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## Appropriations (1996): News Article 03

Jacqueline Trescott

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# Senate Panel Has Bad Budget News for Arts Agency

By Jacqueline Trescott  
Washington Post Staff Writer

After delivering a friendly warning that the National Endowment for the Arts budget for next year would most likely remain flat, both Republican and Democratic senators said yesterday at a hearing on the agency that they approved of the reforms it had undertaken.

"The changes are steps in the right direction," said Sen. Conrad Burns (R-Mont.), a member of the Appropriations subcommittee that oversees the NEA's funding.

In her annual review, Chairman Jane Alexander told the committee the agency is processing one-fourth as many applications as in the past, is making fewer and smaller grants, and is searching for supplemental funds from the private sector. In addition, she said, the agency has overhauled its grant-making structure and eliminated some funding categories. It is able to fund only "the best of the best," she said.

After being told that the 1996 funding of \$99.5 million was the most her agency was likely to receive for 1997, Alexander responded that the \$136 million requested by the administration was barely enough. After last year's reduction of 39 percent, she said, each American's contribution to the arts amounted to "38 cents, less than the cost of a candy bar." That, she testified, "puts the agency's purchasing power in real dollars back to where it was in 1972—nearly 25 years ago. It is a cut that far exceeds that imposed upon almost every other agency in government."

Furthermore, she said, the NEA cuts contribute to an already tenuous funding situation. "Half of performing arts organizations are in some kind of deficit," said Alexander.

The subcommittee, chaired by Sen. Slade Gorton (R-Wash.), listened sympathetically, citing programs in their own states that had benefited from NEA funding.

Alexander warned that may not always be the case. "The average basic state grant dropped by over

\$130,000 this year, hitting the smallest states hard," she said. "While some states have increased their contribution in recent years, overall state appropriations for arts-related activities are down in real dollars by approximately 25 percent since 1990."

Though he praised the endowment's performance, Gorton pressed Alexander on the agency's position on the funding of material that is protected by the First Amendment but still objectionable to many Americans.

"New art is often difficult art," Alexander responded. "You wouldn't want to cut out total controversy in any case because it is an expression of the variety of who we are as a people. Nonetheless, once in a while, we can make mistakes."

When Gorton asked her to restate her views, Alexander replied that the agency has "enough prohibition right now. We do not fund obscenity, as defined by a court of law. I think that is sufficient." Thanking her for her candor, Gorton said her response was "troubling" but did not elaborate.