

# Tyler Morning Telegraph

## Support the arts, but not with federal tax dollars

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The debate about public funding for the arts is intensifying, as the Washington Post runs another story detailing the benefits - but not the justification for - spending tax dollars on the arts.

The story, titled “Where do your NEA dollars really go? What we learned on an Indiana road trip,” details some of the projects that National Endowment for the Arts supports - cherry-picking uncontroversial, inexpensive projects.

“Viki Graber’s sneakers slosh in the wet grass as she twists two willow branches to form an arch,” the Post explains. “This 30-foot-long tunnel, an installation and playful passageway being built in Salamonie State Park, is the National Endowment for the Arts at work in Mike Pence country. And it’s anything but an easy gig for Graber, 53, a basket weaver. She sleeps in an unheated cabin nearby - home is 90 minutes north - as she creates her work. For this, she will get \$3,000.”

The newspaper cites a couple of others – including an injured machine operator benefiting from art therapy.

“In Indiana, artists and nonprofit leaders in small towns or underserved communities fear that lawmakers don’t understand how much they depend on the millions of arts dollars distributed each year outside booming metropolises,” the Post contends. “NEA dollars give children access to the arts at a time when schools are cutting back. They provide performances for people who don’t live in cultural centers. They keep such handmade traditions as basket-weaving and quilting alive. Nowhere is this more evident than in Indiana, where a 500-mile, 36-hour tour through the state reveals what’s really at stake.”

As Chris Edwards of the Cato Institute points out, “Establishment reporters don’t seem to think that anything good happens in society without a stream of federal money attached to it.”

In other words, something can be laudable and worthy of support, yet not an appropriate expenditure of tax money. That’s particularly true of federal tax money, since there’s such a large deficit and such a narrow list of things the federal government is supposed to be doing (see the Tenth Amendment).

If Indiana taxpayers feel strongly about funding the arts, they’re certainly free to do so without constitutional constraints.

“The NEA’s annual budget is \$150 million,” Edwards notes. “Indiana has 2 percent of the U.S. population, so I would guess that it receives about 2 percent of NEA funding, or \$3 million a year. If NEA spending in Indiana is important, couldn’t Indiana governments and philanthropists support it? State and local governments in Indiana currently spend \$43 billion a year from their own revenue sources. Couldn’t they carve out just \$3 million - or 0.007 percent - of that to support local quilters, hoop net makers, puppeteers, and other Indiana craftspeople?”

Now, it would be easy to list a few examples of silly projects (so, so much basketweaving) but that would be beside the point.

The fact is that the public - even conservatives - generously support the arts, through voluntary donations, endowments and foundations.

And that’s entirely appropriate.

The arts deserve our support - but not our tax dollars.