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Commentary: DOGE cuts threaten our history

April 11, 2025 | By Cheryl Casey

Over the last few months, I've been sharing updates with our members and supporters about an amazing collections training program that the Waterbury Historical Society was selected to participate in, called *Activating 21st Century Local History*.

This learning opportunity came at just the right moment in our efforts to improve how we accomplish our mission and achieve our strategic goals. The program is administered by the Vermont Historical Society and, only three and a half months into a year-long experience, I'm already seeing beneficial outcomes emerge.

Then the Trump administration went after the Institute of Museum and Library Services, an independent federal agency that provides grants to libraries and museums of all sizes across the country. Its approximately 70 employees have been put on administrative leave. On April 1, Vermont Historical Society Executive Director Steve Perkins sent an email that included the following message:

"We are dependent upon IMLS to continue our *Activating 21st Century Local History* program, and there are no IMLS employees to process reimbursement requests. We anticipated this problem and have been exploring options, but so far have not found a private funder to make up for the \$137,000 remaining on this grant.

"Unfortunately, unless we find some alternate source of funding, we will not be able to continue the *Activating 21st Century Local History* program after this month. This program has had a great start with

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My heart and my spirits plummeted. Public sphere public sphere. IMIS corporations has libraries will be affected, particularly their ability to provide interlibrary loans. We at the historical society stand with our colleagues in the Waterbury Public Library. They do amazing work and have been terrific partners in programming and other initiatives. We should all be outraged at how much damage is being done to institutions that do so much good for communities across the country.

But at the same time, I want to elevate the discussion around museums, especially small local museums. Many of these are run by volunteers, especially the historical societies here in Vermont. These organizations preserve and protect a community's story, lovingly curating the greatest successes, most disappointing failures, and everything in between that has brought the community to its present chapter. Through exhibits of artifacts, documents, and photographs, local museums provide touchpoints to a community's past and inspire champions of the community's future.

Waterbury Historical Society was selected to participate in this year's *Activating 21st Century Local History* cohort along with Brookfield Historical Society, Sharon Historical Society, Thetford Historical Society, and Bixby Memorial Library (Vergennes). We all have been developing mission-critical projects for which we were going to receive dedicated, onsite support from the state historical society staff between May and October and a stipend to cover necessary materials. Right now, I think we're all a bit frozen with that "deer in headlights" look.

What's just as devastating is that small historical societies and museums across the country are feeling just as let down and deflated. Some might even struggle to stay open as a result of federal funding cuts.

History is *our story*. It is ours to celebrate, reconcile with, learn from, and build on. But we can't do any of these things if we don't have the resources to preserve and access our story. Maybe for the Trump administration, that's the point.

What can we do?

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An essential part of this mission is having a publicly available digital catalog of our collections that

enables researchers and other members of our community to find answers to their history questions, satisfy their curiosities, and just explore the *many* ways Waterbury has contributed to the larger story of Vermont. At present, our digital catalog, using a platform called PastPerfect, is online through our website but difficult to navigate. Our goal is to rectify the problems, keeping our mission front and center in our work.

It might take us longer than expected, and we might experience hurdles that could have been avoided, but we will see the project through because our volunteer squad, although currently small, is mighty. Additionally, the Vermont Historical Society has committed to finding ways to support us and the other members of the program cohort through periodic consultation. I cannot thank them enough for all they are doing.

At the state level, Vermont Attorney General Charity Clark has joined 20 other state attorneys general in suing the Trump administration. The lawsuit cites the “devastating effects on communities” that would occur if the IMLS and two other federal agencies (Minority Business Development Agency and the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service) are dismantled.

We Vermonters can also advocate for our libraries, historical societies, and other affected stakeholders by calling or writing to our delegation in Congress (Rep. Becca Balint, Rep. Peter Welch, Sen. Bernie Sanders). Locally, we can encourage our elected state legislators to press the issue with our congressional delegates.

The Waterbury community extends far beyond our municipal borders to family, friends, and former residents in states across the country. Our historical society membership list testifies to that fact. They, too, can join the call to save the IMLS for the sake of their own local museums, historical societies,

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Waterbury Center resident Cheryl Casey is president of the Waterbury Historical Society and a regular contributor to Waterbury Roundabout.

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Waterbury Roundabout is an online news site launched in May 2020. Our mission is to provide readers with news about local government, schools, businesses, community organizations, events and the people who live, work and play in and around the Waterbury region. Thank you for reading!

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