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Big bucks for the humanities

Yearly flow: A million dollars in North Dakota

By Mary Jane Smetanka
Herald Staff Writer

MANDAN, N.D. — The sign on the door simply says "NDCHPI." Inside, the small office suite has a few file cabinets, some desks and room enough for three people to work.

This unobtrusive office near the Missouri River administers grants for humanities projects worth almost \$1 million a year. Like its headquarters, the North Dakota Humanities Council (until recently called the North Dakota Committee for the Humanities and Public Issues) is a low-key organization unknown to most state residents.

One of the projects funded by the council is the Chautauqua program, a tent show combining history, folklore and drama that tours the state each summer. The acclaimed film "Northern Lights" began as a council-funded project.

Other projects include programs on the effects of energy development in the state, discussion of Indian art, life on the prairie and programs on North Dakotans' ethnic heritage.

Although the North Dakota program is younger than other state groups that administer grants for the National Endowment for the Humanities, its success is used as a model for other state councils.

"It's a terrific program," said Julie Van Camp, program officer for the NEH in Washington, D.C. "Their outreach is superb and reaches all regions of the state.

"They have active, vigorous programs. They rate among the best in the country."

The state councils are funded only by NEH and are independent of state government.

That puts the council in a unique position among state groups giving out grants. It also has fomented charges that the 21-member council which traditionally has selected its own members, is closed.

However, several years ago federal law changed to allow two board members to be appointed by the governor. This summer the number of board members appointed by the governor will grow to four.

Membership is divided between college people and public members and men and women. The group meets four times a year.

Grants are awarded to non-profit organizations for humanities projects that reach the state's out-of-school adults. A council guide states that the projects will help people "make better decisions about North Dakota's future if they better understand themselves and their heritage."

Humanities include disciplines such as language, literature, history, philosophy, comparative religion and history and criticism of the arts.

Project costs are shared with applicants, most often by donation of time, facilities and other preparations. Applicants are expected to match NEH funds with local money or support.

People with expertise in the humanities help project applicants and take part in presentation of programs to make sure they have some humanities content.

The NEH is different from the National Endowment for the Arts, and does not fund programs dealing with production, performance and exhibition of arts unless some interpretation or humanities are included.

Since the North Dakota council began operation in 1973-74, the value of programs aided by the group has grown from about \$312,000 to \$995,000 in 1980-81. Those amounts include NEH grants, money donated by individuals and matching grants in cash, time, promotion and equipment.

Administrative costs for the North Dakota council are 8 to 12 percent of the budget, a rate that makes council executive director Everett Albers proud: The staff of two full and one part-time person is the smallest of any council in the nation.

While the small staff holds down administrative costs, the success of council-funded programs has pushed North Dakota to eighth in the nation in gifts and matching grants from NEH, at \$200,000. This is the third year that the state has been at that level.

In contrast, Minnesota received \$100,000 this year in gifts and matching grants.

"Personally, I think we're at a limit," Albers said. "At the last national meeting, people questioned, 'Why does North Dakota have \$200,000 when they have less than a million people?'"

"It's because we have very low administration costs, and because we are the humanities for the public in this state. There aren't that many other institutions providing this service."

If North Dakota's program has set an example for other state councils, it is from its success in reaching people in small towns and isolated parts of the state.

"There is a constantly increasing variety of programming that in the early years we never dreamed of," said Bernard O'Kelly, who was involved when the council started in late 1972. O'Kelly is dean of the University of North Dakota College of Arts and Sciences.

Some council observers say projects approved by the council have become less academic and more broadly based, appealing to a more general audience.

Part of this is due to a shift in emphasis at the national level. At first, NEH projects were tied to public policy matters; now they have moved to a more solid humanities ground.

Albers said that unlike some other state councils, the North Dakota group has always been split between members from the academic community and the general public. A "healthy tension" exists between the board members and tends to keep projects balanced between the popular and more scholarly, he said.

Larry Remele of the State Historical Society said another reason for the change in the type of programs is that the appointments made by the governor have opened up the council. The council has not become politicized, as some had feared, he said.

But he said that some people still misunderstand what the council does and how members make their decisions.

"It fills a very worthwhile function in North Dakota, but its decision making process needs to be opened up," he said.

"For a lot of people, it looks as though there are a few people getting all the bucks, and a few people making all the decisions."

Council meetings are open. Members have looked over grant proposals before they meet and talk with applicants about their projects.

Members from colleges and universities abstain from discussion of projects that involve people from their institution. No council member receives payment for involvement with a project.

About 90 percent of the grant applications are funded. Albers said that is because he and his staff talk with applicants before they file and most of the applications that wouldn't get funded are weeded out.

Sponsors of projects range from groups such as the Velva Lion's Club and Rugby Sons of Norway to groups with more exotic names, like the Prairie People's Institute for Culture and Religion.

Projects are evaluated for effectiveness and random audits of expenses and budgets are done. Albers said that to his knowledge, there has never been any abuse of council money or padding of accounts.

Some groups are formed just to receive grants and sponsor projects. Albers said that humanists who present projects do not receive the fee they might if they were consulting on a program, and are required to donate time and provide labor just as others are.