

UNIVERSITY of WISCONSIN  
LA CROSSE

June 1, 2020

Tim Acklin, AICP  
Senior Planner  
City of La Crosse  
400 La Crosse St  
La Crosse, WI 54601

To Mr. Acklin, and the City Plan Commission:

Hello; I'm James Longhurst, a public and policy historian at the University of Wisconsin La Crosse. I write in support of the Hear, Here public history project's funding request. I also write in support of Professor Ariel Beaujot's commitment to carefully encouraging community conversations about the history behind public space, and who gets the privilege of defining and enjoying that space. As we read national news today about the protests and violence in parks, squares and streets -- and decades of protest against monuments or place names that divide rather than unite -- I very much recommend the sort of work that the Hear, Here project has done. Public history and public arts projects that create and facilitate difficult conversations between and among the public are certainly not a solution, but it is far better to have such conversations than to ignore them until it is too late.

Public history is an academic field which takes as its goals the study and practice of communicating history to the people outside of classrooms, including museums, websites, documentaries, and memorials. So while other scholars in history create historical research to advance knowledge in their fields, or recreate that knowledge in the minds of students, public history reaches beyond the academic journal or college classroom to engage the people. One of the difficulties of doing public history is that many (if not most) people outside of the academic world think of history as entertainment, or as celebrating the stories of national heroes. But the people working within the academic world instead bring a critical, analytical approach to understanding the past and its memorialization. When public history brings these two points of view into conversation with each other, sometimes the two sides are quite surprised at the distance between them.

I believe that the Hear, Here project has a very good record of starting conversations about the things that bring us together and the things that drive us apart. For a very small investment, the Hear, Here project can continue these conversations in the next two years. Professor Ariel Beaujot, and the Hear, Here project, have an established track record of engaging the community respectfully and productively. I suggest that the city view this as an investment in maintaining dialogue, even in this time of severely limited resources.

I believe that any public funds committed to support the Hear, Here project would be very carefully accounted for, and result in a well-managed and important public program. I can say this because I have known Professor Ariel Beaujot since 2012, when I was the chair of a search committee in public history that hired her at UW-La Crosse. At the time, our department had a long-standing minor in public history. As we expanded our minor into a public and policy major, we were looking for hires that would increase our ability to teach in museum studies, material culture, grant writing, and community engagement. This would require not just a *scholar*, but a

Department of History

Wimberly Hall, Room 401

1725 State Street, La Crosse, WI 54601

Phone: (608)785-8350, Fax: (608)785-8370, [www.uwlax.edu/LS](http://www.uwlax.edu/LS)

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*personality*: someone who could work with non-historians outside of academia, and wrangle the logistics of public history projects. Professor Beaujot impressed us immensely stage as a skilled and published scholar who could nonetheless speak convincingly to anyone with clear and compelling language.

Of course, the two most prominent public history projects that Professor Beaujot created has created so far are Hear, Here and [art]ifact, both creative, community-based collaborative endeavors. I would like to highlight the immense and largely undocumented work that goes into creating these sorts of collaborative, deadline-sensitive, and community-centered projects, because I think that it shows the seriousness and care with which Professor Beaujot approaches these public-facing projects. I've been a behind-the-scenes observer in these projects over the years, and I can say that the amount of logistical wrangling and hands-on team management that is required is simply epic. In a deadline-driven collaborative project, these complications are both inevitable, and invisible if well-managed. In the case of Hear, Here, students and community members committed from the beginning to specific tasks, and clear lines of accountability and communication that demanded weekly reports and interaction with other groups. The students who worked on this project were exposed to the power and community engagement of oral history.

I believe that Professor Beaujot has demonstrated a track record as a historian engaged in powerful, justice-oriented community work. While Hear, Here and [art]ifact began as unassuming public history projects, it has become clear to observers that Professor Beaujot inspires her students to tell the *whole* history of the *entire* community; not just "the community" as it has been conveniently and narrowly defined by some. Instead, these projects actively sought out the stories of the powerless and the excluded that had not been celebrated or even preserved by existing institutions. This led to backlash in some instances, and some community members were forced to confront stories that undermined their assumptions of a unified and monochromatic community. In so doing, Professor Beaujot (and her students and community members who are part of the project) have directly engaged with divisions related to immigration, gender, race and ethnicity in thoughtful, evidence-based, and professional ways. This is the very definition of engaged scholarship. I'm proud and slightly amazed at the ways that Professor Beaujot's work has become a part of the vision for a more just and inclusive community in such a short time. Professor Beaujot has clearly demonstrated her ability to engage a community in difficult but necessary discussions about the boundaries of who is included and who is excluded from history.

I encourage the city of La Crosse to support this funding request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James Longhurst". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

James Longhurst, Ph.D.  
Professor of History  
University of Wisconsin – La Crosse

1725 State St  
La Crosse WI 54601 USA  
[jlonghurst@uwlax.edu](mailto:jlonghurst@uwlax.edu)  
608-785-8344