

Thank you for your time today. My name is Susanna Gellert and I am the Executive Artistic Director of Weston Theater Company, Vermont's oldest professional theater. For almost 90 years, Weston has been a home for exceptional entertainment in Southern Vermont, serving an audience of over 15,000 people. With a full-time, year-round staff of 8, the company swells to a workforce of over 100 at the height of its summer season. We have two spaces: our new building, Walker Farm, which seats 140 and The Playhouse, the historic home of the company. The Playhouse seats 300 and is owned by the Weston Community Association, another non-profit in town, and it is rented by the theater every summer. It is a beautiful building situated in the heart of the Village Green, on the banks of the West River. It was severely damaged by the July flood.

Weston Theater Company is a cultural center and an anchor institution in Southern Vermont. It has a significant impact on the region's cultural landscape and civic networks. With as many as four hundred and forty visitors travelling to Weston to see theater on any given summer evening, its economic impact on the area is profound. As one local business owner said to me in August, "When the theater is closed, I feel it in my cash register."

I'll start with THE FLOOD itself:

On the evening of Sunday, July 9, I wrote to the Weston Theater team to let them know that flooding was expected that night and throughout the day on Monday. In addition to providing information on how to stay safe on the roads, I advised that anything sitting on the floor of the lowest level of the Playhouse basement should be moved to a shelf or a higher level.

At 3 am on Monday morning, I received a call telling me that the Playhouse basement was fully flooded and that the Weston fire department had evacuated three houses where our summer staff were living. 27 actors and theater-makers relocated to our Walker Farm Theater, where they stayed until Monday afternoon when we started the process of re-homing them. Roads into Weston were washed out and the rest of our staff, mostly housed in nearby Ludlow, were without water and power. Many of them ended up at the emergency shelter there.

By the time the water crested again, on Monday afternoon, the flood waters had surpassed the previous high-water mark from Hurricane Irene by 3-feet. The house next to the Playhouse building, which the theater owns, had 2-feet of water throughout its first floor. Up the road, at the theater's offices on Main Street, water had infiltrated the basement and risen one-foot high on the first floor. And the Playhouse, where THE BUDDY HOLLY STORY had performed the night before, had water flooding through the basement ceiling. For the first time in the building's history, flood waters invaded the auditorium, pouring up through the basement and into the seats.

As the week progressed, it became clear that we were facing an unprecedented situation. Over 100 friends, neighbors, and supporters arrived to help us clean up the Playhouse. As they worked, the extent of the loss became clear. Every single component of our operations in the building—dressing rooms, costumes, props, machinery, tools, sound equipment—had been destroyed; the electrical system, the fire safety system, ADA equipment, all were ruined. We would not be performing in the Playhouse again any time soon. And so we made some hard decisions: our production of Singin' In the Rain would move to Walker Farm; to protect our reserves, our two final shows would be cancelled, and The Buddy Holly Story, after losing almost a week of performances, would have two final concert showings in Manchester. These were the short term decisions of triage in the moment; the harder questions were still to come.

Weston is a tight-knit community, reliant on close friendships, networks of neighbors, and key partnerships between town organizations. One of those key partnerships is between Weston Theater Company and the Weston Community Association (the WCA), which owns the Playhouse. On Tuesday morning after the flood, while we waited for the water to clear, I met with the leaders of the town and the WCA on the steps of the Playhouse to begin conversations about what to do. Six months later, we are still working to answer that question. I am grateful to have the opportunity today to tell you a bit about why that is.

This testimony is intended as an overview of some key areas. In addition to telling you a bit about Weston's story, I am most interested in hearing your questions and will do my best to answer them.

The most important thing I want to convey today is gratitude. Everyone at the theater is grateful for the aid and assistance the legislature and this committee have provided our organization and our town. The time you have spent with us, the conversations you have initiated, and the Business Emergency Gap Assistance Program, in particular, have been essential to our ability to stay afloat following July's floods. Thank you for all you have done and for your ongoing support as we continue down the long road toward recovery.

As you know, non-profit organizations—particularly those in Vermont's small towns—face significant challenges as we return and rebuild. As an anchor cultural institution in a small town, Weston has been at the forefront of tackling some of these challenges. I will focus today on four areas in which the flood has created significant impacts. These are:

- Finances

- Federal funding and communication streams

- Rebuilding and Resilience planning

- And Timing: specifically the fact of the flood coming on the heels of the pandemic

I will start with this last, as it sets the stage for the story of how the flood managed to be more than the sum of its parts.

Weston Theater Company began to reopen from the pandemic shutdown in the summer of 2021. We performed outdoors that year, under a tent, and for a reduced audience of about 5000 people. 2022 continued the theater's return with more shows and an audience of just over 7,500. Though this number represents only 50% of our pre-pandemic audience, the company had momentum heading into 2023. Our audience return rate was well ahead of the national average (which hovered at about 40%) and we were the only theater in the country whose number of

subscriber-members increased above pre-pandemic levels in 22. 2023 was therefore planned as the year that would complete the trajectory of Weston's reopening.

Prior to July 10, we were on pace to achieve our projections: ticket sales were on par with 2019 rates and subscription numbers had doubled once again. Excitingly, 25% of ticket sales were going to new, first-time buyers, meaning that Weston was not only accomplishing a return to pre-pandemic levels but it was also building a new foundation for future audience development.

This momentum stopped in its tracks on July 10<sup>th</sup>. Forced to shut down for a week, to relocate to our smaller theater, and to cancel productions, our ticket sales dropped to 7,000—lower even than 2022. These numbers imply lost revenue, which I'll discuss in a moment. More than that, they point to what I consider the most troublesome knock-on effect of the flood: cultural non-profits like Weston Theater Company had not yet made it through the pandemic when the flood waters came. Already facing a steep, uphill climb to bring audiences back through our doors, we have now lost yet another year in the reopening effort. And each year lost, each time an audience member loses an opportunity to come to the theater, the loss is redoubled: it will take that much more time, that much more investment, to get that audience member back again. It is in the context of this pre-existing challenge that the flood's impacts must be considered.

On that sobering note, I turn to the FINANCIAL IMPACTS of the flood, which are perhaps the most immediate and palpable. The theater lost over \$450,000 in revenue from ticket sales due to July 10<sup>th</sup>. Our 2024 budget projects a further loss of \$400,000 (note that this number represents potential earnings were the theater's mainstage space in operation). Damages to our owned properties approach \$500,000 and the cost of lost improvements and equipment at the Playhouse exceeds \$1.5M. The total number comes to almost \$3M. Of course, the theater was not alone. Non-profits throughout the town, the region, and the state, suffered similar losses. The Weston Community Association, which owns the Playhouse as well as two museums on the West River, faces hundreds of thousands of dollars in repairs and flood resiliency upgrades.

Individual donations, foundation support, and BEGAP funding provided an important first step towards the theater's recovery. Because of this support, we are able to look ahead to the summer of 2024 and are planning a season that will take place entirely in our Walker Farm theater. Smaller shows, smaller audiences, lower revenues, increased risks. Lucky as we are to have a place where we can perform, our business model relies on two theaters running simultaneously. Coming up with a viable recovery and resiliency plan for our 300-seat space is a critical next step that will require significant expertise, time, and financial resources. All three of which—ever difficult to find—are especially hard to come by right now.

Immediately after the flood, and with the experience of applying for federal pandemic-era funding in my wheelhouse, I was optimistic about our ability to receive help finding these resources. Instead, I have discovered the third challenge we face: the difficulties of applying for support from FEDERAL AGENCIES.

The other day, I heard about a storeowner in Weston who no longer wanted to talk with government officials or FEMA representatives because “they create a lot of work and not a lot of help.” As a devout believer in the power of government to provide guidance, vision, and critical assistance, I found this sentiment heartbreaking. And yet, I get it. The labyrinth of federal agencies we have dealt with since July 10<sup>th</sup>, and the labyrinths of bureaucratic dead ends and paperwork cul-de-sacs they have created, is mindboggling. In the theater's case, we started with FEMA who sent us to the SBA. The SBA encouraged us to apply for an Economic Injury Disaster Loan. It turned out that we weren't eligible for an SBA loan because eligibility is based on financial statements from 2020 through 2022. Of course, the pandemic had upended our financials in those years. And so the SBA sent us back to FEMA, which is where we now sit: with my General Manager spending upwards of 8 hours a week filling out paperwork, meeting with FEMA staff, soliciting quotes from contractors and vendors, and all with no certainty that we will receive any funding in the end.

I offer this story for two reasons. First, I want to make sure the Committee is aware of the disconnect between expectations and outcomes, between hope and reality, when it comes to

support from federal agencies. Second, and most important, I want to make sure that we all understand the sheer amount of time and effort it takes to work with FEMA and the SBA. Non-profit organizations with small, volunteer staffs likely don't have the human resources to navigate the application process. I know this is the case for the Weston Community Association, and I suspect it is true for others as well. As the Legislature considers the needs of non-profit organizations in the aftermath of the flood, I implore you to keep in mind that Federal funding may well be hard to come by at best and inaccessible at worst.

Organizations like Weston Theater Company face a similar challenge when it comes to REBUILDING EFFORTS AND RESILIENCE PLANNING. In the first days and weeks following the flood, many of us in town were optimistic that experts like the Army Corps of Engineers would arrive and provide new plans for the flood plain as well as guidance and actionable solutions. With these plans in place, we thought, the work of rebuilding the Playhouse and the town could begin. It soon became apparent, however, that this was not to be.

In effect, we have been left to our own devices as we try to figure out what comes next. The Theater Company, along with the WCA, other businesses and non-profits, and of course the town's select board, have been working together to devise pathways and plans. The Windham Regional Commission, the Department of Historic Preservation, and other agencies have come forward to help but there is little agreement about direction. We recognize that we must make sense of a new reality: flooding that once happened once every 100 years, then every 40 years, is now happening every 10 years. Soon enough, we may see floods like this every 5 years. Or every 3. As the leader of an anchor cultural institution in the region, I have an eye towards rebuilding with innovation and resilience in mind. And yet, I must also consider the critical role that continuity and even history play in the strength and capaciousness of Vermont's cultural character. Navigating this tension—between innovation and history—is an abiding challenge.

When I first joined Weston Theater Company, I had conversations with any number of people about what makes our town special. Time and again I heard the story of Hurricane Irene, how

people came together to clear out the Playhouse, how neighbors took care of each other, how strength and kindness saw the town through that difficult moment. Such generous care and energetic fortitude came through again this past summer. The fact is though that people are growing tired.

Just a few weeks ago, the West River Corridor flooded again and buildings—including the Playhouse—saw water levels rise. We know now that such flooding is likely to continue and grow more frequent. With that reality in mind, I ask this committee to consider how it might help:

First, by providing further financial resources to aid towns and business as they rebuild in a flood resilient manner;

Second, by providing guidance and assistance to organizations struggling to access federal relief funds;

Third, by advocating for more robust and hands-on expertise and support to small towns as they develop flood restoration, resilience, and management plans.

Thank you so much for your time today. I am grateful for all you do to support Vermont's non-profit organizations. And I welcome your comments and, of course, questions.