

Culture minister defends decision to slash ArtsNB budget

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Culture Minister Bill Fraser is defending cuts to ArtsNB.
Photo: Kris McDavid/Miramichi Leader

FREDERICTON • The New Brunswick government says it will introduce legislation in the coming weeks designed to strengthen the arts community in the province.

Culture Minister Bill Fraser was under fire in the legislature on Wednesday as he defended the Liberal government's decision to slash the budget of the ArtsNB board, suggesting that the grant-giving organization was inefficient and unaccountable for the taxpayers' dollars it is given.

The government already has reduced the arts board budget by \$200,000. When the next \$200,000 cut is made next year, the administration budget for ArtsNB will be reduced to about \$140,000 from the current average annual amount of \$540,000.

"The arts board has to manage its budget, and manage the funding we provide to them to provide to artists," Fraser said in the legislature during consideration of his department's budget.

"They have to be accountable for that funding. That is taxpayers money. We are working with arts board to see how we can collaborate and deliver the grant dollars most efficiently."

Fraser said legislation will be introduced during the current spring sitting that will strengthen the peer-jury system for awarding grants to artists, among other changes.

But artists watching the proceedings from the public gallery of the legislature on Wednesday said it's no good strengthening the legislation while also weakening ArtsNB and its responsibilities to promote and nourish the province's artistic life.

Ann Manuel, a Fredericton visual artist, said the best solution at this point would be a moratorium on cuts to ArtsNB to allow for full consultation.

"They do manage their money well, they are lean in their operations and the problem is with the overall amount they are given," Manuel said of ArtsNB.

"ArtsNB is completely transparent and have an annual report readily available online. They are most certainly held accountable, by legislation and by their own due diligence."

Fraser said he hopes to work collaboratively with ArtsNB, "arm in arm," during what he called the transition stage.

Tory opposition leader Bruce Fitch echoed calls from arts groups for a moratorium on the cuts to ArtsNB.

"You are basically cutting all of the administrative opportunities for that group - to me it doesn't sound like you are working arm in arm, it sounds like you are shutting them down," said Tory opposition leader Bruce Fitch as he questioned Fraser.

It isn't clear what services ArtsNB will be able to deliver once the entire \$400,000 has been taken from its administrative budget.

The Liberals announced in early February that they would fold the administrative duties of the board into the Tourism, Culture and Heritage Department, promising that the roughly \$1 million in direct annual grants to artists will continue.

The province's arts community has strongly objected to the plan, warning the decision will undo 25 years of independent, peer-juried arts funding and politicize the grant process.

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