3-28-1983


Channing Gray

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The Rhode Island State Council on the Arts is busy arming itself with facts and figures to fend off an attack by Republican members of the General Assembly who have said the agency is run inefficiently. The party wants to dismantle the council to save money.

The Republican charges surfaced a couple of weeks ago, when the GOP released its own version of next year's state budget, one that would trim $8.8 million from Governor Garry's spending plan and reduce income and gasoline taxes. Among the list of cost-cutting measures was the elimination of the arts council for a savings of $356,616.

The arts council was singled out, said Senate Minority Leader Lila M. Sapinsley, when a Rhode Island College economist hired by the GOP found figures indicating that out of the agency's $20 million budget, roughly $387,000 went for personnel costs. "When he saw that," said Senator Sapinsley, "a red flag went up."

Understandably, the GOP's position has drawn fire from arts supporters who see it as the work of anti-culture Philistines. But Senator Sapinsley said that is not the case.

"It's not that the Republicans feel the arts aren't important," Senator Sapinsley said the other day, "it's just that we want to make sure the state's arts dollars are spent on the arts, not a bureaucracy."

Senator Sapinsley concedes, though, that the GOP may have goofed when it thought that it could eliminate the state's $350,000 contribution to the council, that is, the personnel costs, and keep the $400,000 that the agency gets from the federal government, primarily the National Endowment for the Arts. The endowment, you see, requires the state to match the federal grant.

In an effort to clarify the matter, Sapinsley wrote several concerned arts supporters last week that "our solution was admittedly simplistic and, I now understand, not feasible, since National Endowment Funds come to us on a dollar for dollar match. So be it. But if we are going to spend $350,000 of our taxpayers' money this year to get $350,000 of Uncle Sam's taxpayers' money, the Republicans want most of the $700,000 to directly support artistic programs. We do not believe this is the case at present."

As for the arts council, it questions the GOP's personnel figures (the council's are closer to $200,000). The council adds that members of the state's minority party don't seem to understand that a lot of the money it spends on salaries is for people who run federally financed programs, programs that in turn generate local matching money.

Agency director Christina White, said, for example, that the head of the council's education program is paid about $17,000 in state money, plus about $4,000 in benefits, to hire artists with a $60,000 federal grant that this year has brought in another $67,000.

"There appears to be an assumption," said Miss White, "that all we do down here is give out grants."