

Paper Mache for April 17 by David Read

There's a headline that keeps resurfacing every few years: "The federal government is eliminating funding for the arts." It's alarming, but at least for now, not entirely accurate. But if you look a little closer at what's happening with the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), a more complicated and more important story emerges. The arts aren't simply being defunded. They're being redefined. Yes, proposals have once again been made to eliminate these agencies. Similar efforts have appeared in federal budgets for years under different administrations. And yet, each time, Congress has stepped in, often with bipartisan support, to preserve baseline funding. For now, the NEA, NEH and IMLS remain intact, continuing to support projects from community theaters to historical preservation. But focusing only on whether these agencies exist misses the bigger picture because even without full elimination, the system is shifting in real time.

Over the past year, grant programs have been reduced or redirected, funding priorities reshaped, and in some cases, previously approved grants canceled. Staff reductions and leadership changes have also altered how these agencies operate. The result is not a sudden disappearance of support, but a gradual transformation, one that determines not just how much federal funding is available, but who receives it and what kinds of projects are valued. Federal arts funding is not abstract, it's practical. Specifically, NEA funding helping support nearly one half of what it took for us to create the Murals of Live Oak project a few years back. A NEA grant is funding our new Neon Alley public art experience in Yuba City. A single federal grant can unlock multiple layers of support. Without it, projects can stall. Opportunities for artists shrink. Access narrows. And in rural or underserved communities like ours, where private philanthropy is limited, the impact is even greater. But beyond the dollars, there's a deeper question: What is the role of the arts in public life?

Are the arts essential or are they optional, something to support only when resources allow? Do we view cultural expression as a public good, or as a private luxury? The answers shape policy in ways that aren't always obvious. When funding priorities shift, they signal what matters. When certain projects are emphasized over others, they influence whose stories are told and whose voices are heard. This is where "redefinition" becomes important.

What we're seeing is not just a debate over funding levels, but a recalibration of purpose. Right now, there's a move toward national heritage themes or large-scale commemorative projects. In others, there's less emphasis on community-based or equity-focused initiatives that have driven many local efforts. Those projects don't disappear, but they must work harder to find support and demonstrate value, and that brings us back to the local level. Here in the Yuba-Sutter region, we've seen what arts investment can do. It transforms spaces, brings people together, and creates opportunities for young people to discover their voice. Whether it's a performance, a mural, or a future museum preserving our shared history, these projects happen because people believe they matter and because resources exist to support that belief. The question now is how we respond. Do we wait to see what happens at the federal level? Or do we double down on the idea that the arts are worth investing in locally, regionally, and nationally? History suggests federal support will continue in some form, even as it evolves, which means the conversation isn't over. Because if the arts are being redefined, then we all have a role in shaping what that definition becomes. And that may be the most important investment of all.