

2017

Biddle, Livy: Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (1977-1979): News Article 17

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Recommended Citation

Peirce, Neal R., "Biddle, Livy: Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (1977-1979): News Article 17" (2017). *Biddle, Livy: Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (1977-1979)*. Paper 37.
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Neal R. Peirce

The Arts Endowment Goes Pedestrian

Can the artistic community, armed with minuscule grants, succeed where multibillion-dollar bureaucracies have so often failed in bringing new life and pride to cities, neighborhoods and towns across America?

At best the idea sounds wide-eyed, at worst like putting the inmates in charge of the asylum. But scarcely noticed by the general public, the National Endowment for the Arts, best known for its larger program of aid to theaters and museums, has been doing just that for the last 10 years.

The Arts Endowment's modest community-grant program—recently christened "Livable Cities"—practices "small is beautiful" with a vengeance. Since 1973, only \$17 million has been dispensed—less than such federal behemoths as the Department of Housing and Urban Development often hand out in a single morning.

Yet community leaders from such scattered cities as Galveston and Jersey City, Savannah and Pittsburgh, Milwaukee and Boston, offer rave reviews for the endowment's minigrants, which average a mere \$25,000, require a 50 per cent local match and can be used only for planning, not actual capital construction. Recipients include state and local arts agencies, neighborhood and historic preservation groups, foundations and universities and individual designers.

The money, local leaders say, comes at crucial early stages of projects, isn't layered with complicated forms and bureaucratic red tape and is accompanied by a personal relationship and commitment from the endowment's staff. It's often the seed money that gets major projects rolling.

Livable Cities grants, says retiring

Arts Endowment Chairman Nancy Hanks, are designed to encourage citizens to think about the ways they can enhance the special identity of their cities and towns, preserve the best of the past, create jobs and recreation opportunities and "make their towns not necessarily bigger, but better."

Some grant moneys have been wasted through poor execution or the hostility of local governments and business communities to unconventional ideas. But many have proven phenomenally successful.

In Galveston, whose Victorian business section, The Strand, was proclaimed the "Wall Street of the South-

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west" before Houston took the lead some 60 years ago, the county arts council decided that the visual and performing arts could not survive without the creation of a new economic and cultural climate.

The arts council formed a union with business, minority and preservation groups and applied for an \$8,000 grant to study the feasibility of developing The Strand, which contains one of the country's finest concentrations of 19th-century commercial architecture, for diversified cultural, residential, retailing and wholesaling use—"neither a staged tourist set nor a museum."

The result: foundations invested more than \$200,000 to purchase historic but endangered old buildings; the banking community established a \$1-million credit line; today \$3.5 million has been invested in housing, shops and services on The Strand. Additional en-

dowment grants helped develop an action plan for further development. Now The Strand, which used to be nearly deserted by day and feared by night, pulsates with people and new development.

The historic preservation group Savannah Landmark is using an Arts Endowment grant to plan and obtain HUD financing for rehabilitation of exquisite old Victorian houses in a 162-acre community where 80 per cent of the residents are low income. The objective: to oust the slum landlords who've let the houses deteriorate and restore the buildings without displacing the poor tenants.

Endowment grants have been used to let neighborhood residents "plan for themselves" and achieve "preservation without displacement" in Pittsburgh, through that city's amazingly successful History and Landmarks Foundation, and in Milwaukee through Historic Walker's Point, Inc., in a poor, multi-ethnic community.

Says Arthur Ziegler, president of the Pittsburgh foundation: "A small grant, \$8,000, \$20,000, \$40,000, creates a major survey that in turn results in civic pride that in turn leads to the formation of a historic district that in turn elicits private and public funding that in turn concludes triumphantly in a revitalized neighborhood. But without the initial small grant, the series would never begin."

Just a few other examples of endowment community grants show their amazing diversity. Supporting establishment of a mobile design center for migrant workers in Florida; rehabilitating grand Victorian houses in Detroit's blighted Woodward East area; developing guidelines for saving and reuse of

hundreds of Midwestern courtyards which typically dominate the squares that are the heart of the region's towns and small cities; and, in Washington, planning for more pleasing and efficient use of streets in the center city through use of transitways and pedestrianways, improved lighting and building facades, street furniture, extensive tree plantings and aesthetic pavement textures and colors.

How did the Arts Endowment ever get so far afield from painting a drama? "It's always been the artist's function to point out to society what's wrong with it," says Geri Eadem, of the endowment. "Man has the right to live in a decent built environment, which buildings relate to people's needs."

Edmund Bacon, Philadelphia's famed architect-planner, notes that the endowment is "free of aments and impediments to clear thinking that encumber a great institution like HUD. It will be the Livable Cities program that will generate the future policies of HUD."

"The livable city," Bacon says, "arise not from the computer protocols, not from standards and guidelines, not from legislative action, but from the work of the artist."

The objective, Bacon adds, must be to "open up and refurbish beloved city and neighborhood landmarks by giving them a new setting and status."

And that, in turn, says Robert M. Nulty—himself the prime mover of the endowment's city-livability program—"can provide a catalyst for the next steps in city and neighborhood renewal. It's not the master plan; it's for something you can start on right away."

Handwritten note: 10 minutes past 9/10/77