

Funding For the Arts: You Can Make A Difference

By Leida Snow

Faxes have been flying, as steps are taken in Congress towards approving funds to operate the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities in Fiscal Year '97. We've all been here before: Congressional support for the Endowments continues to erode, and we're asked to put as many fingers into the dike as possible.

What we have here, as the Oscar Hammerstein lyric once put it, is "a puzzlement." People who care about the arts and humanities in this country have not begun to take control of the issue and hold politicians responsible for their positions, yet that is the only way we will ever see a change in government's attitude towards arts funding.

Simply put, politicians know there is a dedicated minority whose agenda includes the elimination of government support for the arts. They say their votes rest on whether a given politician is with them or not.

On the other hand, politicians know that arts advocates tend to look at a broader

picture. They may know that so-and-so isn't with them, but he or she is "good" on other issues, and they don't make the arts a crucial test of their support. Well, what would you do, if you knew there'd be a price to pay by going in one direction and no downside to going the other? You'd do just as many moderate members of Congress (or state legislatures, or city councils) do: You'd make nice to the arts advocates, but you wouldn't really work to help them. Your actual support would be with the other side.

Recently, I was at a Town Hall Meeting hosted by U.S. Representatives Carolyn Maloney (D-NY) and Jerrold Nadler (D-NY). It is a given that no matter what the published subject of any Town Hall Meeting, constituents bring up anything they want: They talk about issues of concern to them. At this meeting, a man took me aside, knowing that I am Arts Adviser to Congressman Nadler. He was very upset about what was happening in Washington.

I suggested that since there were two Members of Congress in the room, he

should address his concerns to them. Maloney has been consistently supportive of federal arts funding, and Nadler has been a leader on the issue. But the man said he felt intimidated, because they were discussing "important" things.

Help! If arts advocates don't think federal arts funding is important, why should anyone else?

And here's where we come to my hohum reaction to the latest barrage of faxes. It's not that those alerts aren't valuable: They are. And it's not that we shouldn't try to make our voices heard as legislation works its way through the Congress: We should.

But the only way to change the debate is to get the arts and humanities into the debate *before* legislation is proposed; in other words, to get politicians on the record while they are running for office. To raise their consciousness—and educate the American public—so that when the votes are counted, the arts have already weighed in.

We're told every election is crucial; the coming one could be a watershed. Republicans say they received a mandate in 1994; Democrats claim the last election was meant only to throw out a complacent party and to give the other one a chance. Democrats say most voters had never heard of the *Contract With America*, that no one realized the extremes to which Republicans would go, attacking many federal safeguards and trying to destroy the NEA.

Critics point out that Republicans realized many of their goals without expressly passing legislation; by, for example, passing spending bills funding departments and agencies that the majority did not favor at significantly lower percentages of the '95 budget levels, effectively gutting them. They say that no one knew that for the first time in our history, the government would be deliberately paralyzed, shut down as a way of changing policy without going through the normal political process.

Was '94 a mandate? Or was it that people didn't know? *Now they do know.* They know that Democrats and moderate Republicans were able to "save" the NEA even though it was on the hit list of the ideologically driven Republican majority; but, projecting a budget cut of 40%, the agency slashed its staff and capabilities; moreover, if the ideologues retain control

in the next Congress, the NEA and the NEH will probably be eliminated.

So what is to be done? I've talked to arts advocates—wonderful, creative, articulate people—who are ready to throw up their hands. Some have left the nonprofit sector; some are acting as if there already were no NEA.

For its part, the NEA has begun to seek alternative sources of income, looking to the corporate world, for example, and causing many in the nonprofit sector to fear they will be competing with the agency for corporate largesse.

Whether private businesses provide "new" money to the NEA or not, there is a problem with corporate support for a federal agency: Private funding is voluntary, and can be withdrawn at any time.

And, yet, despair seems premature to me. As Congressman Nadler has pointed out, we did manage to save the infrastructure of the Endowments—a major triumph in the face of a tightly organized assault. We now have a unique opportunity to ensure survival.

Because an extreme faction within the Republican party has come to dominate that party, it is easy to paint the coming election in stark Republican versus Democratic terms. But arts and humanities supporters should realize that if they make the arts a gut issue in the coming election, the situation will be vastly improved no matter who wins in November. Conversely, unless they make the arts important in Congressional races, the arts will continue to be treated like a stepchild.

How do you make the arts a salient issue? It's so easy, it's almost embarrassing that it hasn't been done before.

At every town meeting, at every rally or debate, at every public appearance, Members of Congress should be asked about their support for federal arts funding. And not only incumbents: *Every candidate should have to speak to arts funding*, and should have to explain why the high school band or the community arts center should or should not get an NEA grant, or why the local library should or should not get NEH funds.

Candidates would then be on the record as supporting or opposing federal arts funding. The issue would have to be addressed, and voters would know the candidates' positions. Some close Congress-

sional elections might be decided on that basis.

An interesting thing happened when some of the most ideologically driven Congressional freshmen went home to their districts: They found that some of their more extreme notions didn't go down well at home. Since they want to be re-elected, some of their rhetoric has been muted recently.

But that is not sufficient: When politicians (incumbents or challengers) talk the talk, voters have a right to find out if they will also walk the walk. They must ask directly if candidates for office will vote for re-authorization of the Endowments, if they will work for and vote for an increase in funds to support the arts and humanities.

Democrats will point out that the majority controls the agenda, that it decides which bills will come to the floor and what issues will be debated. And that is true.

But when we wake up the day after the primaries, and the day after election day in November, whether there are Democrats or Republicans in office, let's be sure that support for the arts is rock solid.

In the last election, less than 40% of the voting age population made its wishes known at the ballot box. That sad statistic presents a unique opportunity: Those who use the arts as a wedge issue to divide this nation know that a small, dedicated group can have enormous impact in democratic elections; the good news for the vast majority of Americans who support federal arts and humanities funding is that it only takes a small number of us, equally dedicated, to make a difference.

The latest Louis Harris survey on the arts, "Americans and the Arts VII," found that by a three-to-one margin, U.S. citizens are strongly supportive of government-funded arts programs, and would even be willing to pay more in taxes to continue those programs.

Defeatism is premature, as Congressman Nadler has said: It is true that we may lose if we act, but we will certainly lose if we don't.

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