

By Dana Whitelaw

# BOARD POWER

When the High Desert Museum suddenly lost state grant funding, current and former trustees sprang into action.

**I**t was a quiet Friday afternoon in March 2016 when I received a disturbing email from the Oregon Arts Commission. It informed me that the High Desert Museum (HDM) was no longer eligible to apply for operating support and Arts Learning grants from the state of Oregon.

Bewildered, I let that email sit for the weekend, thinking that there must be some mistake. I figured a conversation with the commission's director on Monday would remedy the situation. But I went home that day with a pit in my stomach.

As you've probably guessed, this issue was not resolved with a quick phone call. But that was not the end of it. Our organization—most especially current and former museum trustees—fought to restore this funding, starting with appeals, then creating legislation, and finally engaging in a full-court press to get a bill passed to address what we saw as a gross inequity in arts funding to the more rural parts of Oregon.

## Some Background

Before I delve into how we dealt with this sudden loss of funding, let me first provide some context. HDM opened its doors 35 years ago with

the belief that museums should be collections of unique experiences, repositories of memories, and places of discovery.

The museum has a unique interdisciplinary mission that enables us to weave together stories usually told separately, combining art, science, and cultural and natural history to inspire a sense of place and encourage reflection on our region's past, present, and future. Our collection consists of art, artifacts, and living wildlife species, and we welcome over 180,000 visitors a year—a remarkable number for a town of 85,000.

Twenty-four dedicated board members provide leadership for our 45 full-time staff members, who are ably assisted by over 200 volunteers. The museum's budget is just over \$4 million, with half coming from earned revenue streams (admissions, café, store, facility rental) and half from contributed sources (corporate sponsorships, grants, individual donors, special events). We do not receive any public funding except through competitive grant processes.

Key to understanding the museum's story is knowing our location and role in the region. HDM is the largest arts and culture organization for all communities east of the Cascade Range—about

The "Innovation Lab: Design Inspired by Nature" exhibition at the High Desert Museum showcases how designers, engineers, and architects have taken a page from nature's book and created designs or products that humans use. For example, a Swiss engineer developed the idea for Velcro from burrs that became embedded in his dog's fur.

two-thirds of Oregon, in terms of land. The closest art museum to us is 130 miles away. With over 7,000 Native American art objects, a significant Western art collection, and permanent exhibitions of indoor and outdoor sculptures, HDM offers a lens through which to explore our world more deeply.

Over the last nine years, I have seen multiple arts organizations fold because of the funding challenges in our region. These organizations include Cascade Festival of Music; the Nature of Words literary festival; and Arts Central, the arts learning center in Bend. The population and economic prosperity of Central Oregon is growing, but our arts organizations are being left behind.

The Art Commission's decision to end our grant eligibility was premised on a recent review of its funding guidelines. Though the commission had been funding HDM since 2012, it now decided that it couldn't because art was not the primary focus of our institution. However, during a visit, the chair of the Arts Commission said that if we had the word *art* in our mission, we would be eligible.

But while *art* wasn't in our mission statement at the time, it was implicit in our work. If we were accomplishing the creation of art through our programs and exhibitions, should it have really mattered whether the word was in our mission? HDM is dedicated to an interdisciplinary approach, and this OAC decision appeared capricious.

In addition, after determining that HDM was not eligible for operating or Arts Learning grants, the Arts Commission did not award any Arts Learning grants in Central Oregon last year. Why? No one else applied. We saw an urgent need to address this regional funding inequity in Oregon.

### First Step: Formal Appeals

Let me first acknowledge that as we began this endeavor I was not a savvy advocate. I had never engaged our local legislators or testified in the state capitol. In fact, I didn't know where to begin. But I took a deep breath and informed our inner circle of supporters—trustees, emeritus trustees, and supporters I thought would have connections—about what the OAC had decided.

They were as upset as I was. "Several of us grew up in the more rural areas of the state, so the inequity of funding hit home," says HDM Trustee Ryan Hagemann.

Our counter-strategy began at the next Board of Trustees meeting, just a few weeks later. We submitted a formal appeal of the Arts Commission's decision that was signed by several of our trustees and other supporters of our cause: county commissioners, the Central Oregon Visitors Association, and state legislators.

Unfortunately, the appeal failed. We were once

again bewildered but even more fired up. We worked with a former Oregon Supreme Court justice to submit a formal petition for reconsideration of the decision, directly addressing the statutes that we believed the commission had applied inconsistently to HDM. This petition also failed. Our supporters, including legislators, made passionate phone calls to the Arts Commission office, but to no avail.

In the fall of 2016, we decided to take the commission at its word and work on our mission statement. I was very resistant to adding the word *art* to our mission to chase a funding opportunity. That felt disingenuous. And it seemed ridiculous, frankly, that we weren't eligible because of the lack of one word in our mission statement, although our work and programs were eligible.

But after careful thought and discussions with our staff and board, I decided that if it wasn't clear that we included art in our interdisciplinary approach, then we should make it clear. Our mission changed from:

*Through exhibits, wildlife and living history, the High Desert Museum creates learning experiences to help our audience connect to the past, discover their role in the present and their responsibility to the future.*

To:

*To explore the High Desert's unique landscape, cultures, wildlife, history and arts, connecting our visitors to the past and helping them discover their role in the present and responsibility to the future.*

The new mission was approved at the December 2016 board meeting.

### Next Step: Legislation

With two Arts Commission appeal failures under our belt, the Board Executive Committee decided to submit legislation to address the issue. We formed a four-member, ad hoc committee to help drive this. The committee members had prior legislative experience and connections to legislators. And as attorneys, they were able to help me navigate the legislative language. I needed guidance and support in this process, and I relied significantly on the committee's recommendations.

The legislative session had almost begun and we were behind in initiating a bill. I contacted our local legislator's office to see if he would sponsor it, and he was on board. Sheepishly, I had to ask what the next step would be. Neither I nor my board chair had ever done this before.

We worked with the Office of the Legislative Counsel, which drafts the Legislative Assembly bills. Legislative Counsel staff listened to what we wanted to achieve and delved into the statute language that governs the Arts Commission. Importantly, we collaboratively worked with the Arts Commission to shape the new statute language. We

kept emphasizing to the commission that we had the same goal: equity in access to arts experiences throughout Oregon. How could they object to that goal and to making it clear in the statutes?

We made three important changes:

1. The language clarifies that the statutory definition of *arts* includes museum-related activities such as exhibitions, collections care, and educational programs. Museum activities use art in various forms to interpret our culture and sense of place, and the legislature always intended to support those activities. Importantly, including museum activities in the definition aligns with the work that is supported by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Aligning Oregon's statutory definition of *art* with the NEA is undeniably good public policy.
2. The new language instructs the Arts Commission to take into account the regional differences in access to arts and culture experiences for Oregonians. Funding strategies should reflect the variation in access and ensure equity to arts experiences across our state.
3. This bill restores the original intent of the 1967 legislation (Senate Bill 145) that created the Oregon Arts Commission. At that time, legislators articulated that the bill was meant to encourage the arts to flourish. It was not to focus on the type of art, but rather the quality. This bill seeks to restore that premise.

I think it was at this point that I watched the classic 1976 *Schoolhouse Rock* video "I'm Just a Bill." And I'm not afraid to divulge that it was probably one of the most helpful things I did for our advocacy endeavor.

When the language came out of the Legislative Counsel office, House Bill 3139 was born. On the advice of an emeritus trustee, we hired a lobbyist—one of the best things we did. Furthermore, our board members wrote letters, called our legislators, and were generally vocal on this issue. In my time at the museum, I had never seen our board more engaged and active. This became larger than our museum; it was a rallying cry for arts and culture in rural Oregon.

As we approached our first committee hearing, the relationship with the Arts Commission began to falter. Even though we had worked collaboratively with commission members to make the language changes to the statutes, they decided to raise red flags at the eleventh hour. The commission's lobbyist had been working behind the scenes to kill the bill and had connected with the chair of the committee; our lobbyist thought we were done.

This was when our board really came to the rescue. The committee meeting was scheduled for 8 a.m. on a Monday. That weekend before, we called

everyone we could get to listen to us about the value of this legislation. Also, through an emeritus trustee, I was able to connect with a state senator with family ties to HDM. She called everyone she could, including the committee chair, to get us back on track.

And it worked. In a contentious legislative session, HB 3139 passed unanimously through both the House and Senate committees. We were fortunate to have native Oregonian and former NEA Chair John Frohnmayr testify on our behalf. By the end of the session, even the Arts Commission testified in support of the bill. (The fact that the bill was set to pass unanimously and a compromise on our part on rule-making helped get the commission on board.)

The experience allowed us to truly engage our trustees and legislators and is a real lesson in the power of asking for help. "The collaborative effort in HB 3139 to clarify the statutes and restore equitable funding throughout Oregon was an inspirational cause for our trustees and legislators to work on and find common ground," says HDM Board Chair Josh Newton.

And HDM Trustee Kathryn Collins raises a valuable point about how this experience needs to inform future work: "In the case of Oregon House Bill 3139, being a strong advocate meant timely communication to address and remedy loss of critical funding. However, strong advocacy also means consistent and persistent messaging over time and the building of relationships with decision-makers."

In the end, we received notification that we are again eligible for funding from the Arts Commission.

### AAM Advocacy Resources

For more information about advocacy and the board, check out the following AAM resources.

"Your Secret Advocacy Weapon: Your Board" (article excerpted from *Speak Up for Museums: The AAM Guide to Advocacy*)  
[aam-us.org/about-us/publications/museum-magazine/archive/your-secret-weapon](http://aam-us.org/about-us/publications/museum-magazine/archive/your-secret-weapon)

*Stand for your Mission* (discussion guide for museum leaders—especially directors and trustees—to get involved with advocacy)  
[aam-us.org/advocacy/stand-for-your-mission](http://aam-us.org/advocacy/stand-for-your-mission)

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