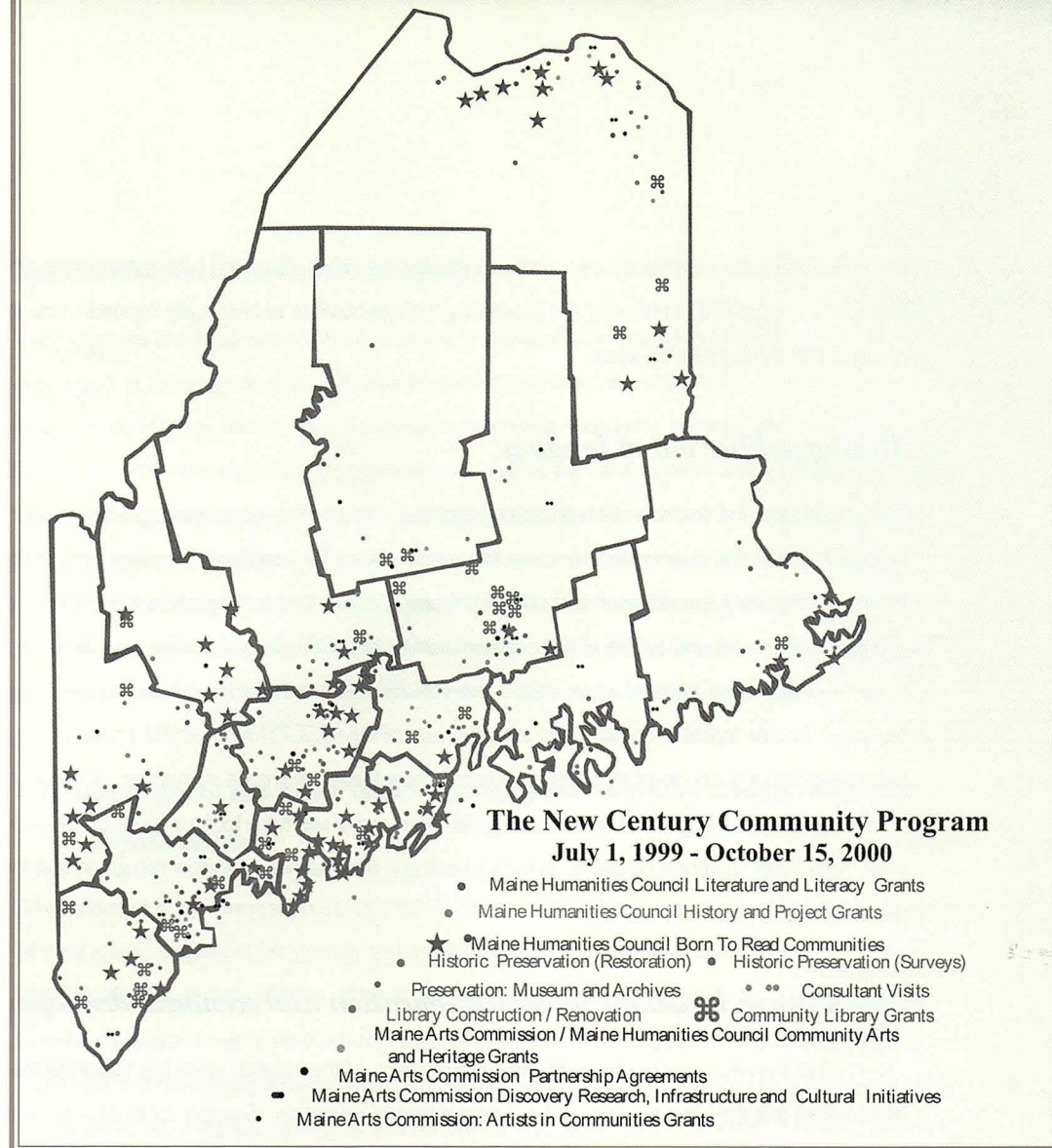
Over half of the interviewees stated the educational effects of the initiative were key to gaining their support; a few legislators added that they consider arts and culture a subset of education. Support for small cultural institutions, particularly those in rural areas, was specifically cited as an important educational component of the initiative. These local institutions offer students, as well as adults, greater access and exposure to the arts in their own communities, an important factor given that the majority of Maine's prominent museums are located in Portland and not readily accessible to most residents. Moreover, a few legislators spoke of the importance of cultivating knowledge and understanding of arts and culture at an early age as a way of instilling a life-long interest in the field.

While most of the interviewees stated they did not believe the NCCP would have a significant positive impact on the Maine economy, a few legislators did note the potential positive impact on economic development as contributing to their support. They believed that through strengthening the state's libraries, strengthening and restoring the state's historic assets, and creating new venues for arts and culture, the NCCP would enhance the quality of life in communities throughout Maine. This quality of life is crucial to maintaining the competitiveness of some key targeted industries as well as fostering entrepreneurial development in Maine.

Maximizing impact through leveraging and effective management

The majority of legislators interviewed stated that the fact that there were no funds allocated for administration was an important element in gaining their support. Moreover, a few legislators noted that the NCCP money acted as catalyst for private investments, something important both because it allowed the limited funding to go further and because it indicated that there was a local commitment to the projects. Finally, the perception that the program used the first allocation effectively was critical during the reauthorization process.

Other states can build on the successful collaborative experience in Maine and design initiatives that are based on a coalition of arts and cultural agencies that typically compete for funds.



Communicating with Legislators —

Elements of an Effective Funding Effort

Interviewees stated there were two aspects of the effort to educate policymakers that were most effective in strengthening their support: volunteer involvement by interested lay people, particularly constituents, and the NCCP's written materials. Legislators were impressed by the grassroots strength of the effort—the numbers, the range of supporters' interests and level of sophistication, and the broad geographic range of the lay people involved. Such constituent involvement effectively capitalized on Maine legislators' known reliance on word of mouth and personal interactions for gathering information on legislative issues.

The high quality written materials that the NCCP developed during its initial campaign made a very effective, persuasive presentation. The materials clearly communicated the intention, spirit, and values of the initiative: defining the arts and culture broadly in a non-elitist manner, in language legislators could easily understand and communicate to their constituents, and emphasizing the accessibility of funding for small organizations.

The maps and list of grants the MCAC staff developed were cited as key in the reauthorization by virtually all the interviewees. This information made a "most compelling case" in favor of the NCCP and clearly documented both the geographic distribution and the wide range of organizations and activities funded. *This was seen as the key piece of information cementing legislative support.*


What Can Other States Learn from Maine?

While there are elements of the effort to gain legislative support for the NCCP that were very specific to the Maine context, there is also much that can be utilized as a model, adapted as needed, and replicated in other states that are seeking to increase public investment in culture. The creators of the NCCP did an effective job of capitalizing on specific characteristics of Maine, such as the strong sense of pride and history, and the personal relationships that exist between legislators and constituents. In addition, a few people said that there is an unusually collegial atmosphere and high level of collaboration and cooperation in the state legislature. "There aren't the turf battles that you see in a lot of other places," was how one person described it. Another said that Maine politics exist in "an atmosphere of mutual trust."

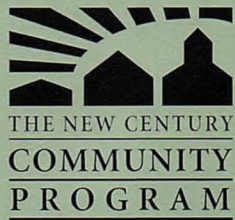
Several program elements of the NCCP could be expected to engender support among legislators in other states. These include a broad definition of arts and culture that crosses the traditional "silos" of the domains as well as wide-ranging geographic focus, dispersal of grants to both small and large cultural organizations, and support for diverse projects, thereby allowing individual legislators to adopt the reasons for backing the program that best suit their constituencies, as well as their personal interests and beliefs. In addition, other states can build on the successful collaborative experience in Maine and design initiatives that are based on a coalition of arts and cultural agencies that typically compete for funds. Finally, other states could learn a great deal from the process used by the MCAC and its member agencies to engage and mobilize their constituency, to communicate their message effectively, and to demonstrate their impact through persuasive materials.

Regarding legislator opinions on the broader issue of cultural policy, our findings indicate that the majority of legislators are more likely to fund specific programs that they feel will be of benefit to their constituents, to the state, are consistent with their values, and/or support their personal interests, as opposed to appropriating major state funding for non-specific arts and cultural purposes.

In conclusion, the experience of the NCCP campaign in Maine makes clear that through effective education and advocacy and a unified effort of many individuals and organizations, an initiative to substantially increase state investment in arts and cultural activities can meet with success.



This monograph was based on a report completed for the Maine Cultural Affairs Council by Mt. Auburn Associates of Somerville, Massachusetts, and Erik Jorgensen of the Maine Cultural Affairs Council. A copy of the Executive Summary of the full report is available through The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Maine Cultural Affairs Council.



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Maine Historic Preservation Commission
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