

Obama Team Convenes Arts Leaders

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Even before he took the oath of office, Barack Obama and his administration were laying the groundwork for sweeping changes -- even in the arts. On Thursday, Jan. 15, Bill Ivey, the former chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts who now heads Obama's transition team for arts and culture, convened a meeting of about 20 arts-service organizations at the Presidential Transition Team Headquarters on Sixth Street in Washington. Attending were the CEOs of groups such as Opera America, Dance USA, the League of American Orchestras, Association of Art Museum Directors, Chorus America, Dance USA, the Theater Communications Group and a host of others, from Meet the Composer to the National Association of Latino Artists.

"It was essentially an information gathering session," says LAO head Jesse Rosen, "to inform the transition team of how the stakeholders to the NEA perceive the agency now what kinds of recommendations we wanted to make. We were also invited to speak on the impact of the economy on our respective fields."

What's this? The U.S. government paying attention to the arts and actually soliciting input from the field? This is indeed a change!

The meeting came about in response to a [letter](#) sent in November to the Obama transition team, signed by 16 service organizations and making specific arts policy recommendations. The letter starts:

"The arts and cultural community welcomes the opportunity to communicate with President-Elect Obama and his staff, in re-imagining how the federal government can inspire and support creativity in communities nationwide through robust policies that advance participation in the arts for all Americans."

The letter and its recommendations grew out of a number of arts-service- organization forums, which Rosen traces back to the National Performing Arts Convention last year in Denver. The goal was to come up with arts policy recommendations to give the new administration, without even knowing who that might be.

In response to the letter, the signatories were invited to meet with Ivey; they had only one week's notice, but clearly they were primed and ready. By this time, word had gotten out; in the end about 20 individuals headed to Washington.

"We didn't begin by answering Bill's question about the NEA," says Rosen. "I started by describing the surprising amount of commonality across disciplines and institutions about the challenges we face." Those include understanding the new audiences they must attract, wanting to be closer to their communities, taking advantage of the new opportunities technology affords. "There was a sense that our models and ways of doing business needed to be reconsidered and possibly redone or adapted. That our institutions needed to be more innovative."

As Rosen ticked off the concerns and challenges, "a lot of people chimed in and said 'yes, yes!' With a

room full of 20 representatives from different sectors of the arts world, there was amazing commonality. We all felt very gratified by that.”

All were in agreement that the National Endowment needed to take a bigger leadership role and “take advantage of its bully pulpit potential,” continues Rosen.

“Bill said at one point in the meeting that he was really surprised; he thought we were going to come in waving the banner for more money. He was pleased that we talked more about context and strategy.”

Ivey himself has argued that the arts are overbuilt, that there are too many non-profit arts organizations. But this group was not asking for money to grow the field. “That’s the old school of arts lobbying,” says Rosen. “What we were saying is, we believe the world is changing rapidly around us and we need to be a part of that. And in order to do so, we need certain kinds of support and an agency that is sympathetic to the kinds of transitions we’re all going through.

“I was quite tickled to be part of this. It’s a breath of fresh air to have the federal government be so inviting of a dialog. It remains to be seen what will happen, but it’s certainly a very encouraging first step.”