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## Brian Mackey: Arts programs feel state's squeeze

**THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER**

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Pick up a program from any arts organization in town, listen to public radio or watch public television, and you're likely to see a version of this sentence: "Programs are made possible in part with funding from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency."

But for more than a year, state support for the arts has been hard to come by.

Every local organization contacted for this story — from local public broadcasting stations to art, dance and music organizations — said they've heard nothing about Arts Council grants for the current fiscal year, which ends June 30.

"We have not even gotten a letter from the Illinois Arts Council indicating what our grant is going to be for this year," said Penny Wollan-Kriel, interim director of the Springfield Area Arts Council.

That's a significant difference from as recently as five years ago, when organizations would learn what their grants would be in September of the fiscal year, the money coming through in December.

For fiscal 2010, the money that usually would have come in December 2009 didn't come until July 2010 — the first month of fiscal year 2011.

Julie Ratz, artistic director of the Springfield Ballet Company, said the word last year was, "Expect the same." With that in mind, the SBC budgeted \$5,890, the amount of the grant it got for fiscal 2010.

But as you often hear on financial advertising, past performance is no guarantee of future success.

The year before, the SBC had received \$9,200 from the Arts Council and budgeted accordingly.

Those may seem like small amounts, but for small operations — the ballet company has three employees — it can make a difference. SBC administrative director Sally Hamilton said a guest artist for a show such as "The Nutcracker" costs about \$1,000. A show's worth of pointe shoes costs \$3,000.

For larger organizations such as Illinois Public Media in Urbana — the umbrella organization for PBS station WILL-TV and NPR stations WILL-AM and -FM — much larger numbers are in play.

When Mark Leonard became general manager of the group four-and-a-half years ago, WILL was getting more than \$500,000 from the Arts Council. That figure declined to \$210,000 in fiscal year 2010, he said.

Terry Scrogum, executive director of the Illinois Arts Council, said the Governor's Office of Management and Budget had indicated the grants could go out after the first of the year. He said that this year the Arts Council's budget is about \$8.5 million, down from the fiscal year 2007 high of \$20 million.

"We hope that within the next week or so we'll be able to notify the field when we think that's coming," Scrogum said. "I think finally it's settling down at this point."

But even then there's no telling how long it could take after the awards are made for the comptroller's office to cut the checks. Arts groups will be at the back of a long line of groups eyeing their mailboxes for billions of dollars of unpaid bills.

When the state's budget is as strained as it is, it might seem silly to shed tears for arts groups and public broadcasters. Most everyone contacted for this story acknowledged that reality.

Last year, Springfield public radio station WUIS-FM received \$34,910 from the arts council, down from \$51,000 the year before. But Bill Wheelhouse, a veteran statehouse reporter before he became general manager of the station, made clear he was aware of the political climate.

"It's difficult to complain too much when other important services are being cut to people," Wheelhouse said.

And yet ...

"People still look at the arts as a frill," Wollan-Kriel said, "instead of a solid, reasonable part of the quality of life in the state."

"That's what makes life worth living."

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