

A PLAN, A PROCESS... A PUZZLEMENT

NEA terms 5-year plan 'work in progress.'

By **Lindy Zesch**

Raising many crucial issues and worthy ideas, but failing to articulate agency priorities and plans for implementation, the five-year plan recently delivered to Congress by the National Endowment for the Arts provides a springboard for a new national debate on the arts.

The massive document was prepared in response to a request from the U.S. House Appropriations Committee for a "five-year plan setting forth the direction and scope" of NEA programs, to be prepared "in consultation with arts groups and institutions."

Although requested last June 21, the plan was not completed until the final days preceding the Feb. 15, 1984 deadline, amidst a flurry of activity within the Endowment and a dizzying round of staff meetings, telephone consultations and memos.

An 88-page summary document was presented to the National Council on the Arts at its meeting in early February. While the Council recommended some revisions, it did not give formal approval to the plan, because many members felt they had been given insufficient time to consider its contents.

The plan, NEA chairman Frank Hodsoll told the Council, is primarily for "internal use by the Endowment." Hodsoll terms it an "interim document" rather than a plan—a work-in-progress that provides the "beginning point of a more formalized annual planning process."

Whether or not Congressman Sidney R. Yates (D-IL) and his Appropriations Subcommittee will accept this definition of an evolutionary plan remains to be seen, but a close reading of the document reveals that Hodsoll's caveat is entirely appropriate. Rather than stating specific priorities, articulating new agency goals, unveiling new programs or projecting a financial plan for the coming years, the document constitutes a status report on the arts from the NEA's point of view, along with a non-prioritized list of issues, ideas and possible funding initiatives to be con-

sidered in the future. And the report raises more questions than it answers.

It will take both Congress and the arts world some time to digest all the ramifications of the planning document. By considering the report the beginning of an ongoing process, Hodsoll has, perhaps wisely, chosen not to allow the agency to lock itself into a plan that has had insufficient time to percolate, and that was largely authored by the NEA staff itself. He has also emphasized the importance of the kind of ongoing development that any good plan must have, auguring flexibility in both its aims and consequences.

Familiar rhetoric in the report warns that projected federal deficits are at an all-time high and that bringing them down "will require restraint on all sides." But the report earns high marks for stressing the importance of the close relationship between the federal arts agency and the fields it serves. It underscores the central role of the peer panels which recommend Endowment policy and grants, and credits them with providing the "stamp of approval" to which other funders look. These statements may go a long way toward assuaging growing fears in the arts world that the role of the panels has been slowly eroding.

Perhaps the most important section

of the report deals with "artistic deficits," an important new phrase. In an arts world often too full of meaningless jargon, the Endowment has identified what may be the most serious problem plaguing the arts in this decade. "Artistic deficit" is a non-fiscal term used by the NEA to describe the condition that occurs when arts institutions are forced to allow economic concerns to take precedence over artistic excellence. To quote from the report:

"There is concern that financial stability is being achieved at the expense of the art form. This includes popularizing to increase earned income, insufficient numbers of performers to perform the full range of repertoire, less rehearsal time in relation to performances, . . . greater emphasis on guest stars and too great emphasis on product as opposed to process in artistic creation. There is never enough money. The perfection of art requires experimentation, failure as well as success, attention to quality in every detail."

However, the report correctly points out the difficulty of measuring artistic deficits: "How far is it legitimate to raise standards and/or experiment and thereby create a deficit? To what degree is it legitimate to lower standards and reduce diversity of fare to reduce a deficit?" The resolution of this conundrum, the report says, is a matter for negotiation among artists, administrators and funders. "No sum of money will elicit genius," it continues, "but realization of genius, and access to it in presentation and exhibition, are dependent on sufficient resources to allow the 'work' to be 'done right.'" Unfortunately, the report stops short of committing the NEA to playing a major role in providing the resources to combat artistic deficits. But, creating a forum for discussion of the issue is an important beginning.

A second and related problem stressed in the report is what the NEA terms "undercapitalization." Arts institutions, it says, lack "substantial net worth." Differentiating between operating support for activities in a given year and building a base of support for operations over a period of years, the report stresses that the latter allows organizations to "take artistic risks and absorb unforeseen losses." The NEA has begun to address this problem under the new

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