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More details are needed about R.I. arts program

The Advisory Council for the Cultural Arts has sketched in dismayingly vague terms the outline of a plan to spend \$117,000 in state and federal money on a program for support and encouragement of the arts in this state. The recommendations are marred by a lack of specifics; the basic plan is flawed by a lack of guidelines to be followed in its administration.

Implementation of the program will depend on General Assembly approval of a \$67,000 supplemental request to the state Department of Education's proposed budget and the qualification for \$50,000 of federal matching funds under the National Endowment for the Arts. Administration of the program is lodged in the Department of Education.

The council's program has four points: use of \$30,000 to help local non-profit groups which undertake to sponsor professional performances and exhibits in their communities; use of \$35,000 for free or low-cost performances and exhibits by local cultural organizations; use of \$25,000 for research and development projects; use of \$10,000 for technical assistance to local amateur organizations; use of \$17,000 for administration.

The lack of specifics spawns many serious questions. Will non-profit groups be subsidized even though they offer programs with little broad appeal? What are "local cultural organizations?" What kind of "technical assistance" will be offered amateur organizations? Why is such a comparatively large sum being earmarked for research in such areas as professional advice on publicity?

These and similar questions ought to be raised and pursued vigorously when the supplementary budget request gets into the hands of General Assembly committees. At a time when the state budget is being called upon to meet basic and costly housekeeping needs, the legislature cannot afford to authorize spending that cannot be wholly

justified for clearly-indicated needs.

But beyond these questions looms the larger question: how is the program to be administered? What guidelines will be followed, for instance, in choosing which programs merit allocation of funds by the Department of Education? The question is of considerable interest because the program will not be independently staffed until the program is implemented.

The issue here is not one of the value judgments that must be made in terms of cultural merits of programs seeking financial help. The issue, rather, is how the administration will determine which of the petitioning organizations have solid bases on which to operate and responsible leadership to guarantee wise use of allocated funds.

Will petitioning organizations be expected and required to meet minimum standards of self-help before getting state and federal help? Will any effort be made to establish priorities, giving greater weight to programs already well-established in local communities? How will the merit of pioneering organizations be measured in terms of competency to perform as promised?

There is to be a meeting tomorrow night to which representatives of fine arts groups have been invited to hear guidelines of applications for support. Application forms for aid will be distributed then. Presumably the roster of invited organizations spans the whole known spectrum of groups interested in various forms of cultural activity.

But while the council is advising organizations how to apply for help, it would be well advised to tell the public and the General Assembly how it proposes to allocate that help among the petitioning groups. Not least among the long-range questions to be answered is how this program is expected to grow in the future—and how it will be financed in the years to come, particularly if federal aid is cut back.