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# Cultural Agencies Dodge a Bullet

## NEA, NEH Avert Budget Cuts Amid House Threats of Closure

By Jacqueline Trescott

Washington Post Staff Writer

The National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities averted additional budget cuts yesterday, while some Republicans renewed their pledge to abolish the agencies.

The NEA would get \$99.5 million in 1997, the same as this year. The NEH would get \$105.4 million, almost \$5 million less than its current appropriation. After Republicans took control of Congress in early 1995, many conservatives, following the lead of Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), made dramatic reductions in the budgets of the two federal agencies. The opponents have long contended public money should not be used to support art, particularly works that some find sacrilegious or offensive.

Since the early '90s, the NEA has had its budget slashed 43 percent and the NEH, 41 percent.

Yesterday, as the full House considered the fiscal 1997 appropriations for the NEH, Rep. John Shadegg (R-Ariz.) offered an amendment to trim an additional \$12 million from the agency's budget. "This is a reasonable proposal that keeps us on track" toward phasing out the agency in three years, Shadegg said.

Shadegg argued the government should not

support the humanities because the private sector last year gave \$50 million to such projects. The bulk of that support came from the Mellon Foundation and several other private groups that have said they don't expect to increase their support of the humanities or arts because of competing social needs.

Before Shadegg's amendment was defeated 168 to 254, Rep. Sidney Yates (D-Ill.) said last year's agreement between the House leadership and a group of Republican freshmen to phase out the NEA at the end of fiscal 1997 did not include the NEH. Shadegg, however, said an informal agreement about a longer phase-out for the NEH had been struck at that time.

At one point, Rep. Philip Crane (R-Ill.) took the floor to say he was not asking for total elimination of the NEA this year because he had been assured by Rep. Bob Livingston (R-La.), the chairman of the appropriations committee, that the agency would not be funded after next year. Rep. Jim Kolbe (R-Ariz.), a member of the appropriations subcommittee, assured him that was the case.

In other action during the floor debate, Rep. Peter Hoekstra (R-Mich.) withdrew his amendment to cut the NEA's budget by \$31,500, the amount equivalent to a 1995 grant given to Cheryl Dunye, a lesbian filmmaker. Hoekstra said the government shouldn't pay for work that

includes sexually explicit material. He later dropped the amendment. His noncombative action, he said, was intended to smooth the way for eliminating all money for the agency in 1998.

The film that drew Hoekstra's wrath is "The Watermelon Woman." Dunye, an African American woman, applied to the NEA in November 1994 for a grant to make a feature film on a mythical black actress of the 1930s. The application detailed the lesbian content of the story line, saying the film's purpose was to explore "the specificity of identity, the empowerment of black women—lesbians and straight—and the rewriting of American history."

The NEA approved the grant in June 1995, months before Congress ordered the agency to eliminate most individual grants. Dunye's work has received several awards, and the film is scheduled to open the San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival tonight.

Yesterday NEA Chairman Jane Alexander said the grant to Dunye followed the NEA's guidelines of nondiscrimination and rewarding excellence. "I thought it was a very fine first film," said Alexander. She said she didn't find the brief sex scene offensive.

Faced with opponents who are determined to eliminate the NEA, Alexander said she would be repeating her view that not all art is meaningful to everyone. "Congress has got to understand this is a very broad nation," she said. "For us it has always been a year-to-year situation, and I will continue this same urging next year."