

## The Governor's Proposed Cut in the Budget for the Arts

by Norma Munn

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Arts folks are not happy that in his new budget, Governor George Pataki has proposed a nine percent cut in funding for the State Council on the Arts, whose budget is already only \$48.4 million.

As recently as mid November, at the annual Governor's Arts Awards, Pataki offered glowing words of strong support for the arts. Some in the crowd seemed unaware that the governor's actual record is not quite as supportive as his public remarks. Including the current budget proposal, his administration has recommended cuts in three budgets, level funding in two, a miniscule increase one year and a significant increase in one year. He also decreased funding mid-year during his second year in office, and vetoed a legislative increase of four million dollars in 1999. At best, this is a checkered record.

So, why do arts folks feel they are better off under this administration than under his Democratic predecessor, former Governor Mario Cuomo? Simple. In 1992, admittedly a difficult budget year, then-Governor Cuomo cut the arts budget by 41 percent, reducing it from \$49 million to \$29 million. No other state agency went through such destruction. And, it was destruction. Given the delay in passing state budgets, arts groups are often mid-way through their budget year before they know what the State Council on the Arts will provide. The delay plays havoc with planning, and costs money as groups have to borrow money. But, when a cut of this magnitude is absorbed in such a short time and after a budget year has started, it creates deficits that cannot be avoided. Cuomo continued the cuts in 1993 with an additional \$5 million. After that experience, only complete annihilation would seem worse.

Recovery for the arts started as the legislature forced increases in 1994, and as Cuomo prepared to run for another term.

None of this excuses the current governor for his recommending such a large cut, nor are arts groups and their boards planning to quietly accept the proposed decrease. The reality is that it is the state legislature that restores and protects the arts year in and year out, and it has done so both in this administration and in the prior one. That restoration and increase has traditionally been primarily the responsibility of the Republicans in the Senate, which is why the potential loss of Senator Roy Goodman in the recent election was of such great concern to the arts community. His re-election brought a collective sigh of relief from the arts field.

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The Assembly has over the past few years begun to participate more in the process of providing arts funding, but there too there are changes. The arts committee was chaired for the last three years by Paul Tokasz of Buffalo, who recently was promoted to majority leader. The new arts chair is Joseph Morelle from Rochester, formerly chair of the small business committee. Given the size of this cut, Assemblyman Morelle is facing a difficult year as he starts this new chairmanship.

In the midst of the proposed cuts to the State Council on the Arts, Pataki was busy announcing three large capital gifts to New York City cultural groups. The Rose Center at the American Museum of Natural History is slated for \$13 million, which has some people asking just how much that project actually cost. The Intrepid Museum is targeted for \$7.5 million so it can "remain one of the New York City's top tourist attractions." (A comment fit for analysis on The Spin Room!) And, \$1 million is going to the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Local Development Corporation.

Despite these sops, the bottom line is that the arts community is deeply upset by the proposed cut. The funding level currently equals 1987 in actual dollars, and the governor proposes reducing it even further. Factoring in inflation, the arts community is being funded at 1977 levels. This is in a state where arts are a major export product, a major tourist attraction, a significant part of the economy, a larger employer than construction, and for many an important reason for putting up with the otherwise often frustrating and expensive living conditions of New York City. So, in a year of unparalleled budget surpluses, why cut the arts.

Norma Munn is Chair of the New York City Arts Coalition, founder and President of the Artists Community Federal Credit Union, and former Chair of The City Club of New York.