

Tourism Day at the Vermont State House

Statement before the House Commerce and Economic Development Committee and Senate Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs Committee

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Thank you all for coming, for your ongoing support of businesses, attractions, and communities that make Vermont a four-season destination. The voices on this panel represent every part of our state because tourism is a vital economic driver that crosses many sectors. I'm delighted to be here to share a perspective from the Northeast Kingdom, and more specifically from the vantage of the Fairbanks Museum in St. Johnsbury, where I'm the director of external relations.

You may know the Fairbanks Museum from the Eye on the Sky weather broadcasts on Vermont Public. Who has visited the Fairbanks Museum at some time? For some people, the visit to our natural history collection is a rite of passage through school or with a club or community group. The Fairbanks Museum welcomes over 13,000 students every year on field trips, and their experiences often lead to in-state tourism, as students come back with their families. The Museum's historic building is on the National Register, and we make every effort to weave our long history and current programs into the fabric of Vermont's unique sense of place.

But we're much more than a destination for schools. The Fairbanks Museum creates memorable impressions of Vermont that carry through generations. We often welcome grandparents who tell us that they returned to Vermont with their children and grandchildren because of their happy memories of visits here. The Fairbanks Museum is a touchpoint – we know people want to be immersed in a time and place that takes them out of their day-to-day routines, and they come back to relive that experience and to share it with others.

At the Fairbanks Museum, we've also invested in putting Vermont on a larger map. In 2018, we set the Guinness World's Record for the largest Astronomy Education program ever. That's right, St. Johnsbury VT is in the Guinness Book of World's Records because 1,580 people gathered to learn about the stars and planets. Looking ahead, we're preparing for visitors from far and wide to come to Vermont to witness a total solar eclipse that will be visible in northern Vermont in April 2024. We've already booked an overnight for scouts traveling from Massachusetts, and we're preparing to help schools and communities across the state experience the totality. Vermont will be in the spotlight for this event, and we want to be sure it's extraordinary.

The Fairbanks Museum remains strong because of its connections with community. It's a legacy of a successful family that brought business to the upper stretches of the Connecticut River. Because St. Johnsbury's arts and culture institutions share so much history, our present and future are connected. We're practiced at partnerships and enjoy supporting each other. That means we plan for collaborations, and we're prepared to stretch investments. When the museum started envisioning an annex – the first addition to our building since 1895 – partnerships came naturally. In the earliest phase of the annex project that is now underway, we committed to building Vermont's demonstration mass timber after discussions with staff at the Agency of Commerce and Community Development. The Science Annex has also catalyzed a partnership with the Community College of Vermont, which will relocate the St. Johnsbury offices and classrooms to our new building.

So investments in our Tang Science Annex have an impact on a much wider community. We're deeply grateful for the trust you've shown in this process. Funding for our project includes state and federal

grants that carried us through COVID-related delays and construction cost increases. We never lost the vision, and you never lost faith. We're so very grateful for support from the legislature, Division for Historic Preservation, the Vermont Arts Council, the Vermont Humanities Council, and the Agency of Commerce and Community Development. Grants received are an investment in jobs for the present and an enduring icon that will carry long into the future.