

Sue Minter, Democrat

Interview: July 25, 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?



Sue Minter: I am inspired by our creative economy and remember well how it took over our main street in downtown Waterbury during the Palettes Project and during the After Irene Floodgates Art project. I have seen art in so many ways drive social awareness and social change and obviously, provide inspiration.

I want to reflect for a moment on the AIDS Quilt Project. When the AIDS epidemic was really at its peak, I went to many different presentations of the quilt itself. I saw it in downtown Boston, and in Washington, DC. It drew together thousands of people to raise awareness about AIDS in a powerful, emotional way. Art drives awareness and social change. Art can also drive our economy.

So you may see my economic development strategy evolves around two programs, one is called "Invest Vermont" and the other is "Innovate Vermont." "Invest Vermont" is building upon what we've been doing in our downtowns and villages and as part of the Downtown Program that I have been in, really, for the last 12 years. Arts and culture is very much a part of a strategic economy-building in our downtowns. It's about restoring our historic buildings but it's also about bringing arts and culture into the forefront of what drives the growth of our downtowns. About six years ago when I was in the downtown revitalization effort in downtown Waterbury (and this precedes Tropical Storm Irene), we started something called the Stowe St. Arts Festival. That first year — not a ton of people. Well, two weeks ago we had it again here, and you couldn't even get into the street. It was packed that night and that was music and there was a festival and the next day, more and more and more artists. Which of course is so great for the artists themselves, but so great for the community and awareness and inspiration of art and what's possible, and for the business sector.

So I see them all as very much integrated into not just how we build and support our artists, build people's understanding and inspiration of the art that they do and help our businesses actually engage in expanding their own businesses through art. And downtown Waterbury today...you know, it was an idea on a piece of paper. How do we bring the two together? And we've done it through activities, we've done it now through entrepreneurs, there's a wonderful artist who has taken on Axel's Frame Shop, who is now using that space in new ways to bring art and more people's awareness of art to our downtown. And the newest café — the Stowe St. Café — you can go in there and see art and community art and crafts and ways to support local artists and grow the Vermont brand everywhere. So I see continuing to use this through my Invest Vermont effort, continuing to do it in new places and enhancing what we can do to support our artists and the creative economy.

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?

Sue Minter: As I thought about the Floodgates Project I suddenly went to the AIDS Quilt, because that one was such a political, social education driver and so powerful. My very first artistic experience was having the unbelievable privilege of being in a music — singing — group called American Music Abroad. I was 15 and on a tour of Europe, and that was just an incredible opportunity. I first saw (Michelangelo's statue of) David. I had been to museums, and I'm lucky and privileged to have been able to be exposed to a lot of art. But for me, being in the presence of David was the most awe-inspiring art experience I had ever had. Sculpture has always, really — and I am very unartistic. I can't draw a person, I can only draw a stick figure — but in my junior and senior year I started doing sculpture. I feel like I can do sculpture. It is a physical experience.

But I'd really rather point to some more impactful community art that I have experienced post-Irene, which really shows what art can be in terms of healing, in terms of community-building. In my hometown of Waterbury, following the devastation of our downtown from flooding during Tropical Storm Irene, to help us move through our grief and loss, we used art. And I say "we" — I just participated as a person who showed up and did my own art as a member of the community. The folks focusing on this created the opportunity for community members to use art as a way to heal. And there were materials and anyone could do anything. And it all ended up on display as part of the After Irene Floodgates Art Project. It was displayed in a downtown business that had been damaged. The building was unusable at that time, but it is now where we sell unique craft beers, and it is very popular. But for a while it was this temporary art gallery, putting into the public space people's experience, their pain, their loss, and their hopes and their dreams.

It was, I think, personally healing to just put stuff there — as uncreative as I feel like I am — but also to really see what other people were able to create and put together. And that was really powerful. And the last one I want to mention is about Waterbury's River of Light. It was a community art project three months after Irene, and it was led by our local elementary school art teacher, MK Monley.

Other local artists like Sarah Lee Terrat were also involved, and graphic designer Laura Parette, we have all these great people that did the other art installation. MK was sort of the mover and shaker and we had an artist-in-residence, Gowri Savor, who taught us how to create internally illuminated lanterns. I just became a community member who experienced the River of Light. It was essentially a lantern parade.

It engaged all of the children in the school, it engaged community members, and I think in the second year, I became part of a team that made one of the lanterns and saw what went into it, we made one of these huge ones and each year — the first year, it was post Irene and again it was part of the recovery. And the regrouping and the power of community to actually be resilient and recover from this devastating event and the beautiful things that were in the whole community came out. It was dark and this beautiful River of Light wove slowly through our recovering downtown. It was very intense!

The River of Light has now become an annual event. It takes over two roads and it goes down to the fields where there is a huge fire; all these fire dancers, and "Waterbury recovery" in fire and flames, and I mean it's just — thousands of people come, and all the young people. So that way I see it is about community building. So I see social impact, I see healing, I see inspiration that I've had personally and I see community building and strength and coming together. Those are the ways that I've experienced it and see what it can and must continue to be.

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)?

Sue Minter: It's really again about integrating. I think I heard different pieces in your question. We have this drive towards STEM which is more, kind of, cerebral and I'll just use the word math-driven. And I know that this is because of the goal of creating a work-force for the future for so many businesses in Vermont who are challenged to find qualified workers. Part of what I aspire to do in my "Vermont Promise" program is to actually get two years tuition-free at Vermont Technical College and Community College of Vermont to really help move people into

ladders of opportunity, to break the generational cycle of poverty, and to build that workforce and help grow the economy.

But I absolutely believe that arts and the whole person, the whole development of a person is essential to all of our education and to the driving of that workforce, too. When you go, for example, to our career tech centers, you can see art and creativity exhibited in everything. It is part of what is innovation. It is what drives innovation. It isn't just math — it's math brain plus creative brain that is actually creating new innovative solutions. So I think we have to see the whole person, we have to continue to believe in the arts as essential and certainly ensure (it continues).

The artist-in-residence program is something I really see as critical, especially in the early years. And I've just mentioned a few things but there are so many more ways that art and — and for me, personally, music — have changed my life and my kids' lives: being a part of a play, being part of a musical production, being part of expressing yourself differently from being a kid in a classroom, or being a jock.

I know that our particular school (Harwood Union High School) has phenomenal arts — both music and studio arts — and when I go to the art show, I am blown away with what they are doing with photography. It's also technology-based and that's part of the workforce. I don't want us to narrow our vision, I, in fact, want to grow that vision. Ways that the governor can champion: I think it's about continuing to celebrate art whether it's in the governor's office or in the legislature but maybe — I love the idea of visiting more of our schools — maybe doing more as I have as a parent, visiting these art shows. I want to go to sports teams but I also want to go to the arts shows, I want to be at the music festival, like the Winooski Valley Music Festival, those sorts of things, because I think that's one way that a governor can be a champion, is to show up and show how important this stuff is for the parents, for the kids, and you know hopefully the media will cover stuff like that.

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?

Sue Minter: I think it's about how we leverage everything we do. We can talk for example about art and infrastructure. We have the Danville (Transportation Enhancement Project) success as an example of how we actually bring art and culture into a downtown infrastructure project to be able to think outside the box; about how we use the existing programs we have to leverage more.

I learned a lot both as a community activist and as a state manager that state managers can't do it all. We've got to leverage in every way we can and we have to go after grants. One of the things the state doesn't have enough capacity is at grant writing. It's a small thing but there are so many opportunities out there that we have to actually be collaborative. I think that you will find in me a governor who is very collaborative, and always looking for partnership and leveraging. I don't know that I'm going to say "this revenue source is going to be for that!" It's really about getting creative about how we think collectively so that we can expand our opportunity. You know, there are other revenue streams that I've talked such as social impact financing — social impact bonds. As for social impact, for example, I think the state complex is a great example. We invested heavily in the new State office building and we brought tremendous art — Sarah Lee's mural — about the history, the daily life of the state employee, that kind of inspiration. So I am most interested in leveraging funds to integrate. When we have community development projects, how do we get art into there? When we have an infrastructure project, how can we get art into it? That's how I would look to things.

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?

Sue Minter: I guess what I see is the ways in which we use our tourism dollars. How are we leveraging our communities because the state has, let's face it, such limited resources and our tourism budget is always at risk. It's always the thing that's getting discussed about being cut. Rather than wanting to cut that, I want to ask how can we build off of it? I have a plan for outdoor recreation and the outdoor industry, and leveraging our assets, whether it's our state parks, our mountains, our trails our mountain bike trails — how do we get more people to come and recognize Vermont for what it is?

I think we have been fairly limited in how we market Vermont. And when we have communities with the kinds of community plays, the kind of art and museums, I don't know that we do enough to actually accentuate that in our marketing. So that's one way to help make sure that as we do our Invest Vermont we have these vital, more vital downtowns; how all of them are looking to art and culture as part of the nexus that they promote and build. So I think that's pretty much it.

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?

Sue Minter: I have a vision of my first 90 days, establishing a variety of task forces. I am very focused on how innovation can drive our economy and I think your question helps me realize that we need to add a few task forces into areas whether it's the industry, the outdoor industry, or the creative economy to continue.

I know that there are always things going on in our state, but not everyone knows about what everyone else is doing and we're not necessarily at our best because we're all running around in our own corners. I certainly saw this during Irene. I hope we can create the opportunity for people to collaborate and come up with suggestions to drive forward. That's my vision, and I've talked about these task forces of innovation within those four sectors but I think I want to build upon those task forces because when you get leaders who are excited about leading innovation to actually work together and come up with strategies, it's part of what I hope to do as part of a statewide strategic plan.

I don't want our state strategic plan to be about what state employees alone feel they should be doing or what the appointed cabinet officials believe they should be doing. I want it to be about the whole community. I want to have that liaison, the partnership with folks who are really driving their sector so I think that would be a way to do it. I also have had similar conversations, and realizing that I want to have key people – and I know you already have the Arts Council, so you've already got a council – but let's get some drivers of change, new with excitement. They are only going to meet for 90 days, and they are going to come up with 4 things and sort out what's possible, and how could it work, and how can we do it with real goals that are achievable with short and long term actions. That's what I'll be looking for because that's the kind of plans that I like. Give me some concrete things that will actually change the conversation around.