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House Panel Cuts Funding to Cultural Agency

By Jacqueline Trescott

Washington Post Staff Writer

In their first consideration of next year's funding for the federal cultural agencies, House appropriators yesterday reduced the budget for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) by 10 percent. The subcommittee also voted to maintain the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the Institute for Museum Services (IMS) at their current levels.

The NEA remains at \$99.5 million, an amount that represented a 40 percent cut from the 1995 appropriation; it also represented a bittersweet victory over boisterous forces in the House that called last year for the agency's immediate elimination. For the fiscal year that starts in October, the IMS was held to \$21 million.

The vote taken in subcommittee yesterday was a hearty rebuke to the White House, which had requested \$136 million each for the NEA and NEH and \$23 million for the IMS. The lack of acrimony over the appropriations, however, signaled that the funding of the agencies would probably not be a central issue in this election year.

Even the thorny problem of the agencies operating without congressional reauthorization seemed solved. Rep. Ralph Regula (R-Ohio), chairman of the House interior subcommittee, announced that Rep. Dick Armey (R-Tex.) had promised to protect the funding if no increases were presented.

After last year's cuts, both agencies had to sharply reduce their staffs and reorganize their internal operations and grant-distribution procedures. In addition to the mandated cuts, the federal funds are shrinking because of inflation. The NEH, for example, has argued that its current budget of \$110 million represents a decline in buying power of 65 percent since 1979.

"This 10 percent cut, on top of last year's 36 percent cut, will make it all that more difficult, if not impossible, to preserve George Washington's papers, to fund the next King Tut's traveling exhibit, to provide 'The Civil War' to PBS's millions of viewers," said NEH Chairman Sheldon Hackney yesterday.

Another sign that the agencies will be protected in the event a brush fire over cultural funding ignites comes in the form of two letters sent by Republican congressmen to House Speaker

Newt Gingrich and Regula. Asking for continued support for the agencies, the letters indicate that the standing pledge from a group of House freshmen to eliminate the NEA by the end of fiscal 1997 would face a hard fight. The letter sent to Gingrich yesterday and signed by 29 Republicans cited reverses in arts education programs and community education and outreach programs of arts institutions because of last year's cutbacks.

A group of 28 Republicans, who had favored last year's level of \$110 million for the NEH, asked Regula to consider the agency's role in funding preservation projects and saving brittle books and historically significant newspapers.

Other cultural institutions fared well yesterday. The panel gave the Smithsonian Institution \$367.4 million, including a hefty 20 percent increase for operations and maintenance backlogs. The Holocaust Museum was given a 4 percent increase, bringing it to \$29.7 million, the National Gallery of Art got a 3 percent increase, giving it nearly \$60 million and the Kennedy Center received \$20 million, also a 3 percent increase.