

Elizabeth Nye Testimony

Oregon Legislature Joint Ways & Means Committee

April 8, 2023

Good morning Chairs Steiner and Sanchez and Committee Members:

Thank you for meeting in Portland today. I know you are very busy this time of year and deeply appreciate the effort you are making to reach Oregonians across the state.

I'm Elizabeth Nye, Executive Director of the Lan Su Chinese Garden in Portland and a member of the Cultural Advocacy Coalition of Oregon. I'm here today to ask you to **support House Bill 2459**, which invests \$50 million in relief and recovery funding in arts and culture organizations.

While Lan Su is not specifically identified in the bill as a recipient of these funds, I believe our organization would qualify for a grant through the \$29 million allocated to county cultural coalitions to award to local arts and cultural organizations that demonstrate value and need.

I also ask you to **endorse House Bill 2498**, which directs the sale of \$200 million of lottery bonds and disburses the interests and earnings through the Oregon Cultural Trust.

Lastly, I urge you to consider designating \$1 million within the Oregon Arts Commission budget to **fund two to five Cultural District Pilot Projects**.

This has been an extremely challenging time for Lan Su. While we have successfully brought people together for a variety of cultural events, our overall attendance at the Garden remains 32% lower than pre-pandemic levels. Meanwhile, our operating costs are up 21%, primarily due to increases in labor, contracting and utility expenses.

As you'll hear today and in meetings elsewhere, Oregon's cultural and arts organizations are still struggling to get back on our feet following the pandemic. Despite these challenges, however, we are working together to revitalize our state's economy and restore our collective cultural energy.

I have submitted to the committee a fact sheet providing more details related to a proposed Cultural District Pilot Program in Portland's Old Town/New Chinatown/Japantown. You'll see there's a growing list of individuals, organizations and businesses that support this idea, which has proven to hold economic benefits elsewhere.

I'm happy to answer any questions you may have. Again, I thank you for your ongoing support of Oregon Arts and Culture. It's critical to us and extremely important for the diverse communities we serve.

Thank you.

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A Cultural District in Portland's Old Town/New Chinatown/Japantown

A new tool for economic/cultural resurgence: Creative or Cultural Districts are being established across the nation by state and local governments to identify areas with unique cultural heritage and recognize places with a high concentration of arts and cultural organizations, events and businesses. These cultural districts foster additional economic development and synergistic investments. According to a report by Americans for the Arts, cultural districts generate \$166.3 billion in economic activity each year in the United States.

The Oregon Arts Commission is exploring options for our state and plans to designate two to five areas as Cultural District Pilot Programs. Each pilot program would receive \$200,000 for the biennium to support organizational capacity building, community events, marketing and branding.

Mission for an Old Town Cultural District: To celebrate the diverse heritage of Portland's communities who first found refuge and thrived in downtown Portland; to support the non-profit and academic institutions that educate present generations, and to forge a future through collaborations that strengthen voices, increase visibility, and make places for a thriving community once again.

Old Town makes for an ideal Cultural District pilot: Old Town is Portland's oldest and most diverse neighborhood, and is near the original "port of Portland." Historically this district has been home to Chinese and Japanese, Jewish, Greek, Roma, Italian and African American communities and their histories.

After the discovery of gold in 1848, Chinese miners, laundrymen, cooks, merchants and doctors migrated to California and the Northwest. Immigrants who settled in Oregon established "Old Chinatown," which was centered on SW Second and Front Avenues. A devastating fire in 1873 and rebuilding pushed Chinese merchants to move their businesses north of Burnside.

Chinese immigration was restricted in 1882 when Congress passed the first Chinese Exclusion Act bringing a rise in the 1890s of Japanese immigrants, mostly young bachelors, who came to Oregon to work for the railroads, lumber mills, farms and fish canaries. Historic Old Town became the heart of the Japanese community and a Japantown (Nihonmachi) developed with more than 300 businesses. The Japanese and Japanese Americans were removed from the area in 1942, due to Executive Order 9066. Subsequently, a new Chinatown grew.

By 1890 Portland and Oregon saw a small but burgeoning African American community. This area was the predecessor to what is now known as Albina. In 1869, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church was incorporated and worshippers met in a (now demolished) church at 3rd Avenue between Burnside and Couch. Jews, Roma and Greek workers and families were drawn to Oregon and Portland for work and new opportunities. Many established homes and businesses in and near Old Town.

This rich cultural diversity is reflected in a number of non-profits and organizations that continue to be based in Old Town today including the Portland Chinatown Museum; Lan Su Chinese Garden; the Japanese American Museum of Oregon; Oregon Jewish Museum and Center for Holocaust Studies; the Oregon College of Oriental Medicine.

An investment in Old Town at the right time: Old Town cultural organizational directors and other neighborhood stakeholders would collaborate with the Oregon Arts Commission and other partners to develop district boundaries, branding and economic and tourism development opportunities. Grant dollars would be used for capacity building, research, materials and marketing. The group would also identify and co-present existing or new arts and cultural events that would bring additional visibility and economic vitality to Old Town, Portland and Oregon.

The Old Town group would commit to sharing knowledge gained with other organizers of potential Cultural Districts in Oregon.

Organizations, businesses and individuals who support an Old Town Cultural District include:

- Anne Naito-Campbell
- Annie Tonsiengsom, Executive Producer + Owner, Actual Industries
- Bing Kong Tong 秉公堂
- Chisao Hata, Creative Director, Living Arts Program, Japanese American Museum of Oregon
- Cynthia Castro, Chief of Staff, Office of Commissioner Meieran
- Dan Lenzen, Venture Hospitality and Real Estate
- Elizabeth Nye, Executive Director, Lan Su Chinese Garden
- Eric Arthur, Taiji Teahouse & Café
- Erica Naito-Campbell
- Gee How Oak Tin Benevolent Association 至考篤親公所
- Hip Sing Tong 協勝堂
- Hongcheng Zhao
- Hop Sing Tong 合勝堂
- Jennifer Cole, Jordan Schitzer Dean, Pacific Northwest College of Art/Willamette University
- Jenni York
- Jessie Burke and Jonathan Cohen, The Society Hotel
- Joe Kye, Tiger Fest
- Judy Margles, Director, Oregon Jewish Museum and Center for Holocaust Education
- Mark Takiguchi, Interim Deputy Director, Japanese American Museum of Oregon
- Nandini Ranganathan, CETI
- Old Town Community Association
- Oregon College of Oriental Medicine (OCOM)
- Portland Chinatown Museum
- Reid Decker, Chair, Portland Old Town Arts & Culture Foundation
- Roberta May Wong
- Sankar Raman, The Immigrant Story
- Soo Yuen Association 溯源公所
- Travel Portland
- University of Oregon

