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Arts council is accused of secret grants decisions

By CHANNING GRAY
Journal-Bulletin Arts Writer

PROVIDENCE — A member of the state Council on the Arts has charged the agency's chairman, Daniel Lecht, with "appalling abuses of power" and contends 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, says she is so dismayed by council activities and especially Lecht's behavior that she has decided to resign, spelling out her reasons in a letter to Governor Garrahy, dated April 13.

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

Some of that money, she said, is intended for arts groups with direct ties to council members.

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

The Faculty Club luncheon, held last Tuesday, violated "both the spirit and intent" of that promise, she wrote.

In her letter to the governor, Mrs. Gammino-Antaya 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

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flag the decisions it made privately, she said.

He told the council members that when they convened 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 on Mrs. Gammino-Antaya's charges.

Elaborating on her letter, Mrs. Gammino-Antaya said that at the luncheon Lecht presented a list of 6S 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 made at the private luncheon came 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, is a longtime council member.

Bass was not at the luncheon, she said.

Another proposed recipient is the Westerly Center for the Arts, she said. Anne Utter, a member of the board at the center, is also a council member. She was not at the meeting either, according to Mrs. Gammino-Antaya.

Other groups on the list, said Mrs. Gammino-Antaya, 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.

Another council member who attended the luncheon, Ernest Fal-
ciglia, viewed it as "an informational meeting to discuss arts groups that might get surplus funds."

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

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

The council has 12 members, all appointed by the governor. In the current fiscal year, it has received about $390,000 from the state and more than $400,000 from the federal government.

This year it has given about $360,000 to a broad spectrum of arts groups, from Trinity Square Repertory Company and the Rhode Island Philharmonic to small groups such as the Puppet Workshop and Looking Glass Theater.

* * *

ACCORDING TO Mrs. Gammino-
Antaya, the council members at the luncheon, besides herself, Lecht and Falciglia, were Phyllis Stanzler, Dorothy Licht, Mahler Ryder, Norma Merolla and Roberta Holland.

Those not attending, in addition to Bass and Mrs. Utter, were Marjo-
rie Lee and former state Sen. Stephen Fortunato.

This is not the first time Mrs. Gammino-Antaya has been highly critical of Lecht. In February, 1982, she publicly blasted him for firing Diane Disney, the council director, without a formal board vote. Because only some members were polled by phone, she called it the "Saturday night massacre."

In her letter to the governor, she mentioned Lecht's efforts to get legislation passed that would extend his term as chairman, give him the authority to dismiss council members and reduce the quorum. These efforts, she wrote, were an "appalling abuse of power."

"I can no longer tolerate seeing good people malignned, the arts demeaned and your judgment ridiculed," she wrote Garrahy.