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Crunch may help new cultural group make its mark

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Less than a month ago, an organization that promises to be the region's largest cultural alliance announced its formation.

At its launch meeting in late March, the organizers of the ambitious Greater Buffalo Cultural Alliance talked about making a splash right off the bat. They needed, members said, to nail one big accomplishment to make their presence known and build enough momentum to shift the way culture is treated in the Buffalo Niagara region and beyond – by its people and its politicians.

Now they have their chance. Thanks to the battling forces of the Erie County Legislature, County Executive Chris Collins and Comptroller Mark C. Poloncarz, the cultural organizations of Western New York are tied up in a political dispute that threatens the funding that was promised to them.

The whole affair started last fall, when the Legislature took a look at Collins' proposed 2010 budget, saw that it recommended about $5 million in cultural funding and didn't think that was enough. The

Legislature tacked on an additional $1.67 million for cultural groups large and small.

Sounds good, right? But the problem, according to Collins and his spokesman Grant Loomis, is that the Legislature based that extra funding on money that may not materialize— “phantom dollars,” as Loomis put it. So, in accordance with Collins’ promise to run the government like a business, the county executive’s office informed the cultural groups that it would withhold the Legislature’s additional funding until May 2011 –should it show up at all.

For arts groups trying to plan 2010-11 seasons, this presents an obvious problem. How do you budget with money that might not even be there, and that you won’t get until your fiscal year is nearly over?

Collins, acting out of the fiscal prudence that he says is responsible for a recent budget surplus in a time of economic crisis, has nonetheless put Western New York’s cultural groups between a rock and a hard place.

And here’s where things get political. As my colleague Matt Spina reported in The News this this week, Collins decided to award $30,000 of these so-called “phantom dollars” to the Erie County Soil and Water Conservation District. Why? Because, essentially, the guy in charge of the district, Republican Erie County Legislator John J. Mills, told Collins that, well, his agency really needs the money. Seriously.

As if the cultural groups don’t need money – and as if they don’t serve a vital economic and civic function in Western New York. Loomis, by way of explanation, said that Collins allotted these dollars to the conservation district because it was not vetted by the Erie County Cultural Resources Allocation Board process, as the culturals were.

Here’s the problem. The useful information compiled by that board, which is charged with advising Collins on how much money to dole out to cultural groups, is kept under lock and key by Collins, as if it contained nuclear launch codes.

In an approach that borders on lunacy, Collins also withholds that information from the Legislature itself and then criticizes its members for not following the board’s recommendations.

Comptroller Poloncarz, who clearly has a political ax to grind against Collins, released a scathing report on April 15 calling the action hypocritical, alleging racism because of the county budget’s dearth of funding for minority-run organizations, and accusing Collins of making a legally questionable end-run around the county’s established system of checks and balances. He also suggested legal action against the county to resolve the dispute.

Poloncarz does have his points, especially as they pertain to the inherent hypocrisy of funding one organization with non-existent money and hanging dozens of others out to dry. This becomes even more difficult to understand when you factor in this year’s $40 million budget surplus.

There also seems to be a highly dubious understanding within the Collins administration of the civic and economic role culture plays in the region and about the wisest way to apply public dollars to arts and cultural enterprises.

Someone should help him understand where the cultural groups are coming from, and why the service they provide is as worthy of additional support as the Soil and Water Conservation District. Someone needs to act as the John J. Mills of Western New York's economically powerful and direly necessary cultural machinery.

Greater Buffalo Cultural Alliance, I'm looking at you.

Comments

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