

First \$200,000 cut made to provincial arts funding board

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Culture and Heritage Minister Bill Fraser
Photo: Chris Morris/Telegraph-Journal

FREDERICTON • The New Brunswick Arts Board entered a new and uncertain realm on Friday as it lost \$200,000 from its budget in accordance with the Liberal government's decision to disband the funding board's administration and put its operations in-house.

The \$200,000 cut came into effect on Friday, April 1, the first day of the fiscal year, and although Culture Minister Bill Fraser had a private meeting with the board of the arts organization – and despite a letter and social media campaign to keep the board intact – the government is pushing ahead with the planned changes.

"The next step is to continue to work with the arts board as they transition," Fraser said in an interview.

Akoulina Connell, executive director of the board for the next few weeks, said nothing changed as a result of a meeting with board members and government officials, including Fraser, on Thursday.

"They didn't present a plan, a schedule, draft legislation – nothing. We have as little information now as we have ever had on where this is pointed," she said.

"As of today, we are in our new restricted mode."

The Liberals announced in early February that they will fold the administrative duties of the board into the Tourism, Culture and Heritage department, saying the move will save \$400,000 over two years.

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.

Green party leader David Coon, who represents a large number of artists in his Fredericton constituency, said Friday the changes to the board are bad news.

"It is a dark day for the arts community in New Brunswick to lose the organizational capacity of ArtsNB to advocate on behalf of artists," Coon said.

"It is such an important part of our culture and our society. It's a loss of institutional capacity working on behalf of artists."

Fraser said the government's goal is to ensure artists receive the maximum amount of grant money through a process that is still at arm's length from government.

He said artists won't receive any less than they do now. The board handed out nearly \$1 million in grants and scholarships last year.

Fraser said the public and political opposition to the government move was expected.

"Anytime there is change, there are people who have concerns," he said.

"That's natural. The important thing is we are moving forward in a positive direction and we will work together."

Connell, who will take on new duties as the CEO of the arts council in Manitoba in June, said the \$200,000 cut will immediately cost at least one staff member and curtail meetings, outreach programs and workshops as the travel budget vanishes.

Once the full \$400,000 cut comes into effect next year, she said even more significant changes will have to take place.

"It's up to artists themselves to take action," Connell said. "They need to demand to be consulted in the drafting of the legislation."

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