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Arts council, governor vie for council's unspent funds

PROVIDENCE — The State Council on the Arts — rocked this week by allegations that it has been holding secret meetings and that it has violated its guidelines for awarding grant money — met yesterday to decide how to award up to $20,000 in unspent funds.

In an uneventful, 30-minute session held at the agency's Wickenden Street headquarters, council chairman Daniel Lecht appointed a committee to review groups that received money from the agency this year and asked that it report back with recommendations on how any leftover money should be spent.

But Governor Garrahy is writing the agency asking that all surplus money be returned to the state, according to Lorraine Silberthau, a press aide to the governor. Mrs. Silberthau said Garrahy told her this on Wednesday.

Lecht, after yesterday's meeting, said he knew nothing of the governor's request.

THE AGENCY has been accused of meeting in secret for the past two years and of holding a private luncheon last week where it was decided how to hand out up to $30,000 that would revert to the state if not spent by the end of the fiscal year. Mary Gammino-Antaya, a council member who attended the luncheon, spilled out the details of the meeting in a resignation letter to Governor Garrahy dated April 13.

Mrs. Gammino-Antaya wrote Garrahy that she considered this both a violation of the state's open meetings law and the agency's guidelines for giving out grants because the money was not being awarded competitively.

There was no mention of Mrs. Gammino-Antaya's charges at the meeting or the seeming discrepancy in extra money.

Lecht told the board that it may be a month before he knows exactly how much is left in the budget, but that it could be as much as $20,000 in "state funds not picked up by organizations that didn't meet the terms of their grants."

Normally, the council gives out grants only after proposals have been submitted and reviewed by experts who make recommendations to the politically appointed board. Asked if the agency had the authority to give out funds without following this procedure, Lecht said in a phone conversation after the meeting that he was not certain.

Pressed on the issue, he hung up. Before doing so he said, "I gave you a prepared statement to print (in response to Mrs. Gammino-Antaya's resignation) and you didn't print it, so I'm not talking to you."