IF GRANTS DISAPPEAR, SO MAY INSTITUTIONS

by John A. Herbst, Executive Director

IT'S A sad state of affairs in Washington, D.C., these days for museums and historical societies. Federal grants, one of the critical sources we have in our effort to provide stewardship over the heritage of our region, are being threatened with elimination or drastic curtailment. This will damage not only our efforts here in the Pittsburgh area, but throughout the nation.

Unlike cultural agencies in Europe and other parts of the world, government support in the United States for local, county, regional, state, and even national historical sites and museums has always been minimal. Given that most of the heritage of this nation is in the care of private organizations, many of which are run by volunteers and without professional staff, we have a truly serious situation with the level of care and protection being accorded to the irreplaceable pieces of our past — the archives and artifacts which are a record of our culture.

Federal support for historical societies like ours has come mainly from two agencies: the Institute of Museum Services (IMS) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), which along with the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, have all been targeted by the new Congress for elimination or reduction.

Let me tell you something about what two of these agencies have done for the nation and for the Pittsburgh area. We will start with IMS. This small agency distributed $3,729,000 during its last two fiscal cycles, encouraging museum activities across the country. It supports basic operations for all types of museums from science to history to art museums and zoos, and general operating revenue is the most difficult funding to raise. Last year, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania received $97,325 to support our operations, while $112,500 was provided to the Carnegie Museum of Natural History; $62,588 to the Mattress Factory; $112,500 to the Pittsburgh Zoo; $67,690 to Fort Ligonier; $77,100 to the Johnstown Flood Museum; $112,500 to Fallingwater; $69,484 to the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art in Loretto; and $46,498 to the Erie County Historical Society.

In our case, these operating funds supported the tremendous gains we've made in membership recruitment, collections development, and publications this past year. The IMS also distributes funds through a Conservation Assessment Program and Conservation Project Support. These grant categories provide support to maintain priceless collections which are the cultural inheritance of the future.

Our institution has likewise been supported significantly by grants from the NEH. This agency provides funds to museums and historical organizations for exhibits, endowments, self-studies, research projects, preservation of library and archives materials, and public programs. In the last grant cycle, over 30 museums and historical societies were awarded grants totalling $9,997,024. The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania received $521,000 as a challenge grant for History Center construction costs, and $50,000 for interpretive planning for the Kins House Museum, which we are developing to tell the stories of Pittsburgh's immigrant community.

Nationwide last year, the NEH supported 36 teacher institutes, enabling 1,500 teachers to participate. Fifty grants awarded by the Media Program will result in 70 hours of quality television and 69 hours of radio programming. About 244 million people will tune into these humanities-based programs.

On the exhibition front, 122 museum exhibitions were seen in 256 sites in 40 states during calendar year 1994. Every year, several million people view NEH-funded exhibitions.

The NEH budget for fiscal 1995 was $117 million, only 5.2 percent of the budget of the National Science Foundation. Against this budget, there are about 8,500 applications each year, with about 1,700 receiving approval through a competitive process. Most approved applications are not awarded the full amount of funding requested — approved applicants receive only about 76 percent of the funding they asked for.

This is all to demonstrate the enormous importance of federal funding for museums and the humanities. The Endowment's purpose in supplying these grants is to support documentation and illumination of the American experience — the great experiment in democracy and freedom that is our nation's history and legacy. The preservation of history, our key role in the lifelong learning process for citizens in a democracy, and the partnership we have with the schools in educating today's youth, are all important reasons to value the existence and contribution of the NEH, IMS, and NEA.

One final point: the grant-making programs of these agencies have led to an explosion in private funding. More than $1 billion has been generated by Challenge Grant programs of the NEA, which require $3 or $4 in gifts for every federal dollar awarded. There is no doubt that NEH grants amount to a seal of approval that museums can use to leverage additional support.

When the new Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center opens, it will generate more than $5 million back into the regional economy, and NEH dollars have helped to create a $13 million construction project for area companies employing a large labor force. Federal investment in our cultural institution is a must, and I hope all of you will communicate with your elected representatives in Congress and let them know that it is simply mad to abolish this support.