

Opinion

SUNDAY EXTRA

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Florida's arts funding has fallen off a cliff

Ballet Pensacola has lost \$40,000 in state funding, resulting in cuts to the Discover Dance program, an outreach initiative that served elementary schools. COURTESY A.C.E. PENSACOLA: ARTS, CULTURE, & ENTERTAINMENT

During the last 5 years of Gov. Scott's tenure, arts funding dropped 93 percent in Florida. Will DeSantis restore it?



Eve Samples
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Remember the final scene of "Thelma & Louise," when the movie's namesakes drive their convertible off a cliff, plunging into the Grand Canyon?

Picture the arc of that Ford Thunderbird. That's what arts funding in Florida has looked like over the past half-decade.

In 2014, state lawmakers and former Gov. Rick Scott passed a budget that included \$43 million for grants via the Florida Division of Cultural Affairs. If you have no idea what the division is (and that might be part of the problem), I'll explain in a moment.

Last year, that number fell to \$2.65 million — spread thinly across more than 400 arts programs statewide.

"It's dropped 93 percent while the economy's boomed," said Janeen Mason, curator at Lighthouse Center for the Arts in Jupiter and

co-founder of a new arts advocacy group called Fund the A List. She has firsthand knowledge of the cuts; the Lighthouse Center's share of state money dropped from \$120,000 to \$7,000 during that period.

Not since the aftermath of the Great Recession has Florida been so tight-fisted with money for the arts.

Why?
"Not everyone understands exactly what the arts do for us. We just have to do a better job of letting them know, and we are doing that this year," said Katharine Dickinson, chair of the Florida Council on Arts and Culture, a 15-member board that advises the state on which programs to fund.

Economic toll

The state Division of Cultural Affairs is not a household name, but you probably know its work. Through grants, it supports hundreds of vetted community arts programs. We're talking museums, theaters, botanical gardens, operas, ballet companies, education programs and more.

Less money for the Division of Cultural Affairs means less money for these programs.

That, in turn, takes an economic toll. Arts and culture were responsible for 4.2 percent of nationwide GDP in 2014 — ahead of transportation, tourism and construction, according to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. In Florida, the arts support 132,366 full-time jobs and generate \$3.35 billion in household income.

Yet there's no dedicated source of funding for the arts in Florida, which means museums can be pitted against health care and children's services when vying for money.

When the arts are an afterthought, we risk ending up with what we got last year.

Florida lawmakers have a chance to undo some damage as they work to pass a state budget by May 3. It's not clear if Gov. Ron DeSantis and lawmakers have the will to restore funding to 2015 levels, but that's what arts advocates are seeking: a return to \$43 million for the Division of Cultural Affairs.

As of Thursday, lawmakers were far from that mark. The Florida House was pledging \$10.4 million and the Senate \$21.3 million.

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Heard trial shows importance of open government

Treasure Coast Newspapers Editorial Board
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

Martin County Commissioner Sarah Heard dodged a bullet. Or maybe it was more like a cannonball.

Heard was put on trial earlier this month on charges she'd violated public records law. Assistant state attorneys prosecuted the case, which had resulted from Martin County's now-settled lawsuit with the Lake Point rock quarry. If convicted, she could have been removed from the County Commission; she could have gone to jail and faced a \$1,000 fine.

But the jury of four women and two

men took a mere 30 minutes to find Heard not guilty on all charges. It was a moment of vindication for the five-term commissioner; her supporters celebrated and reiterated their belief that the whole thing had been a farce, that Lake Point had sought revenge upon Heard and tried to harass her and ruin her reputation.

We keep coming back to the fact that none of this might have transpired had Heard — and two other former commissioners who face trials later this year — not communicated about county business via private email accounts.

Had the email exchanges between

Heard, former commissioners Ed Fielding, Anne Scott and Maggy Hurchalla been conducted via official channels — Heard, Fielding and Scott's county government email addresses — this would not have been an issue.

To be sure, neither Heard nor the former county officials violated county rules; at the time, the county had no policy prohibiting the use of private email or social media accounts to discuss public matters. The problems arose after Heard's emails disappeared, which she said was the result of her Yahoo

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Martin County Commissioner Sarah Heard exits the courtroom for lunch break during jury selection on April 8 for her misdemeanor trial in Stuart.

ERIC HASERT/TCPALM

Sunday Opinion Extra



Froma Harrop
Columnist

Paris and New York are united by urban infernos of tragedy

Many of us watching the inferno at Notre Dame de Paris felt that 9/11 dread. Last week, as nearly 18 years ago, the news channels kept looping the same horrific video of towers collapsing. At the end, the medieval cathedral remained mostly standing while the twin towers at New York's World Trade Center vanished into a pile of smoking rubble. The outcomes may have been different, but both calamities showed that what we think most permanent may not be.

In human terms, the calamity on Sept. 11, 2001, was of an entirely different scale. Thousands died. The conflagration in Paris miraculously cost no lives.

As an architectural disaster, however, there's no comparison. Notre Dame is a Gothic masterpiece embodying the spiritual. The twin towers, bland buildings famous mainly for being tall, were dedicated to commerce.

The late historian Lewis Mumford denounced the World Trade Center as an "example of the purposeless gigantism and technological exhibitionism that are now eviscerating the living tissue of every great city."

That terrorists had unleashed the massacre at the twin towers made the tragedy especially gruesome. Parisians are relieved that the fire at Notre Dame appears to have accidentally started — but the 2015 terror attack was often mentioned during the fire as a related reason for insecurity. The scars from terrorism and devastation of an iconic structure make Paris and New York sisters in pain.

Medieval cathedrals are no strangers to destruction. Over the centuries, fire and humans have caused enormous damage at cathedrals throughout Europe, and they have been rebuilt. French President Emmanuel Macron said Notre Dame will be brought back as well — though his five-year timetable sounds optimistic.

It took almost 200 years to build the original Notre Dame. Reconstruction on a work dating back to the 12th century would be quite a challenge.

Where the twin towers stood, a 104-story replacement skyscraper has risen. The Freedom Tower took only eight years to build.

The catastrophic loss of life at the World Trade Center transformed pictures of the towers into sacred imagery. Before 9/11, movies such as "Wall Street" and "The Bonfire of the Vanities" portrayed the twin towers as cauldrons of corporate greed. After 9/11, "The Simpsons" and other shows deleted episodes showing them out of respect for the fallen.

Older structures, be they homely or majestic, also serve as warming reminders of place. About 14 years ago, wealthy residents of Santa Monica Canyon stopped the demolition of a beaten-up gas station dating back to 1924. A tiny business with three vintage pumps, the Canyon Service Station was no cathedral, but the millionaires who passed it every day loved it for always being there.

Now imagine the trauma of losing a cathedral that has anchored your town for almost 700 years. Parisians were spared the worst last week, but like New Yorkers, they've seen that the unthinkable is possible.

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Arts

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What about private sector?

At this point, you may be wondering why the private sector can't pick up the state's slack.

"Government investment serves the public interest, and ensures that everyone receives the benefits of the arts — particularly among the underserved population," said Dickinson, who served the Florida Council on Arts and Culture under five governors.

That's really important, she explained, "because private philanthropists, corporations have their own motivations."

Make no mistake: Arts organizations heavily rely on private fundraising, too. But private donations often have limited uses. So when state support dries up, communities are harmed. Consider a few examples:

- The loss of \$40,000 in state grant funding to Ballet Pensacola resulted in cuts to the Discover Dance program, an outreach initiative that served elementary schools. The state grant money had been used for expenses and staff — recurring costs that private grants often won't cover.

- In Fort Myers, the state grant reductions prompted the Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center to cut arts education programs in schools and at-risk communities. The center also started charging for its Art Walk event, which used to be free.

- The Tallahassee Museum's state funding dropped from \$150,000 to just over \$9,000 — despite strong grant rankings. Now, the museum has five fewer full-time positions; it's also had to tap its cash reserves for maintenance.

Rural impacts

The cuts have had acute impacts in remote parts of Florida. In Highlands County, South Florida State College had to cut a series of performances that reflected the cultural diversity of

the area.

The college had planned to collaborate with a local arts organization to take live performances into middle schools — but when state grant money was reduced, the in-school performances were eliminated.

"Some major institutions in major markets might have been able to absorb the loss of state arts funding and still deliver arts programs," Cindy Garren, director of cultural programs at the college, explained via email. "We could not."

Big picture

"State funding has always been a roller coaster ride," said Flora Maria Garcia, president and CEO of the non-profit United Arts of Central Florida.

Even if lawmakers come through with a boost this year, it won't solve the larger problem: Funding Florida's arts community hinges on the whims of politicians.

We would be wise to look to cities and states that do this better.

In Colorado, the seven-county Denver metro area has a special sales tax to support arts and culture. Voters approved its renewal for the third time in 2016, generating about \$65 million a year.

In Minnesota, the top-ranked state for arts funding, voters in 2009 approved increasing the state sales tax. In the decade since, the proceeds have provided more than \$440 million to historical, artistic and cultural projects.

Those ideas may not be the perfect fit for low-tax Florida — but recent history tells us it's time to find a new model for supporting arts and culture in the Sunshine State.

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Marc A. Thiessen
Columnist

Bernie Sanders needs Fox News to court Trump voters

WASHINGTON — That Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., went on Fox News for a town hall Monday night was controversial among Democrats. As Sanders told hosts Bret Baier and Martha MacCallum, "Not everybody thought I should come on this show. Your network does not necessarily have great respect in my world, but I thought it was important for me to be here and have a serious discussion about serious issues."

What Sanders painted as a magnanimous gesture was really a calculated move to boost his presidential prospects: He needs Fox viewers to win the White House.

According to the massive Cooperative Congressional Election Study, about 12% of Sanders primary voters cast their ballots for Donald Trump in the 2016 general election. These Sanders voters appear to have given Trump the margin of victory in the three states that handed Trump the White House. The Fox News town hall was held in Bethlehem, Pa., in a state where some 16% of Sanders supporters — about 117,100 people — voted for Trump; Trump won Pennsylvania by 44,292 votes. It was a similar story in Wisconsin, where about 9% of Sanders supporters — about 51,317 people — voted for Trump; Trump won Wisconsin by 22,748 votes. And in Michigan, about 8% of Sanders voters — or about 47,915 people — cast their general election ballots for Trump; Trump won Michigan by 10,704 votes.

If Sanders wants to win the Democratic nomination, he needs these Trump voters to support him. And if he wins the nomination, he needs them to stay in his column and vote for him instead of Trump in 2020.

Can Sanders separate his former supporters from Trump? Going on Fox News and making his pitch that Trump has failed them is a smart way to do it. Sanders not only participated in the Fox town hall, he published an op-ed on the Fox News website, in which he declared, "When Donald Trump ran for president he made a lot of promises to working families. He told them that he would protect their interests while standing up to the Establishment. Unfortunately, he did not tell the truth."

During his town hall, Sanders criticized Trump for proposing an \$845 billion cut to Medicare and made an impassioned pitch for his Medicare-for-all plan. Selling a government takeover of the U.S. health-care system on Fox may seem counterintuitive, but many of those who defected to Trump in 2016 are non-traditional Republican voters who were attracted to Trump precisely because he promised not to touch Social Security and Medicare. So, Medicare-for-all is not anathema to them the way it is to conservatives.

Sanders is telling his former voters, in essence, Trump has failed you, and I can do better; Trump claims to be an outsider, but I am the real deal.

Will it work? Will these former Sanders voters, having helped put Trump in the White House, stick with the president, or will they switch back to their first love, Bernie Sanders? The answer may well determine who wins the Democratic nomination — and the presidency in 2020.

Follow Marc A. Thiessen on Twitter, @marcthiessen.

Heard trial

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account being hacked. After an arbitrator in the Lake Point lawsuit concluded the county and some commissioners likely violated public records laws, the county adopted tougher standards.

Yet it should have been a matter of common sense. When public officials are doing the people's work, the public has a right to know what's being said or done, when, and by whom. The public deserves — and indeed, has a right to — the correspondence.

While the jury's not-guilty verdict in the Heard case is cause for celebration in some circles, we worry Florida's elected officials might take it as implicit consent to conduct the public's business privately.

Let's be clear: It is not.

It is rare that public officials are prosecuted for alleged public records violations, a fact that led Heard's supporters to conclude she was being politically targeted. Across Florida, actual violations are likely far more numerous than prosecutions.

Florida has some of the most strict public records laws in the country. They mandate public access to "all materials made or received by an agency in connection with the transaction of official business which are used to perpetuate, communicate or formalize knowledge." Emails, texts, voicemails and many other forms of communication are

included.

If an elected official violates Florida's open records laws, they violate the public trust — and they can cost taxpayers money in the form of lawsuits, settlements and other legal fees.

Thankfully, training and instruction for public officials on public records is available from both the state Attorney General's Office and the First Amendment Foundation. It is wise for newly-elected officials to take the training, and for existing officials to re-familiarize themselves with the rules on a consistent basis.

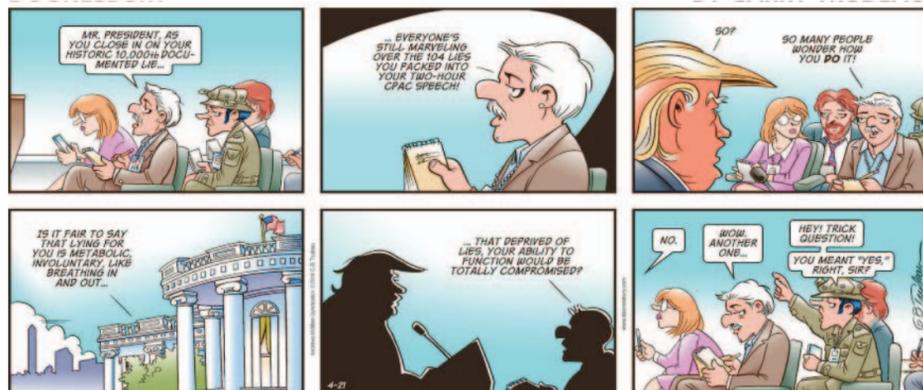
Governing must be done in the sunshine, as it's the only means by which the public can hold elected officials accountable.

The temptation among some members of the public is to minimize these violations of the public trust when decisions go your way. Partisans too often think that if behind-the-scenes maneuvering is "necessary" in order to kill a controversial plan or proposal, then so be it.

That's not how it's supposed to work. And that's the lesson we hope all public officials — indeed, the public itself — takes from Sarah Heard's trial, and from the trials of Fielding and Scott yet to come.

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