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Independent Corporation Weighed as Arts Agency

By GRACE GLUECK

A plan to replace the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities with an independent agency similar to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting has been under discussion among White House officials. The idea, which stresses private support for the arts, comes in the wake of the Reagan Administration's proposal to cut the budget of the Endowments by 40 percent, and is still only in the talking stage.

Alexander Kir, special assistant to the President in the Office of Public Liaison, in the areas of arts, humanities, education and culture, said yesterday, "It's my understanding that there has been some informal discussion of the idea, but there's no hard, fixed policy proposal." And Robert S. Carter, head of a private election Reagan transition committee to evaluate the arts endowment, acknowledged that there have been "informal" conversations on the subject, but said that there has been no overall discussion with Congress, which would have to pass legislation. "We think that Congress will carry through our proposal for a 40 percent budget cut, and the eventual establishment of a $1.5 billion annual cap for the Endowments," he says.

A Study May Be Coming

Some Washington officials, who have heard versions of the discussion but would not comment for the record, say that the Administration has been making a decision on appointing a task force in May to study the structure and function of the two Endowments. When the task force would primarily consider, however, for reconciliation in the Congress, would be the setting up of a private nonprofit organization similar to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. It would receive federal and private support, as does the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and would administer arts and humanities funding.

Neither Mr. Bakshian nor Mr. Carter would discuss the purpose of such a corporation, but both believe it could be attributed to the Administration. The Reagan Administration is known to believe that under the Carter regime, the Endowments had become "insulated." An arts corporation would presumably be run by a Presidential-appointed board of directors, each serving a six-year term, who in turn would designate a chairman from among their ranks. This differs from the Endowment structure in that their chairman are appointed by the President; both the Endowment chairman and the President also appoint the 12-member Presidential appointees, each serving a six-year term.

Another View of Isolation

In addition, unlike the Endowments, which are financed annually by Congress, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting is financed by Congress on a two-year basis. For these reasons, proponents of the corporation idea believe that arts financing would be more insulated from political interference under the structure of a corporation.

However, the members of the Endowments' advisory councils are also appointed for six-year terms by the President, so they could be fired, says those who favor retaining the Endowment structures, that a board of directors appointed by the President and reappointed from time to time as their terms expire, has no more insulation than the Endowments. What is likely, if a corporate structure is set up, would make it easy for the Government to get out of the arts-funding business, and put the corporations in competition with other agencies. This was the main reason for the refusal of Agriculture Secretary John Block to say that the Reagan Administration official who does not favor the idea.

Dissolution of the two Endowments, a procedure that would require action by Congress, would also allow the Reagan Administration to get rid, in one fell swoop, of programs and personnel—such as the Expansion Arts Program, which finances projects for minority, blue collar, rural and low-income communities—that are distasteful to it, a possible third motive.

Not Entirely Opposed

The corporation suggestion has been met with a groundswell of approval among arts officials. "I kind of think it would work," says William Krit, a member of the National Council on the Arts, overseeing body for the arts endowment, who is Midwest Regional Manager, North American Governmental Affairs, for the Ford Motor Company. "It's worked for public broadcasting. If this is a way we can bring increased attention to the need for arts funding, why not?" And Barry Sussman, New York City's Commissioner of Cultural Affairs, said: "It's an idea we would like to see at least debated. Anything is better than hearing the Endowments.

But others cite such dangers as the possibility of the Federal Government shed its responsibility for the arts. "If such a corporation were set up, it would make it easy for the Government to get out of the arts-funding business, and put the corporations in competition with other agencies," said one Arts Council official who does not favor the idea.