

To: House Committee on Economic Recovery and Prosperity

Re: House Bill 4040

From: The Liberty Theatre
1203 Commercial Street
Astoria, OR 97103

Honorable Chair Lively,

I'm writing to you today regarding House Bill 4040. As you know, I'm the Executive Director of the Liberty Theatre in Astoria, OR. I am also an appointed member of the Arts Council of Clatsop County, and a clarinetist with the Oregon Symphony, Chamber Music NW, and various bands in Portland. Music is very much my passion and livelihood. Although I would like to report good news of our venue's recovery, I can only attest to our still dire situation.

Following the guidance of our state, we planned a grand reopening season for our Theatre, with a full calendar of events and increased partnerships with our community. These plans were not realized as the COVID numbers climbed in our county. Worse, we've had canceled shows, low ticket sales from nervous audiences, and rising uncertainty. In surveys collected by the Independent Venue Coalition of Oregon, we've learned that ticket sales are down 59% statewide. As you know, it's not just the income from the actual ticket that venues are missing - those ticket holders buy popcorn, sodas, beers, wine, and candy at shows. At my Theatre, it's often the concession sales that make my events profitable. That non-ticket income is down 55% across Oregon venues.

The loss to our rural, historic Theatre due to Covid is just over \$1,000,000. With an operating budget of \$1.4 million, it's like we've lost an entire year of income. We have been able to operate behind closed doors only due to the kindness and generosity of donors, foundations, and elected officials like you. Hoping we could reopen in late July, our delayed opening cost us money we couldn't afford to lose. Labor is more expensive, marketing costs have skyrocketed, and the calendar is still very empty. Venues across Oregon continue to have the same struggles, as the number of events is down 46% statewide.

We were extremely grateful for the CARES and ARPA relief, which enabled us to bring back our staff. While we have been awarded a Shuttered Venue Operators Grant, technical difficulties resulted in late payment. These funds must be used by the end of this year. We haven't yet received word on our supplemental application. Our donors are exhausted and recovery grants from foundations are drying up. Without further support, we will begin living off of emergency savings on January first. It will last three months, then my staff and I will be furloughed for the second time.

The impact goes beyond our doors. Usually, The Liberty contributes a million dollars a year in economic impact to our rural town of 10,000. We are holding steady as a backbone agency for 17 performing arts organizations in our county. We created the cohort in April 2020 with the simple goal of staying in business. I'm happy to say that each of us has continued to fulfill our mission, albeit a little differently than usual, to keep the arts alive in Clatsop County.

Still, we cannot support the restaurants, hotels, and shops we've partnered with for years. We usually pay more than 1,000 independent performers, sound engineers, stagehands, and agencies. The arts economy in rural Clatsop County alone is a \$15,000,000 industry. Without stimulus support to fully reopen our doors, we will likely remain mostly closed long past mandates, unable to lead Astoria's economic recovery as we have twice in the last century.

In the "Before Times" venues in Oregon hosted over 13,000 events every year, attended by 7,000,000 people, and supported over 4,000 full and part-time jobs. According to the Americans for the Arts, the arts and culture sector contributed \$687 million dollars to Oregon's economy before COVID. Nationally, arts and culture economic activity accounted for 4.3 percent of the GDP in 2019.

One of the fundraising mantras we live by at The Liberty Theatre is "people like to bet on the winning horse." Investing stimulus funds into Oregon venues is the winning horse. It's been proven time and time again that the arts revitalize depressed areas, drive economic recovery, and enrich communities.

Please accept our gratitude for your consideration, as well as the urgency in our plea. We are truly running out of time. Help us help our communities.

Respectfully,

Jennifer Crockett
Executive Director
The Liberty Theatre of Astoria, Oregon