

Stimulus funding for arts hits nerve

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Some doubt it would create jobs

By Michael Kranish, Globe Staff | February 5, 2009

WASHINGTON - The massive economic stimulus bill moving through Congress is being watched closely by arts groups across the country, including the Massachusetts Cultural Council. If the House version becomes law, the National Endowment for the Arts would get \$50 million - and the council's federal funding would soar by nearly 50 percent.

While the NEA money is a minuscule portion of the \$819 billion House bill, it has become a lightning rod for some critics, who question whether the dollars for the arts will create many jobs - and who see the money as a symbol of House Democrats trying to lard up the plan with spending wish lists that have been pent up for years.

The criticism has reached such a crescendo that some arts advocates are concerned that the push for the \$50 million could backfire, reigniting a debate over the value of taxpayers funding everything from "poetry out loud" events to community theater.

William Ivey, who was the leader of President Obama's transition team on arts-related spending, said he has been troubled by comments suggesting "that an arts worker is not a real worker, and that a carpenter who pounds nails framing a set for an opera company is a less-real carpenter than one who pounds nails framing a house."

Ivey, a former chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, said he asked the Obama administration during a meeting on Jan. 14 for several hundred million dollars in arts funding in the stimulus plan, but won backing only for the \$50 million. The money was included in the House version that passed last week without a single Republican vote, but is not in the bill the Senate could vote on this week as Republicans and some Democrats try to rein in some spending. The matter would probably then become an issue when a House-Senate conference committee and the White House try to reach a compromise.

One of the leading critics of the bill has been Representative Eric Cantor of Virginia, the third-ranking Republican in the House, who has urged Obama to "get the pork barrel spending out," citing a grant for a \$300,000 sculpture garden administered last year by the NEA.

Representative Jack Kingston, a Georgia Republican, wants to transfer the proposed NEA funding to highway construction. He failed to get the House to vote on his proposal, so he is now trying to get on the conference committee that will determine the fate of the funding. "We have real people out of work right now and putting \$50 million in the NEA and pretending that's going to save jobs as opposed to putting \$50 million in a road project is disingenuous," Kingston said in an interview yesterday, adding the time has come to examine all of NEA's funding.

Such criticism has revived memories of how the GOP-led House in 1997 voted to eliminate the NEA. The agency survived the controversy after a compromise was reached to slash its funding. The agency has made a comeback in recent years and the budget has gradually increased. The proposed additional \$50 million - on top of \$122 million already set aside in this year's budget for grants - would put the NEA in its strongest financial condition in years.

Advocates for the funding say there is a historical resonance to the proposal, reviving memories of the way President Franklin D. Roosevelt supported the hiring of thousands of artists, writers, painters, and photographers as part of the New Deal.

Dana Gioia, a poet who was NEA chairman until last month, recalled that when top Roosevelt aide Harry Hopkins was asked why the government wanted to hire so many artists and writers, he replied, "Hell, they've got to eat just like other people."

Gioia, reflecting on that comment, said, "As far as I've heard, nothing has changed about the dietary needs of artists."

Bob Lynch, the head of the national advocacy group Americans for the Arts, said the recession is threatening the performance schedule - or even the survival - of a number of arts organizations, estimating that 10 percent are at "serious risk."

The NEA cites Labor Department statistics showing that the unemployment rate across the broad range of arts-related occupations was 6 percent for the fourth quarter of 2008, about the same as the entire workforce, but that unemployment was far higher in some fields, including 46 percent among actors and 19 percent among dancers. The Labor Department says about 2 million people work in the arts, but advocacy groups put the figure several million higher.

But opponents of the funding say that many groups of workers don't receive special funding. Brad Dayspring, a spokesman for Cantor, said the provision "uses taxpayer dollars on NEA programs instead of common-sense tax relief targeted to revitalize small businesses and create jobs for middle-class families facing economic challenges" and "fails to meet the standard necessary to be included in an emergency economic recovery plan."

Anita Walker, executive director of the Massachusetts Cultural Council, disagreed, saying the funding is a vital component in helping to support 37,000 Bay State jobs in what she calls the "creative economy." While Governor Deval Patrick has proposed cutting the council's budget by \$600,000 to help close a budget deficit this year, the increased funding in the stimulus bill would provide \$400,000, officials said.

The NEA's money is distributed in two main ways: 40 percent goes to the official arts agency in each state, and most of the rest is distributed in direct grants to artists and organizations around the nation. Under this formula, more than \$800,000 goes to the Massachusetts Cultural Council, which redistributes it, and a similar amount is given directly by the NEA to individuals and groups in the Bay State.

The federal funding in Massachusetts includes \$30,000 to support Cambridge's American Repertory Theatre's recent production of Anton Chekhov's play "The Seagull." The theater's executive director, Robert Orchard, said the ART received 20 percent of its funding from the federal government during the agency's heyday of the 1980s, compared with about 1 percent this year. Still, he said, the grant was welcomed and helped cover the costs of a great number of artisans and designers who constructed sets.

Another NEA grant is going to Henri Cole, a Boston poet whose work has been a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Asked to describe the impact of the \$25,000 literature fellowship, Cole responded figuratively.

"The economy is like a dry riverbed," he said. "The fellowship money is like river water flowing into it."

Michael Kranish can be reached at kranish@globe.com ■