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Cultural Groups Mobilize To Take On the New Congress

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL

Alarmed by growing attacks on Federal support for the arts, cultural groups around the country are mobilizing to press their case directly to the avowedly hostile House Republican leadership. Their message: The arts don't cost; they earn.

The effort to sell the arts as not just balm for the soul but as a boon to local economies drew representatives of some 50 national arts and humanities groups to a meeting last week in Washington, where they formed a new "cultural advocacy" coalition. Another group set up a 900 telephone number to raise money for messages to Senators and Representatives. The chairman of the President's Council on Arts and the Humanities, John Brademas, said yesterday that he would make his own appeal later this week.

Around the nation, arts councils and museums and opera and dance companies have begun surveying their benefactors and trustees for well-connected business people, Republican or otherwise, who might have the ear of influential legislators.

Newt Gingrich, the new House Speaker, has made no secret of his antipathy to the long-standing system of Federal grants to arts organizations and artists. He and Congressional allies have vowed to pare if not end the subsidies doled out by the National Endowment for the Arts, which is to distribute $167.4 million this year, down from a high in 1979 of what today would be more than $300 million. Other Government financing programs for humanities and museums are also under critical scrutiny.

There are additional uncertainties in New York State, where the new Republican Governor, George E. Pataki, has yet to put his own stamp on formally reappointing the long-serving chairwoman, Kitty Carlisle Hart, or naming a successor.

"Everybody's nervous," said Robert T. Buck, director of the Brooklyn Museum, which has received more than $2 million from Washington over the last two years for special programs and exhibits. Though the grant is only a small part of the museum's $17.5 million annual operating budget, it is considered vital. "We are counting on these monies," Mr. Buck said. "We are planning our projects with their support."

In an effort at solidarity, representatives of the American Association of Museum Directors and about 50 other arts, civic and labor organizations from the United Conference of Mayors to Opera America and the A.F.L.-C.I.O. met last week at the offices of the National Assembly of Local Arts Agencies to plan strategy.

"We're sharing what our Congressional friends are thinking, and figuring out collective ways of communicating," said Bob Lynch, president of the assembly and a former college instructor in poetry and writing.

The arts say they receive little and generate billions in tax revenues.

He said the coalition would portray the arts as a $37 billion industry employing 1.3 million people, or 1.5 percent of the work force, and generating tax revenues of $3.4 billion. Although nonprofit arts groups are routinely misperceived as subsisting primarily on charity, he said, they receive only about 15 percent of their
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Robert T. Buck, director of the Brooklyn Museum.


“Those are conservative Republican principles,” said Mr. Lynch, whose 3,800-member assembly is coordinating but not directing the coalition.

Another umbrella lobbying group, the Arts Alliance, last week set up a fund-raising toll number — (900) 370-9000 — with a message soliciting money for a campaign to sway Congress with the same economic argument.

“Mr. Baker has said that while he supports free exercise of the arts, he does not believe that they should be taxpayer subsidized. In fact, he says, artists would be freer without Federal involvement.

Even managers, benefactors and trustees of large arts institutions that receive proportionately small Federal grants deplored cutbacks or a cutoff, saying the contributions stimulate other giving.

“The N.E.A. validates the arts in

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