

NEA faces an uncertain future

NEA

on the cutting block



GINGRICH

The NEA is mentioned for possible budget cuts in an addendum to the balanced-budget amendment, according to the Arizona Republic of Jan. 22. The amendment passed in the U.S. House of Representatives Thursday and will be considered this week in the U.S. Senate.

House Speaker Republican Newt Gingrich called for an elimination of the agency's funds in a January 10 article in the New York Times. The article says "Newt Gingrich ... has made no secrets of his antipathy to the longstanding system of federal grants to arts organizations and artists."

NEA



The NEA receives \$167.4 million of government funding, which is two-one hundredths of 1 percent of the federal budget — 2 percent less than last year.

If its budget were cut, the NEA would grant less money to fewer organizations, including many here at home. The NEA directly funds the Omaha Magic Theatre, the Joslyn Art Museum, the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, the Omaha Symphony and others. Hundreds of other art organizations and programs in Nebraska are indirectly funded.

NEA facts

- The NEA costs each American \$.64 a year
- More than \$1.3 million people are employed in not-for-profit arts industries

The NEA receives \$167,356 in federal funding (1995), which is broken down into (\$ in thousands):

- Arts in Education — 7,110
- Dance — 6,690
- Design — 3,260
- Expansion Arts — 5,290
- Folk and Traditional Arts — 3,375
- International — 805
- Literature — 4,297
- Local Arts Agencies — 2,065
- Media Arts — 9,540
- Museum — 9,235
- Music — 10,700
- Opera-Musical Theater — 5,185
- Presenting — 5,035
- Theater — 8,155
- Visual Arts — 4,850
- Advancement — 3,100
- Challenge — 12,670
- Arts for Youth — 400
- State and Regional — 31,075
- Underserved Communities Set-Aside — 8,475
- Policy Planning and Research — 650
- Administration — 24,296
- Computer Placement — 900

By Paula Lavigne
Senior Reporter

The 30th anniversary of the National Endowment for the Arts, founded in 1965, may be the last.

The NEA is mentioned for possible budget cuts in an addendum to the balanced-budget amendment, according to the Jan. 22 edition of the Arizona Republic. The amendment was passed in the U.S. House of Representatives Thursday and will be considered this week in the U.S. Senate.

House Speaker Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., called for an elimination of the agency's funds in a Jan. 10 article in the New York Times.

The article says "Newt Gingrich ... has made no secrets of his antipathy to the long-standing system of federal grants to arts organizations and artists."

The article says that Gingrich and congressional allies had "vowed to pare, if not end, the subsidies" allocated by the NEA.

The NEA receives \$167.4 million of government funding, which is two-one hundredths of 1 percent of the federal budget — 2 percent less than last year.

Artists submit grant proposals to the NEA. Broken up into panels, the NEA examines the requests and bases its decision on a strict set of requirements and values.

If its budget were cut, the NEA would grant less money to fewer organizations.

Although rarely mentioned in the light of welfare and balanced budget issues, the proposed cut opened a wound in the arts community.

It's a wound that has reached beyond the national level and one that has affected artists in Nebraska.

The NEA directly funds the Omaha

Magic Theatre, the Joslyn Art Museum, the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, the Omaha Symphony and others. Hundreds of other art organizations and programs in Nebraska are indirectly funded.

Three Nebraska arts leaders are willing to lead the way and fight back.

Right to Choose

Years ago, when they were eating out of the garbage bins behind the French Cafe and living off \$10 a week, the members of the Omaha Magic Theatre knew how to "rough it."

Now the theatre is the only NEA federally-funded theater in Omaha. But if funds are cut, Director JoAnn Schmidman said they still would survive.

"It's not like businessmen who sell insurance," she said. "We have to create. Money or no money, the creation will continue."

But young artists may not have this determination, she said, and will give up. This is where the danger in budget cuts lies, she said, which puts America's culture at risk.

"Countries are known and remembered for their cultures. Think about the Greek and Roman cultures and what do you have? The remains of their poetry, pottery, weaving and paintings," she said. "... And we're messing with that? We're saying it's not useful?"

Schmidman said the NEA cuts were unjustified as a means to downsize government because the NEA was a small part of the budget.

"It's a tiny arm of the government, it's not even a major arm," she said, "and they want to amputate that?"

President Clinton supports the NEA, she said, but that may not be

enough. The opposition used a few controversial grant recipients to make a case against the entire organization, she said.

Schmidman was referring to a performance at the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis by experimental artist Ron Athey. Athey used human blood during his theatrical representation of a man with AIDS. The Food and Drug Administration approved the performance.

"Rather than hearing the positives and the enormous amount of positive art the NEA has supported over its lifespan — the symphonies, the operas, ballets and theater — you hear about one weird incident that some congressman, who's never been there, gets wind of."

For the future

The NEA receives \$.64 per taxpayer in America. In Australia, the arts receive about \$12 per person.

Amy Lamphere, director of Wagon Train Project, which brings international performing artists into Lincoln, said other countries were known for their support of the arts.

When Lamphere was in the Netherlands, she said, she saw a model country that supported its artists.

"There isn't a question mark in that nation that artists are important to their country's health and well-being," she said.

Explaining the purpose of arts in a society is a difficult task, she said. Lamphere said it would take an extra three hours a day to become a lobbyist or activist, but those three hours may be a lifesaving effort.

"People in Nebraska don't know how serious this is," she said. "I didn't even know how serious this is."

People are not as politically active as they should be, because they are

concerned with short-term ramifications, she said.

"If the NEA goes away in our lifetime, you won't notice much of a difference," she said. "But it will make our children and our children's children much poorer, and when they come up head-to-head with kids raised on culture, they won't be prepared."

Culture teaches children skills and builds self-esteem, she said. Without it, Lamphere said, America will be "a marketplace filled with Nintendo experts."

Lamphere said people who said the NEA should be left to market forces to prove that people support it were shortsighted and uninformed.

"If you really want a B-52 bomber, you really don't know you want a B-52 bomber until your house blows up," she said. "The government has to act as a caretaker. There are some things that the government should have protection over to make our country great."

"We don't really know we need social security," Lamphere said, "but we want it, and we damn well better get it."

Direction

As director of the Nebraska Arts Council, Jennifer Severin Clark said she knew the power of political advocacy.

Most of the art organizations, art education and multi-cultural programs in Nebraska are funded by the council, which receives \$850,000 a year from the NEA.

The council has generated a lot of community support through their "Say Yes to the Arts" campaign, Clark said. She said people were writing their congressional representatives and writing letters to the editor about the NEA.

Arts contribute to tourism, economic vitality, urban renewal and youth-at-risk programs, Clark said.

"They're good for you, and they're good for your kids," she said. "They're a positive approach to some of our problems."

Roll call

The NEA's reauthorization was up for review before the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources Thursday.

Virginia Cohen, NEA public affairs specialist, said both Democrats and Republicans offered suggestions on how to save the NEA.

Sen. Paul Simon, D-Ill., said less than 40 of the endowment's 100,000 grants were deemed controversial, Cohen said.

"Simon said, 'I believed I made at least 100,000 votes in my career, and I've made at least 30 or 40 mistakes in there,'" Cohen said.

Sen. Mike DeWine, R-Ohio, questioned the \$15.4 million the NEA spent on administration, Cohen said, but Alexander said that \$167 million "wasn't enough to begin with anyhow."

Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass., reminded Alexander of the examples of how arts were helping curb substance abuse, Cohen said.

She said Kennedy cited one instance of children in a rough Massachusetts neighborhood who were so enraptured by a presentation from a member of the Boston Conservatory that "you could hear a pin drop."

During the hearing, NEA Chairman Jane Alexander defended the endowment, citing NEA budget cuts, streamlining and strengthening the role of state arts agencies.