

Finally – political winds have puffed up arts coffers

The first blush of autumn (and the fiscal year that comes with it) has yet to show on the horizon, but the arts already seem to have avoided the dog days of summer.

The latest reports indicate that the House of Representatives' attack on the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's funding has been beaten back, and that support for the National Endowment for the Arts is on an even keel.

Arts funding among the states is slowly recovering from the 2001-2003 disasters. And here in Florida, site of one of the nation's worst arts bloodbaths in '03, funding has quietly returned to normal.

Actually, "normal" is an understatement for the situation today. Florida arts appropriations that dropped from \$28 million to \$6 million virtually overnight have miraculously bounced all the way back. The Sunshine State, vying for chief arts executioner along with California, New Jersey and a few others two years ago, is now beginning to look like Camelot.

The rebound is due in part to a tax windfall that allowed legislators to resume arts support without risking cuts to hot-button social programs. Even so, improved networks and quiet lobbying by Florida's cultural communities during the past two years were needed to remove at least some of the elitism myths that dog the arts in the political arena.

The legislative budget that Gov. Jeb Bush approved on May 26 included \$28.6 million in arts funding for fiscal year 2006 through the Division of Cultural Affairs – \$16.8 million more than his own recommendation made



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in January. What's more, the legislature funded the Division of Historical Resources Grant Programs to the tune of \$18.6 million – \$12.4 million more than the governor proposed.

The increases represent the return of arts construction and renovation funding that was cut out entirely in 2003. Projects ranging from the Young Circle ArtsPark in Hollywood to a modernization of the Pensacola Opera were caught in a legislative freeze that has thawed in a brief two years.

Not everyone around the nation is as fortunate.

California, whose Arts Council had a \$32 million budget in 2001, now gets only \$1.8 million; in July, the Assembly blocked a proposed increase to \$3.3 million. Also last month, Detroit's city fathers axed the Department of Arts, Culture and Tourism entirely to help reduce a \$300 million budget deficit.

For the past two years, Florida Cultural Alliance Director Sherron Long urged local arts organizations

to work with their state legislators on a one-on-one basis, to show the value of their programs and educational outreach to lawmakers first hand. The Alliance hopes within days to release an improved database to help small as well as large arts groups in the quest for personal access to the halls of government.

For starters, that database won't be used to ask for money. Long says August was Florida arts' thank-you month to the legislature – and to Gov. Bush, who Long says helped push for some of the increased funding.

The absence of a budget crisis, along with good relationships in Tallahassee, can work similarly on the arts' behalf in the future. But if either wheel falls off, funding likely would be stripped again.

That's why the arts communities are also working for support to re-establish guaranteed cash sources for the arts.

A Cultural Institutions Trust Fund developed during two decades of legislative wrangling was emptied as part of the 2003 cutbacks, and taken off the books entirely in 2004. With Bush in his last term, the Alliance is helping the arts community line up its trust fund argument to present to the next slate of gubernatorial candidates, and a renewed initiative in the legislature by 2007.

At the risk of mangling a cliché, it would be nice for the arts to politically take two steps forward for every one back, for a change. ★

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