

REGION

Modest gains for local arts

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By Alison O'Leary Murray, Globe Correspondent | July 26, 2007

Tonight, Millis is scheduled to rock with the wailing guitars of teen bands, thanks to state grants for the arts.

The Battle of the Bands features such local groups as Pongo's Groove and Plain and Simple on the grounds of the Millis Memorial Building. Cash prizes for the best performances are being donated by the Millis Cultural Council. The council had \$4,000 to spend on arts and cultural programs this year, about \$1,500 more than was available last year.

Many cultural councils in the area are expecting another raise for the 2007-2008 grant cycle as they rebound from budgets that were slashed by more than 60 percent four years ago.

According to Massachusetts Cultural Council spokesman Gregory Liakos, the state organization received a modest \$170,000 increase in its \$12.3 million budget for the fiscal year that started July 1, ensuring a minimum of \$4,000 each for local towns to spend on grant applications from artists and performers. Liakos said towns will be notified of their funding in the next few weeks, in time for consideration of grant applications for programs that start in September.

"Most of the grants are \$200 or \$300," said Millis Cultural Council chairwoman Valerie Richard. "We try to diversify" and spread programs among residents, from hiring a comedian to perform at the senior center for St. Patrick's Day to funding the town's \$600 pass to the Museum of Science in Boston, which is available to all residents through the town library.

State cultural council grant money funds free outdoor concerts produced through councils in Bellingham, Norfolk, and Millis. The funding provided for performers or art events is often supplemented or matched, whether through the town recreation department, school parent-teacher organizations, or other sources, such as cable television public access funds.

But each town's cultural council has its own philosophy on how to spend the grant money. In Bellingham, the council decided to focus solely on local artists and performers when its funding was chopped from \$14,000 to \$3,300 in 2003, said chairwoman Mary Healy. This year, Bellingham's group had \$4,700 and looked to fund a variety of activities -- as long as they were Bellingham-based.

"When we had \$14,000, we reviewed about 80 grant proposals and we were able to give some money to people from out of town," Healy said. "Now it's just Bellingham only." That decision cut the pool of qualified applicants down to about 34 each year. Fewer than two dozen actually get funded, Healy said.

The schools get the bulk of the funds for enrichment programs, but residents have also been treated to band concerts on the town common, such as a recent performance by Yankee Notions, she said. And the cultural council is behind resident-only art shows in spring and fall that are run by cultural council member Carol Simonson. The council provides cash prizes to artwork judged best in several categories, a competition that draws nearly 100 participants, Simonson said.

With just \$4,000 to spend, Norfolk's cultural council helped to fund such performances as concerts on the town green this summer, but the group's philosophy also makes room for financial support to performers and shows outside of town.

"We don't try to limit the funding to art in town only," said Richard Denzer, co-chairman of the council. "We make judgment calls. We consistently try to give to arts organizations that serve towns in the area, including the Franklin School for Performing Arts, Massachusetts Audubon, and the Neponset Choral Society, which don't necessarily even put performances on in Norfolk.

"That might ruffle some feathers," he said, "but their livelihood is dependent upon soliciting funds from many area towns, and people from town probably do attend some of their events." ■