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So the bill, in effect, would not only give Lecht the power to unappoint people appointed by the governor, but would block the governor from filling two upcoming openings.

Lecht, in a recent interview, said he did not ask Harwood for the current bill, but simply "bitched to him" that some members were not attending enough meetings, particularly Harwood's law partner, state Sen. Stephen J. Fortunato Jr. As for the provision giving the board's officers an extra term, Lecht said he doesn't think that pertains to him and considers it a mistake.

"I assume he [Harwood] was just reenacting the old amendment, but instead he said "officers," Lecht explained. "But then I thought about it and said, Jesus Christ, that's a stroke of genius, he doesn't even know what he did."

"Then I said, 'I wonder if the governor has seen this?' It could be the best thing that ever happened to him, quite frankly. Now he doesn't have to make a choice."

When asked about the bill, Harwood said it was intended only to keep qualified people on the board. He was at a loss for words, though, when asked about the provision giving his friend an extra term, saying only that "a lot of these bills haven't been gone over with a fine-tooth comb."

As for last year's bill, Harwood could not remember if he had in fact amended it, but said if he had, it "must have been a favor for Rocco."

But Leonard Clingham, chief of law revision for the secretary of state, said the other day that the bill is "definitely special-interest legislation," designed to benefit Lecht and the two other officers.

LECHT IS SITTING in the study of his posh home in a Warwick development. The room looks vaguely like the lair of The Great White Hunter, with carved African masks on the walls, a stuffed cobra poised to strike, and a witch doctor's staff. There is a large tortoise shell propped against an empty aquarium, the octopus died.

He's wearing tinted glasses, a green alligator sweater, and talking about his sizable collection of paintings and prints. But he sounds more like a marketing analyst than an art connoisseur.

"I can't understand artists," he says bluntly. "Artists have to learn how to protect themselves, they're an industry. "Too many of them, besides being broke, are afraid to invest in themselves. They think because they're so great, and most of them are, they think the world should recognize them. They say, 'Here I am in Rhode Island; come find me.' But they've got to get out there and tell the world, 'Here I am.'"

Lecht says he's a lot like his mother. She was "a joiner, a joiner" who normally worked her way to the presidency."
Dan Lecht calls the shots

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He also doesn't waste time when going after the things he wants.

Just before being elected chairman, Lecht was put in charge of giving out the Governor's Arts Awards, $500 and a bronze medal given to outstanding local artists. The award that year went to his close friend Walter Feldman, a Brown University printer and painter whose work Lecht's company had printed.

"Sometimes I act very directly," he said. "This is my nature, to do it, get it over with, and go on to something else."

"I called a few people and said, 'Look, I'm chairman of the Governor's Arts Award Committee. Give me five names in my mind and come up with one I think is a major person. Would you like to consider him?' "

"Christ, if you let stuff like that go, it never gets done."

BUT HIS aggressiveness has more than once earned him a reputation of being domineering. A member of the panel that decided last May on how much money should go to the state's larger arts groups said Lecht definitely ran the show.

"My feeling at the end of that weekend," this person said the other day, "was that I might as well not have been there, because what Dan Lecht wanted, he got."

"I felt it did not make a bit of difference what anybody else said."

And Lecht was blasted recently by a couple of his colleagues for the way the resignation of Diane Disney was handled. Lecht, who reportedly pressured her into stepping down because of differences in the way the agency should be run, angered at least two council members by not consulting them beforehand or calling a meeting.

Said council member Mary Gammino: "It was "like the Saturday Night Massacre.""

There has been a longstanding debate in the community as to who should serve on the arts council: A lot of artists, for example, think that they have not been adequately represented in the past. There are, in fact, only two artists currently on the board.

When asked if more artists should be on the council, Lecht hedged a bit, saying, "Everyone should be on that board." He went on, say, though: "The artists tend to be biased, and when voting on grants, would favor their own art forms to the exclusion of others."

"Let's say I consider you an artist, and we put you on the council as a musician," he said. "If you were a normal person, your inclination would be toward the performing arts, so what would happen to the visual arts?"

"Therefore, is it better to have somebody with a strong opinion about one segment of the arts community, or is it better to have someone with a general overall opinion who can be fair like a judge?"

When it was pointed out that a number of council members also sit on the boards of arts organizations, and that this conceivably could result in preferential treatment toward those groups, Lecht said he didn't think so.

"When we speak of Rites and Reason, George Bass isn't even in the room. And in some cases it can work exactly the opposite, because of the close ties to organizations, we may scrutinize them even stronger."

But the agency's records don't bear this out. Minutes for the May meeting of last year indicate Bass moved the motion to approve $37,660 in grants to arts groups, including $1,500 to Rites and Reason. And at the June meeting, Ernest Falciglia, a member of the Rhode Island Philharmonic board, moved to approve $187,500 in grants to five groups, one of them being the orchestra.

LECHT HAS A small jungle growing in his basement, with about a dozen screeching cockatoos and parrots. He used to have monkeys but they got unruly, so he gave them to the Slater Park Zoo.

He often sits down there at night in a wicker throne, the kind used in Schweppes commercials.

In the front hall, he keeps the framed invitation he got to the White House when President Carter appointed him to the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts: A letter from a Reagan aide saying he has been removed from the board is stored in a nearby coat closet.

"I'm not used to getting fired," he quips.

On the Arts Council facing the possibilities of cuts at both the state and federal levels, Lecht said the agency is doing everything it can to economize, that he has explored but abandoned the possibility of an arts lottery, and is considering asking a large corporation, say an oil company, to put $25 million in escrow and use the interest for the arts.

On how he came to be appointed to the council, Lecht said he let it be known years ago, when he was a member of Artists Internationale, that "I like opera, and I like other things, and I think I'll ask to be put on the state Council on the Arts."

"I pursued it," said Lecht, "I campaigned for it. I'm not going to con anybody."

AND ON WHAT contribution he, an experienced businessman, can make to the agency, Lecht said, "A lot of people talk about what should be done, and they have good ideas, but they don't have the guts to do what they have to do to make them work."

"I think that's what I have, enough gumption to make my feelings, or the council's feelings, felt in a manner which is going to put the art community where it belongs."

"I'm vocal, I'm not one to stay back. And I think quite frankly, in this way I am, I'm an asset."

'I have enough gumption to make my feelings felt in a manner which is going to put the art community where it belongs.'