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Waiting For the Ax To Fall

Arts Council Girds for Possible Budget Cuts

By Carla Hall

The National Council on the Arts began its quarterly meeting here yesterday as part pep rally, part defense of the National Endowment for the Arts — the agency it advises — which is now threatened with 50 percent budget cuts, the first in its 15-year history.

"We have to make the strongest case for the least reductions," said Council member and folk singer/actor Theodore Bikel. "We don't fund organizations, we seed them. We give them about 10 percent of their budgets — if that. We disseminate the arts across the width and breadth of this country, and this is a huge country."

At a meeting marked by the appearances of a powerful Democratic congressman and an influential Republican transition leader, what the Council wanted to know was whether or not the Reagan administration would adopt the 50 percent cut — \$88 million — in the NEA budget proposed by David Stockman's Office of Management and Budget.

Robert S. Carter, who headed the Reagan transition team for the NEA, told the Council at yesterday morning's closed session that the president and White House staff had just been examining the proposed budgets for the NEA and a variety of other agencies.

Carter would not speculate on how much of a cut Reagan would finally recommend. "The Arts Endowment should assume they're going to get some cuts and just hope they don't hurt too much. As I told [the Council] this morning, Dave Stockman was originally for abolishing the endowments. But then he proposed a 50 percent cut. At least he's moving in the right direction."

Carter said he expected Reagan to take budget papers, including those on the NEA, to Camp David with him this weekend for further consideration. Carter and others said they hoped they would learn the final proposed budget for the NEA on Tuesday.

"There have been telegrams, calls, messages of concern that have gotten to Reagan concerning the endowment cuts," said Carter after his talk at the Council. "Key members of Congress and governors have been meeting with him this week. I'm sure some of them have been talking about the endowment. When Bill Milliken, the governor of Michigan, met with the president this week, I'm sure he didn't waste any time getting to that issue. And I understand Sid Yates [Democratic representative from Illinois] wrote Reagan a letter."

Carter said he had talked to presidential counselor Ed Meese "and other appropriate officials. I told them to take a good look at the endowment before they do anything."

Rep. Yates, the influential chairman of the House appropriations subcommittee that approves the budgets of both the arts and the humanities endowments, made an unusual appearance yesterday to have a private lunch with the Council members.

"He said the ball is not in the Congress's court right now," said one Council member after the lunch. "He told us we ought to proceed at full speed until we know what's what. We shouldn't be intimidated by looming cuts. To me, that means plan your programs as if you had all your money."

But the NEA plans a closed meeting with the Council and agency program heads to discuss priorities in the budget, since it is unlikely that the agency will receive the full \$175 million that President