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## Jersey arts groups brace for Trump fight over the NEA



By Chris Jordan

President Donald Trump and New Jersey arts groups: Not perfect together.

At least when it comes to supporting the arts in the federal budget, that is. A proposed federal budget, as reported by The Hill, would eliminate funding for the National Endowment for the Arts.

That has Jersey arts groups on edge.

“A society and a culture should support and champion its art and artists,” said Gabe Barabas, executive producer of the New Jersey Repertory Company in Long Branch. “(The proposed cuts) sends a message to children and future generations, and it sends a message to society as a whole as to what are the things we value. (Our society) should not be about only money, profit and greed.”

The National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities would be eliminated and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting would be privatized, according to the report in The Hill. The cuts come from a budget proposed by aides of Vice President Mike Pence, Russ Vought and John Gray. They both work for the Heritage Foundation, a noted conservative research think tank based in Washington, D.C.

New Jersey arts groups received \$2.3 million from the NEA last year. More than \$800,000 went to the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, which disbursed it to state groups. The Council on the Arts annually disburses an additional \$16 million to state organizations from the state's hotel-motel tax. A representative of the Council of the Arts declined to comment for this article.

"The NEA does good work in funding communities to ensure that the arts are made available to all individuals, regardless of economics. The funding goes right in to make sure the arts are part of all communities and that every citizen has access to the arts," said John McEwen, executive director of the New Jersey Theatre Alliance.

Twenty individual Jersey arts groups received NEA grants in 2016, including \$50,000 for PlanSmart NJ in Trenton, \$100,000 to the Newark Arts Council and \$20,000 for the Monmouth County Arts Council's "Gateway to the Arts" project .

"Disbanding the NEA is not only horrible in terms of support for the arts but it basically sends a message that America does not value its arts," McEwen said.

The message the Trump administration appears to be sending is that it's serious about trimming the budget, said advocates of the cuts.

"The Trump administration needs to reform and cut spending dramatically, and targeting waste like the National Endowment for the Arts and National Endowment for the Humanities would be a good first step in showing that the Trump Administration is serious about radically reforming the federal budget," Brian Darling, a former aide to Rand Paul (R-Ky) and a former staffer at the Heritage Foundation, told The Hill.

Cultural impact aside, many feel the arts act as economic engines that spark growth in distressed cities and communities. Several cities in Jersey, including Newark, Rahway, New Brunswick, Red Bank and Asbury Park, use the arts to generate business and development.

"The economic impact is being undermined," said Adam Philipson, president and chief executive officer of the Count Basie Theatre in Red Bank, a previous recipient of NEA grant money. "Every time there's a performance ... there's a return on the investment. People who come to the Basie, they're shopping, they're parking, they're dining — it helps the general welfare of the community.

"It's not just art for art's sake."

The Basie's economic impact on the area is \$17 million a year, as calculated by the Americans for the Arts Economic Indicator.

"I don't believe the arts should be politicized, but if you look at the NEA, it's .003 percent of the national budget," Philipson said.

The budget of the NEA and the NEH combined was \$296 million last year. The federal budget was nearly \$4 trillion.

“The real value of the agency is more symbolic than impactful to our bottom line,” said John Dias, artistic director at Two River Theater in Red Bank. “The NEA has always stood for what the arts mean to this country. The loss of that standing to artists and the communities they serve will be enormous.”

“We need to educate members of Congress and our representatives about the positive impact the arts are making in our communities, on our young people and students,” McEwen said. “The NEA is bringing art into our schools, inner cities and all corners of our lives. Art needs to be accessible to all.”

The NEA was created in 1965 and it has been the focus of proposed cuts in the past, including in 1981 by President Ronald Reagan. The idea that the Trump administration would eliminate the NEA and NEH is at odds with a previous statement by Trump to the Washington Post regarding the importance of the arts in education.

“Critical thinking skills, the ability to read, write and do basic math are still the keys to economic success,” said Trump in a statement. “A holistic education that includes literature and the arts is just as critical to creating good citizens.”

Many practitioners of the popular arts, including actors such as Robert De Niro and musicians such as Bruce Springsteen, have been anti-Trump.

“It’s a form of punishment,” said the Elizabeth poet, educator and NEA recipient Angela Kariotis Kotsonis. “This will hurt the ones who were not his supporters. It’s not about fiscal responsibility. If you were trying to save money, you wouldn’t cut from the tiniest of things. It’s about stoking our fears and it makes us very vulnerable.”