

February 25, 2020

To: Members of the House Commerce and Economic Development Committee

From: Christopher Kaufman Ilstrup,
Executive Director, Vermont Humanities Council

Re: Testimony on Support for Vermont Filmmakers



**Vermont
Humanities**

Because Ideas Matter

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Thank you for the opportunity to present information about our interest in state support for humanities-based Vermont film projects. Founded in 1974, Vermont Humanities strives to make Vermont a state in which every individual reads, participates in public affairs, and continues to learn throughout life.

Introduction: As you likely know, we are the Vermont state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Vermont Humanities believes that engagement with the world of ideas in interaction with others, contributes uniquely to richer lives, stronger communities, a more humane society, and a better world. Vermont Humanities has developed a broad range of programs that serve Vermonters of all ages and backgrounds. In 2019, we sponsored 882 humanities events in 149 Vermont communities, including towns in every county. We are grateful to have support from the administration and the legislature each year to meet our mission in all 14 counties.

Our public humanities programs, like Vermont Reads, the First Wednesdays Lecture Series, and our Speakers Bureau, are multigenerational and open to everyone. A few programs, like our Veterans Book Groups and the Literature and Medicine Program for health care providers, are for specific groups of people. All our programs and events strengthen Vermont's communities not only by their character and design, but also through strong partnerships with key local institutions such as libraries, historical societies, museums, arts organizations, schools, and community centers.

Role as a Funder: Unlike our sister organization, the Vermont Arts Council, we are primarily an operating organization – meaning that we run our own public programs, like Vermont Reads and the First Wednesdays Lecture Series. But we do continue to have a role in funding humanities projects across Vermont through our small grants program and we hope to grow in that space in the future. Currently, we fund summer Humanities Camps for middle school students around Vermont and we have a modest grantmaking program for other types of Humanities programs. Recent grants include support for Montpelier's Poem City project, a project on Shakespeare, Veterans and Trauma at Norwich University, and "To Sing of Common Things" a program bringing scholars of the African American experience to the Champlain Valley through the Clemmons Family Farm. We are also a collaborating partner with dozens of organizations around Vermont including the Flynn Center, Catamount Arts, Middlebury College, UVM, and more.

Our interest in Film and Filmmakers: Vermont Humanities Council has supported programming around documentary filmmaking since our beginning in the 1970s. Vermont filmmakers who received support for their work in the early days of the Council include Rick Moulton and Robin Lloyd, among others. However, in the early days of the Council our programming was dominated by grantmaking and we did little else. By the year 2000, our grantmaking program was a much smaller part of our overall budget. Support for individual filmmakers is no longer part of our work. That said, we have offered grant funding to Vermont Film Festivals promoting Vermont artists in recent years, including the Green Mountain Film Festival and the Vermont International Film Festival.

One-time allocations for individual artists or film projects: Vermont Humanities Council agrees with the Vermont Arts Council that any process set up by the State of Vermont to support Vermont filmmakers should be fair, equitable, and open to all.

Our own grant award programs are open to all 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations working to promote the humanities in public life. Guidelines and deadlines are available on our website; staff work extensively with potential grantees to identify strengths and weaknesses in individual project concepts; final funding decisions are made by a panel of Vermonters with humanities expertise. We do not fund individual artists or scholars or for-profit projects with either charitable dollars or with funding from our state or federal allocations.

Because of our own standards regarding transparent and equitable grant funding, we are reluctant to support a substantial allocation of state funding to a single artist or project, regardless of the merits of the project, without an open, competitive process.

That said, we would enthusiastically support the revival of the Vermont Film Commission. The Commission, if funded at a reasonable level, could have a significant impact in supporting exceptional projects by Vermont filmmakers. We know that the creative economy is a significant portion of Vermont's broader economy. Continuing to support creative efforts, including Vermont filmmakers, is important to both arts, culture and humanities advocates and to broad economic development efforts in the state of Vermont.

We stand ready to work with the legislature, with our colleagues at ACCD and the Vermont Arts Council, and with other partners to further expand our support of Vermont filmmakers. Thank you.