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Arts council accused again of awarding grants in private; member quits, cites abuses of power

BY CHANNING GRAY
Journal-Bulletin Arts Writer

PROVIDENCE — A member of the state Council on the Arts has accused the agency's chairman, Daniel Lecht, of engaging in "appealing abuses of power," and has asserted that the council holds secret meetings and violates its own guidelines for awarding grant money.

Mary Gammino-Antaya, a member of the council for two years, said she is so dismayed by council activities, and especially Lecht's behavior, that she has decided to resign. She explained her reasons in a letter, dated April 13, to Governor Gerry Brown.

Mrs. Gammino-Antaya said she decided to resign last week after council members met privately at the Brown University Faculty Club to decide how to distribute $30,000 that would revert to the state if it were not spent by the end of the fiscal year.

Some of that money, she said, is to be given to arts groups that have direct ties to council members.

"TWO MONTHS AGO, the arts council, which then had been accused of violating the state's Open Meetings Law, assured the attorney general's office that it never again would discuss the awarding of grants in private."

Last Tuesday's luncheon at the Faculty Club violated "both the spirit and intent" of that promise, Mrs. Gammino-Antaya's letter to the governor said.

She wrote that Lecht said the private meeting "was to be called a luncheon for friends." He also explained how the council would be able to camouflage the decisions it made privately, she said.

He told the council members that when they met Thursday at their next public meeting, there would be "no discussion, but that we would vote for a budget that incorporated the funds — the allocations themselves would not be mentioned by name," the letter said.

Lecht declined to comment about Mrs. Gammino-Antaya's accusations, Elaborating on her letter, Mrs. Gammino-Antaya said that, at the luncheon, Lecht presented a list of six or seven arts groups that he thought should share the extra money. The council made a few adjustments, and approved the list, she said.

The decisions were made at the private luncheon without "any public notification, any hearing, any professional panel review or any competition, despite our publicly adopted grant guidelines," she wrote to the governor.

SHE SAID one of the proposed recipients is Rites and Reason, Brown University's black theater company, whose director, George Bass, has been a council member for a long time. Bass was not at the luncheon, she said.

Other groups on the list, Mrs. Gammino-Antaya said, included the Providence Opera Theater, the Rhode Island Historical Society, Concerts on the Island, the Children's Museum in Pawtucket and the New England Foundation for the Arts in Cambridge, Mass.

Ernest Falciglia, another council member who attended the luncheon, said he viewed it as an "informational meeting" to discuss arts groups that might get surplus aid.

But he said he was not aware that any final decisions were made, and he added that he was not even certain about the amount of money at stake.

"I can defend the essence of it," Falciglia said of the meeting. "It's public money, and if there are groups that deserve more money, it is incumbent upon us to give it to them."