



WISCONSIN
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

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Testimony

Dr. Ellsworth Brown, The Ruth and Hartley Barker, Director

Good Afternoon. I am Ellsworth Brown, the Ruth and Hartley Barker Director of the Wisconsin Historical Society. Thank you for this opportunity to testify today and thank you and your staff for taking time to meet individually with Kate Easton and me to discuss the Society's budget.

Wisconsin has a rich culture and a high regard for history. I have often smiled when passing a private billboard in southern Wisconsin that read: "Without a heritage, every generation starts over." The members of this Legislature and this Administration have proven many times that you care about Wisconsin's heritage. On behalf of the Society, we appreciate your past support of the role the Society plays.

The Society is the state's designated archive, keeper of memory, premier storyteller, and transmitter of our common cultural heritage. It is among the nation's oldest, largest, most active historical societies. Its world-class collections reach back to the earliest explorations of this continent, and it is a trusted source of historical information, in part because we recognize that everyone has a story.

We are extremely grateful for the State's investment in the State Archive Preservation Facility. We have needed better environmental and physical security for Wisconsin's most important historical and cultural resources for over 20 years. The completion of this new facility, scheduled for possession this November, will provide much-needed space for collections valued at hundreds of millions of dollars that overflow the Society's headquarters building, buildings at our historic sites, and a rented off-site warehouse.

The Society was careful to follow DOA's instructions not to increase our budget when we submitted our request, with one exception: additional funds necessary to the new preservation facility. We

requested two positions—a curator and a library assistant; one-time costs to move in collections that span 11 miles of shelving; and the annual lease expense number that was provided by DOA. The Governor’s proposed budget did not include the positions or the one-time moving costs.

The recommended budget included the lease payment, but covered only 75% of it with GPR funding, leaving the Society to provide \$1.2 million annually in program revenue. Unfortunately, the new facility does not generate program revenue for the Society, which is unable to provide for the proposed lease. We believe the lease numbers provided in the budget are significantly overstated because they were calculated at the very high laboratory rate. Significant money can be saved. We request that the state secure an accurate lease rate for the kind of storage space provided in this building, that the program revenue source be removed, and that the costs of the facility be funded fully with the necessary GPR appropriation. We have had conversations with DOA about the lease and the moving costs and hope that these problems can be remedied.

Regarding Circus World Museum Foundation, Inc., with which the Society has had an operating lease-management agreement for over fifty years, I commend Governor Walker for recognizing that this historic site has needed a new funding model for many years. We all learned in January that the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus will end its 146-year run this May (to sold out crowds, by the way). However, Circus World in Baraboo remains open to share Wisconsin’s national legacy—including the Ringling archives.

If the Governor’s recommendation is approved, the Society is fully prepared to continue the stewardship of Wisconsin’s—really, America’s—valuable circus collections and to work with the Circus World Museum Foundation and Baraboo community leaders to ensure that this site remains a popular destination for families. Mayor Mike Palm of Baraboo—a member of Circus World Museum’s Foundation’s board, as are Senator Risser, Dave Anderson, and me—and my colleague at Circus World, Executive Director Scott O’Donnell, are here in support of this budget provision, to answer questions you may wish to ask, and to demonstrate that this request is as much about retaining and advancing Baraboo’s brand as it about our historic site. Of course, we are all prepared to work as well with any other State funding model that may be preferred.

As for shared services, the Society appreciates that DOA has recognized the importance of retaining HR staff's in-house presence to support each agency's unique personnel needs. Although the Society has only 131 permanent positions, our HR office recruits and supports annually over 600 paid appointments at locations across the state including project and part-time LTEs, seasonal LTEs, and work study students. Our HR team also coordinates background checks annually for our 250 volunteers—the largest volunteer staff of any state agency.

The proposed budget includes a transfer of five HR positions to DOA, a miscount; we have only four and have requested an errata to correct this. The governance team of the shared services initiative does not include a representative of small agencies, and we hope that a small, unique agency such as ours will be included.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Wisconsin Historical Society. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

