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Charges of racism lead arts panel to OK Black Heritage unit funds

BY CHANNING GRAY
Journal-Bulletin Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE — In a stormy, at times bitter meeting, the state Council on the Arts yesterday overturned its decision to withhold financing from the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society after a council member and a society staffer asserted that the grant denial was racially motivated.

At issue was whether the heritage society is an arts group or a historical one, but emotions got the better of several council members during the two-hour session, held at the agency's Wickenden Street office.

GEORGE BASS, one of two black members of the council, said that to deny support to the society would "not only be unjust but precipitate unnecessary confrontation because it's a racial issue."

After voting to consider funds for the society, Bass and council member Anne Utter had a brief but heated exchange.

"What about white organizations?" asked Mrs. Utter, implying that race should not be a factor in deciding grants.

"They don't need" the money, Bass snapped.

At this point, council chairman Dan Lecht pleaded for order, saying loudly, "This is a formal meeting; let's act like we're at a formal meeting."

The council decided last year that the heritage society and the Rhode Island Historical Society would no longer get general operating support because they are not primarily arts groups. They can, however, apply for money for such art projects as exhibits or performances.

Most of the operating grants for the next fiscal year — awards totaling about $260,000 — will be given out today and tomorrow during meetings at the Biltmore Plaza.

About two weeks ago, the council wrote to Rowena Stewart, Black Heritage Society director, reminding her that her organization was no longer eligible for this money under the agency's guidelines. Mrs. Stewart was unable to attend yesterday's meeting, but the society's research director, Rhett Jones, came in her place.

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