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Obama's liberal agenda gets federally funded ride through the arts

Taxpayers foot bill for plays about Obama amnesty, drag queens, anti-gun lesbians

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Taxpayers are forking over \$27 million next year for federally funded arts projects that include a performance by a San Francisco drag queen, art installations with climate change themes and theater plays that showcase food stamps, President Obama's immigration amnesty, lesbianism and gun rights opposition.

The National Endowment for the Arts, the federal agency that provides government assistance for artistic endeavors across the country, announced its latest round of grants for fiscal year 2016 last week, leaving some spending critics in disbelief.

The grants include:

- \$10,000 for the world premiere of "Cocked," a play about a pair of lesbians whose anti-gun attitudes are challenged when a relative comes to visit in Chicago.
- \$30,000 to help support a miniseries in San Francisco titled "Gender in Transition," by drag queen Monique Jenkinson, also known as "Fauxnique."
- \$35,000 for "affordable housing and sustainable communities for San Francisco artists."
- \$20,000 to support a series of public art presentations "on the theme of climate change" in Minneapolis.
- \$30,000 to support the continuing development and production of Ping Chong Company's "Collidescope: Further Adventures in Pre and Post Racial America." The artists will further develop a "multidisciplinary work that is inspired in part by the killings of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown."

Spending watchdogs say the NEA is already one of the biggest money pits in the federal government, but projects like these push a political agenda that should be funded only by citizens.

“On the spectrum of wasteful government spending, this list deserves a first ballot induction into the hall of shame,” said Curtis Kalin, a spokesman for the nonpartisan watchdog Citizens Against Government Waste.

“These projects range from the cringeworthy to the utterly absurd. Funding for this so-called art should be provided by outside groups who have an interest in these hyperpartisan messages. Taxpayer dollars should be kept far away from this bizarre list of endeavors,” Mr. Kalin said.

For charging Americans to fund art projects with one-sided political leanings, the NEA wins this week’s Golden Hammer, a weekly distinction awarded by The Washington Times highlighting the most egregious examples of wasteful federal spending.

To mark its 50th anniversary, the NEA will award \$27.2 million to support 1,126 projects in 49 states and American Samoa, the District of Columbia and Guam in the first round of funding for 2016, the agency said.

In an email to The Times, an NEA spokeswoman defended the agency’s “highly regarded” selection process for grant awards.

“Each year, the NEA convenes hundreds of private citizens who are experienced in the individual art forms to review and make recommendations to the NEA about applications the agency receives. These panelists judge applications on the basis only of artistic excellence and artistic merit as posted on the NEA’s website,” the spokeswoman said.

The panel’s selections are then reviewed by NEA’s advisory body, the National Council on the Arts, which includes four ex-officio members of Congress, three Democrats and one Republican.

But that process does not directly take into account taxpayers’ opinions on what kinds of art projects they would financially support, especially when many on the latest list strongly support Obama administration policies.

For example, NEA awarded \$10,000 to help a theater in Los Angeles adapt and create a set of plays called “Pang,” which is “based on interviews with families who receive assistance from food banks, government nutrition subsidies, and/or other meal programs.”

A Dallas theater received \$40,000 from the NEA to support the premiere of “Deferred Action.”

According to a description of the project included in the NEA's grant list, "The play is part two of a trilogy about immigration and focuses on the undocumented youth in North Texas known as 'Dreamers.' The play focuses on the son of a Salvadoran immigrant belonging to a group of political activists that is working to push the DREAM Act through Congress."

Critics say these kinds of projects demonstrate a system in which the government is picking and choosing productions and exhibits that support its political agenda, making it harder for other artists who don't have special interest groups or lobbyists on their side to compete.

"If residents of Tucson believe that mariachis are important, they should fund their own mariachi conference," said Chris Edwards, a budget analyst at the Cato Institute. He was referring to another project on the list, costing \$10,000. "The fact that such a conference needs NEA support indicates that there is not much actual local interest in this instrument. If Tucson residents won't support their own mariachi players, then why should the rest of us be forced to?"

According to the 2015 Giving USA annual report, Americans donated over \$17 billion to arts, culture and humanities projects in 2014.

Over the past 50 years the NEA has awarded a mere \$5 billion to arts projects across the country.

So it seems taxpayers don't need a federal agency to select and fund their art for them; they are perfectly capable of doing that themselves.

"Aside from food, nothing is a bigger reflection of individual taste than art. That's what makes federal funding for arts so controversial with so many taxpayers," said Pete Sepp, president of the National Taxpayers Union. "The First Amendment guarantees freedom of expression, but it doesn't guarantee other peoples' money to pay for it."

Romina Boccia, a federal spending analyst at The Heritage Foundation, argued that the government should gut the NEA, "get out of the business of pushing a certain cultural agenda through art funding" and instead funnel that money to the national deficit.