



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
MASSACHUSETTS SENATE

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August 15, 2023

The Honorable Maura T. Healey
Governor of the Commonwealth
Massachusetts State House, Room 280
Boston, MA 02133

RE: Star Store College of Visual and Performing Arts – Downtown New Bedford

Dear Governor Healey:

I am writing to urgently request your administration's assistance in protecting students at the Star Store College of Visual and Performing Arts as well as the greater downtown New Bedford economy. On Monday, UMass Dartmouth blindsided students with the unfortunate decision to vacate the campus despite over twenty years of state investments that created and paid for the facility. Notwithstanding my warnings to the university and the prior administration since at least 2019, the ownership and future of the Star Store building remains in limbo. Because of this, the extraordinary state investment in the campus is in jeopardy and the lives of students are currently being dismantled.

By way of background, this campus was created pursuant to a 1996 law I sponsored authorizing DCAMM to enter into a long-term lease on behalf of the university following a competitive bid process. For over twenty years, the legislature provided a reserve account in the annual state budget to finance the necessary restoration and redevelopment of the property located on 182 Union Street, at little to no cost to the developer who originally acquired the property from the city's redevelopment authority for one dollar. At the end of the lease term, the Commonwealth was supposed to purchase the building and secure the public's investment for one dollar, providing a public arts campus in perpetuity.

As a result of this arrangement, Star Store was transformed into a thriving university arts campus that fueled an economic resurgence in the city's downtown district. The invaluable economic

development benefits provided by this project literally transformed our downtown and triggered the beginning of an even bigger revival across our city.

However, the university has failed to meet its responsibility to secure and maintain the building. Through a series of direct communications and meetings with state agencies and officials over the past several years, it has become apparent that these public resources have either been squandered and/or exploited. This is evidenced by a building in significant disrepair despite tens of millions of taxpayer dollars invested into it with zero accountability to date. Additionally, students have told me directly that the university has failed in recent years to provide proper upkeep of their facilities and have even failed to provide the necessary faculty to support their academic programming. We also learned that the university failed to fund a required capital reserve account over the life of their lease, further complicating this matter.

The lack of attention by the university and state agencies responsible for this public campus must stop. Since early 2021, DCAMM resisted every opportunity at my urging to exercise the one-dollar purchase option without a detailed explanation or accounting of public funds. My legislation signed into law last year required the transfer of this campus to the Commonwealth for one dollar. The university and DCAMM failed to fulfill its legal obligations and moral obligation to the students and taxpayers who keep the university afloat.

While I am proud of everything the Star Store campus has accomplished for the revival of downtown New Bedford and our city's economy, I cannot stand by while a public institution recklessly disregards the contributions of taxpayers and its responsibility toward students. For over twenty years I championed all of funding and necessary law underpinning this campus and its transfer to the public only to now watch it thwarted by disinterested bureaucrats who would never treat their personal investments the same way. I sincerely appreciate my recent discussions with Secretary Gorzkowicz and look forward to working with your administration to resolve this matter.

Sincerely,



Mark Montigny
SENATOR

cc: Secretary Matthew Gorzkowicz, Executive Office of Administration and Finance
Chairman Michael J. Rodrigues, Senate Committee on Ways and Means