

# Matt Dunne, Democrat

Interview: July 27, 2016



## 1. Addressing Statewide Issues

Like many other states, Vermont faces many economic and social issues. We also know that 85% of Vermonters agree that arts and culture are vital to their community's life.

- Can you provide examples on how you would integrate the arts, culture, and creative community in solving social problems (or in enhancing opportunities for greater social or civic engagement)?
- How would you use the creative sector to drive economic development across the state?

**Matt Dunne:** We are facing a variety of different challenges in our state. Having grown up here and now raising a family here, I have not seen these kind of challenges in my lifetime. We've got poverty rising. We have an opiate epidemic. We have a demographic that is getting older and we're seeing the impact of all these things on the state budget, on stretched social service agencies and on our communities in general. I'm running for governor because I believe we need to go in a new direction. As you know, I have spent most of my career, one way or another, involved in working with the arts community and creative community (which overlap but aren't exactly the same) to try to strengthen the economy of parts of Vermont and across the state, but also to make a difference in the lives of young people and those that are struggling.

I remember my time at Vista, working with organizations like AS 122 in Providence, Rhode Island that had an entire program for at-risk young people who were all in poverty whose purpose was to empower them through the arts, through technical theater education, through performance, through a variety of different things. When I served on the Vermont Arts Council Board of Trustees which I did for eight years, the work that went on with the Woodside School in Vermont (where I believe it was a young person named Coco at the time) who really demonstrated the power of the arts as giving someone a sense of agency to be able to express one's self, especially when you're in a situation where you're struggling to find that voice and understand that you can be an actor in your own play which is a critical piece.

We face challenges our state, including young people who are living in communities that used to be agriculture and are now frequently large tract suburbia, and you see the heroin epidemic that's growing. All the research shows that the ability to engage young people in productive and creative activities is a powerful, powerful way to ensure that they stay on the right track and don't engage with the kinds of activities that are high risk. With heroin as prevalent as it is,

potentially deadly, I think it really important that we focus on prevention in order to reduce the heroin epidemic. The arts are a critical way to be able to do that. That's one of the things that I get excited about even in the face of this very, very difficult time because you don't do prevention by showing scary movies. You do prevention by giving someone a pathway to do something that gives them fulfillment and a strong trajectory.

On the community economic development side, it's always been the case that the presence of a creative community is what drives creative types and other kinds of businesses to aggregate and to thrive. Going back to Richard Florida's work and what we see today. For Vermont, it is both the ability to create communities where people want to live, who are in software, who are in cheese-making, who are making the best IPA beer in the world to have creatives around them, but it's also an economic driver in itself. Having worked with the Center for Cartoon Studies (I believe I dragged the Arts Council into at its very early days when we had convinced them to actually consider being in Vermont and not go to Minneapolis where they were originally planning to create the school). The Arts Council helped them with getting up and running, and now they are a centerpiece of the economy of White River Junction in its renaissance, celebrating their tenth year in a sustainable place.

In fact, that arts education economy is an untold story in Vermont, whether it's the College of Fine Arts here in Montpelier, or the Circus School in Brattleboro. It's a growing part of our economy because any economic development you want to be exporting value and importing cash. That's how it's got to work in Vermont. We are creating institutions that leverage our fantastic brand while actually creating that economic capacity in our state to grow.

## 2. Personal Connection

We've all had defining moments in our lives, where a cultural experience (a performance you have attended, or a work of art you have seen in person, etc.) has made a lasting impact on your personal or professional life.

- What personal experience with arts, culture, or creativity has had an impact on your life and your view of Vermont? How has that impact changed you?

**Matt Dunne:** I was brought up in a household that was passionate about the arts in a variety of ways. My father played the violin. I played the violin. He actually took me around to the three churches in Hartland and we used to play on Sundays at different times when I was in second and third grade. We played duets. It was memorable. In fact, fast forward a little bit when I was running for office at the ripe age of 22. I think I actually got my majority in that race based on people remembering me coming and playing in their church. They would mention it over and over when I would come around especially in North Hartland or with older retirees who I hadn't been in contact with because I was at college or in high school; but they remembered that.

In seventh grade, we didn't have a theater program in our elementary school in Hartland. I asked various teachers if they would start something and they said, "Look, we're really busy. We can't." I and a couple of friends decided we would start our own. We started the Hartland

Children's Theater in seventh grade. My parents were supportive although skeptical at first but they said, "Sure, if this works."

We produced a play that I directed, not knowing much but trying to figure it out, and everything was run by students and that organization continued for almost 20 years and then got folded into the Hartland Community Arts Program which is now a vibrant part of Hartland's community in general. In many ways, that experience gave me a sense of that you could accomplish things, that you could defy the odds and even as a 12-year-old start a theater group that sold tickets and made money and use that money to fund the next theater year and on and on. I continued to do directing and acting throughout high school and college based on that experience.

It was one of those moments where if you're not told what you shouldn't be able to do, you just might do it, and it was powerful. I went on to work managing the Briggs Opera House for a while, teaching acting in White River Junction and River City Arts, and helping found the film commission.

But the moment (since you ask the question) that changed my life was when my father picked me up after school unannounced on a June day near the end of school and we drove straight from Hartland Elementary School to Shelburne Farms to go to the Mozart festival on one of those beautiful, beautiful nights. We met up with some friends up there that I didn't see very often because they were up in Chittenden County. We lay out on a blanket, eating food and listening to the most amazing music imaginable and looking up as the sun set and the stars came up, and then driving back what felt like the middle of the night was a memory that I will always cherish because it was only a couple of years later that my dad passed away.

I also found out later that he had forgotten to tell my mom that he was picking me up so there was a little drama on the far side. This was in the days before cell phones. Nevertheless, it was a magical, magical experience for me and one that certainly stuck with me on how powerful the arts can be on an emotional level as well as all the economic impact and everything else that we talk about so much.

It was just breathtaking.

### **3. Arts Education and Programs for our Youth**

Art instruction increases achievement across all academic disciplines and develops the whole child. We also know that 94% of Vermonters agree that the arts should be integrated into K-12 public school education.

- What will you do as Governor to champion arts education with our youth both in our schools and in our communities?
- How will you balance the importance of arts education with the push for primarily technical education (STEM)?

**Matt Dunne:** The research now is very, very clear. The arts incorporated into school actually makes a difference in student performance. There are some pieces which are particularly interesting to me. When students play stringed instruments, how that affects math. When you look at the ability to use art in storytelling, how that helps connect the dots and being able to build a narrative in general. It also allows for hands on education in the wide form of creative work that is now so important to students who decide that they're going to work with their hands rather than working at a desk. It is something that I believe is important to education not just to create well-rounded citizens which I think is real and true, but also to make sure that we're getting the best outcomes for Vermonters.

In order to be able to achieve that with a declining student population can be difficult sometimes. There are music programs in many of our schools that struggle because as the schools get smaller, most of us don't want to rush to consolidation. We want to make sure that that kind of enrichment that affects parts of the mind in ways that we don't exactly understand are not lost in our more rural areas. I intend to work very closely with the Secretary of Education under my administration to make sure that it is a fundamental component of every education for students in the state of Vermont. We also know that introducing it as early as possible, just like with all things in education, will have the largest impact, but also to work with many of our innovative nonprofit organizations to be able to bridge schools that may not have the individual capacity to deliver the kind of arts education and the diversity of arts education that we would all like to see.

I look at some of the outreach efforts that the Weston Playhouse does in Weston, Vermont and in the surrounding area, or looking at the work that is being done at the Upper Valley Music Center where my kids all do their music lessons; partnering with schools to be able to provide string music education that isn't traditionally available in these kinds of schools.

The way that I would approach this is in a way that I've approached any of the challenges in the work that I've done in the public, private and nonprofit sector which is to look for partnerships and synergy. I don't think we need to reinvent the wheel over and over again. I believe arts education is a very, very important discipline and one that you need to work with strategically to make sure it's incorporated, but we have the chance to both build out that capacity while strengthening our current nonprofit organizations throughout the state.

#### **4. The New Administration's Role in the Creative Community**

The State allocates funding each year for the Vermont Arts Council, the Vermont Humanities Council, and others that serve Vermont's creative community. Some are concerned that the state's capacity to support the programs and activities that are vital to the community are insufficient.

- If you share this concern, please share your ideas on how you might address them. For example, what three revenue sources will you create or use to increase the state's financial investment in the creative community? What specific program priorities related to the creative community are you particularly interested in investing in?

- If you don't share this concern, please let us know what you believe is the path forward for the creative community. What specifically should the state be investing in to ensure the vitality of Vermont's creative sector?

**Matt Dunne:** The first area that I would be interested in addressing may not be what people typically think about, which is the Art in State Buildings program which in Vermont has always been a part of the capital bill. It is frequently a contentious one which is very unfortunate because the ability for us to create buildings that hopefully will last for hundreds of years need to be in places that state employees and the public want to work in and visit. The ability to have cultural aspects be part of that welcoming I think is very, very important. I think it's unfortunate that we are, as I understand it, one of the few states that actually puts a cap on the percentage of a total project that would go to Arts in State Buildings. One of the first things that I would do is request removing that cap because I believe that for the small portion of the overall project, you get a lot more value in a state building when it's not simply a box that someone has to go to every day but is actually some place that inspires confidence from the public as well as inspires the people that are coming there every day to serve Vermonters.

In other areas, I've always been an advocate for resources going to the arts and to creativity. A particular focus of mine has been in making sure that all of our cultural institutions are ADA accessible. As you may recall, we started on the process of trying to do at least a full evaluation where we're missing that mark because I think it's a responsibility to make sure that all buildings are accessible. It's also good economically because all patrons should be able to participate in our cultural offerings throughout the state. That too would be a priority for me as we design our capital bill each year.

Finally, we need to continue to make the direct investment in the kinds of organizations and individuals that drive the creative economy in general. What I would be looking for are ways that we can use our limited state dollars to be able to leverage additional dollars, to be able to encourage the vibrant philanthropic community both here in Vermont and people around the country who love Vermont and love to see it as a demonstration state, as a place where things can be done and shown to make a difference in lives, to be able to bring in more resources than we already have today.

I wouldn't look for a specific revenue source in order to be able to increase that amount of money. Having been in the House in leadership and on the appropriations committee in the Senate, it's a process of prioritization, of making sure that we are getting a good bang for our buck.

I will say that I don't think our economic development strategy should be focused on trying to harpoon a large corporation from out of state and drag it into the middle of the green mountains. We're not very good at it. It's very hard for us to compete in that game. In fact, having worked in corporate America for a long time, the potential for it to become "a race to the bottom" is real. I would much rather make sure that we have the kinds of communities where young creative types or, frankly, people who have been doing creative work all over the

country but would love nothing more than to be able to do it right here in Vermont, feel like there is a place where they can be engaged and excited to live and raise a family.

Cultural offerings are a critical part of that, not only to stimulate the ideas that can go into a new engineering design or a new piece of software or a kind of cheese that will win awards across the world. That's the kind of environment that they want to be connected to. I see it as an integral part of any economic development strategy that we have as we move away from the kind of economy that was with us 40 years ago and into something where we can thrive in the future. I think we're really strategically positioned. We have Montreal, Boston, New York. That triangle is not much bigger than the research triangle in North Carolina. We just need to think about it that way and create the kinds of vibrant communities that people will want to bring their job with them and also for many

During this campaign, because of social media, lots and lots of people are helping this campaign who are Vermonters who no longer live in Vermont. They're excited about the strategy we've laid out because they see it as a way of coming home.

## 5. A Cultural Destination

While Vermont is characterized as a special place, many believe the state has yet to effectively leverage the strength of our arts, culture, and creative community as a means for branding and attracting residents, employees, and visitors.

- How would you utilize our state's cultural assets to make Vermont a place where people want to live, work, play, and visit?

**Matt Dunne:** I completely agree that we have the best brand in the world. It is oriented around quality. It's oriented around an environment which is pristine. It's oriented around a ruggedness that I think people associate with Yankee frugality. That helps a lot with charging 20% more for maple syrup or any of the food products that we create. The problem is that we have, in some ways, only limited to those particular pieces and it served us well and we built it up over a period of time. Vermont Life Magazine was a brilliant, brilliant idea to set a sense of this unbelievably beautiful state in the minds of people around the country and frankly around the world. What we need to do is take that incredible brand and expand what it actually means because we have things going on in the state that no one can imagine at this point.

We have companies that started here that sell for a billion dollars. When I tell people that there is an equity theater company in a brand new \$9 million theater in downtown White River Junction, they think I am joking. Not to mention that the top graphic novel school in the world is in Vermont where there's now a cluster of graphic novelists in the Upper Valley so that publishers in New York now have White River Junction as a must stop as they are looking for the next generation of talent.

That story hasn't been told and it needs to be told. It needs to be told not only to make it clear that there is a great place to come and see great art, but that it can be a place where creatives

know that they can come and get the same kind of experience that they could get in a medium-sized city anywhere else. The difference is it's the best to live and raise a family. I think that's going to be true across the board as we talk about our state as an innovation state.

I remember when I was on the Economic Development Committee they came in with a new plan to encourage young people to move to Vermont to be a part of the employment base and they came in with their poster which was this central design concept. It was a picture of a beautiful dirt road with fields on both sides, one of those classic Vermont pictures, and on the bottom it said, the tagline was, "This could be your commute." I looked at it and I said, "No. Please do not start putting that up in the tea stations in Boston." They were a little hurt. They worked on this for a long time. I understood what focus group got them to that place and it was wrong because everyone knows that we have beautiful landscapes.

They just can't imagine Vermont being a place they could actually live and be a part of a community where they can pursue their dreams and ambitions. We need to change that narrative. The story of the vibrant arts community in the state is critically important as is the story of the entrepreneurs who have been successful almost despite the focus of the state.

## 6. Priorities

The start of a Governor's term often sets the administration's tone and priorities.

- When elected, what actions will you take in your first 100 days to provide support and resources to the creative community?

**Matt Dunne:** This may sound like an odd answer to that question, but one of my top priorities is going to be to address our housing shortage. We have gone from having a housing crunch to a homeless crisis in our state. As is true in many parts of the country where creativity has started to happen where the artists have gone first then come in other kinds of innovative companies that follow suit, development and gentrification, and suddenly those people who've been a part of it all along suddenly are priced out of the market as well as risking not having the kind of diversity that makes those communities interesting and not a monolith.

As I look at the challenges that we face as a state right now, I look at the fact that in many parts of our state, we have less than a 1% vacancy rate. That's true throughout most of Chittenden County. That's true in central Vermont and also down in the Upper Valley. That's not healthy. I think it's preventing us from being able to allow for young people of any kind to see that they can afford to actually live here and be a part of the community as they're getting started in their career.

That is particularly true for people who are in the creative sector whether they are sculptors or painters or if they are trying to get a new innovative company off the ground and they are working with friends and family to be able to get it to the place where they can actually get their first funding to move forward. Addressing that issue I think is fundamental to making sure we can continue on a path. What is exciting in looking around the rest of the country is how

affordable housing can be actually dedicated on a small basis, not all of it, but some of it, to people who are going to pursue the creativity and actual artistic passions that we want to have as part of our state.

As we move forward with the proposal I've made both in doing a large bond to do efficiency work in our apartment buildings so that there are actually places that people want to live, but also a \$200 million bond to get us caught up on housing and do it in downtowns, do it with the style that young people want to live in which is not in a two-acre lot with a picket fence. It's in a very cool apartment with high ceilings where you can ride your bike or walk to places to socialize, to work and shop. By doing that, I think it will do a huge amount for the vitality of our downtowns and it will do a lot for the arts and culture that can be part of driving that overall economy.