

3/5/2020

Dear Chairman Senator Revak and other members of the Senate State Affairs Committee,

My name is Kesler Woodward, and I live in Fairbanks. I was disappointed this afternoon, after signing up at the Fairbanks LIO to testify concerning SB-97—which proposes repeal of Alaska’s 1975 Percent for Art in Public Places legislation—not to be given the opportunity to submit oral testimony. Please accept this written testimony in lieu of that opportunity.

Most of what I have to say was covered by the State Arts Council’s Chairman Ben Brown and its Executive Director Andrea Noble, but I’m glad to be able to testify about this proposed legislation, as it’s very personal for me.

I’ve been an artist, art historian, and museum curator in Alaska for 43 years—arriving shortly after the legislation that this bill seeks to overturn was passed. I was very proud that Alaska was one of the first states in the nation to pass a percent for art law for public buildings, at a time when Alaska had no oil pipeline, no oil revenue, and vastly fewer financial resources than we have today.

I’ve served on the Alaska State Council on the Arts almost continuously for 37 years, at the pleasure of 8 governors from both parties—every governor but one since I was first appointed by Governor Bill Sheffield in 1983. During that time, bills similar to this one, seeking to overturn the Percent for Art Law, have been introduced every 5 to 10 years, because of the misperception that this is low-hanging fruit for budget-cutting.

I can understand why it can look like that, but it is simply not true. The 1% for art (½ of 1% for rural schools) is not added onto the cost of construction, but comes out of the cost of construction itself. The cost of new buildings is not calculated and then 1% added on top. If 1% of the cost of construction were not allocated to artwork for those buildings—artwork that is almost invariably produced by Alaskan artists, with the help and employment of Alaskan contractors—it would be spent on a few fancier toilets, different kinds of floor covering, or decorative furnishings almost certainly produced and purchased from Outside suppliers.

Such a building would in fact not cost the State of Alaska one penny less. It would simply fail to provide opportunities for Alaska artists and Alaska contractors to undertake meaningful work to enrich the built environment where Alaskans work and come to do their state business.

It is also almost invariably overlooked, when this program is viewed as low-hanging fruit for budget-cutting, that it is self-limiting. In times when the State of Alaska is flush with money and undertaking a lot of capital construction, public art projects are commissioned for those buildings, and we are a visually and culturally richer state for them. When times are lean, as they are today and have been recently, there is very little, or in some years virtually no capital construction, and so no new public art projects are commissioned. 1% of \$0 is \$0.

An important additional element of this program that is important, but also often overlooked, is the bond that the people who work in those state buildings have with the artworks which are commissioned. The artworks commissioned for public buildings are chosen not by the State Council on the Arts, or by any artist, but by the users of the building itself – by a committee composed of the building's architect, someone from the DOT-PF, Alaska Court System, or School District, and users of the building itself. At best, a staff member of the State Council on the Arts is sometimes able to serve as a non-voting adviser to the process, and very occasionally, a professional artist is asked to also serve on the selection panel as a knowledgeable adviser, about whether proposals received are likely to be feasible and the artists proposing them are likely to be able to complete them successfully and on time. The artists, most of them Alaskan, as well as those few who are not Alaskan, are selected by Alaska public employees who work in the facilities for which those works are commissioned.

For four and a half decades, we in the arts community have been able to thwart the occasional attempts to repeal this important legislation. In the past, we at the Alaska Arts and Culture Foundation and others have called out the troops and flooded legislators with 500 to 1000 phone calls, e-mail messages, appointments, and more when the program was threatened. We can, and will if necessary, do that again today. More than 17,000 Alaskans are employed in the arts and creative industries, contributing more than half a billion dollars a year to Alaska's economy (despite low to very modest salaries averaging \$31,000 dollars a year). A tiny percentage of those Alaskans have received a Percent for Art commission or been directly involved in the program, but they are almost universally supportive of it, and will fight for its survival.

In recent years, however, we have been successful in explaining the things Ben, Andrea, and I have outlined, to the satisfaction of legislators from both parties, and bills to repeal the legislation have been defeated in committee once they were understood. I implore you to do just that today.

Thank you sincerely,

Kesler Woodward  
Vice-President, Alaska Arts and Culture Foundation