

WETA May Refuse Grant

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By John Carmody

Channel 26 (WETA) is threatening to turn down a major \$800,000 federal grant to produce a new public affairs series for national public TV next season because it fears the Corporation for Public Broadcasting wants "censorship authority over the conduct of the 26 proposed shows.

WETA is objecting to "conditions" contained in a resolution passed at a March 7 CPB board meeting authorizing funds for the still-undefined series that would deal with current issues. The language of the resolution has sent a shiver through the public TV industry, which has already

seen a sharp decline in the number of public affairs series approved by the corporation for the upcoming season.

Although two other public affairs shows were funded at the March CPB meeting, only WETA had special conditions attached to its grant.

The exact language was: "Although (CPB) management has held preliminary discussions with WETA and this series promises to afford balanced and objective, in-depth analyses of major current issues and programs of enduring value . . . the board instructs management to work closely with WETA management in the development of more detailed information regarding pro-

grams within this series.

"As management determines the information developed is sufficient promise of programs that meet these criteria, management is authorized to release funds . . . for actual production."

The key phrase, according to public broadcasting sources, is the "balanced and objective . . . analyses" phrase, the "criteria" which the CPB would presumably use in judging whether the shows should be produced or broadcast.

Yesterday, the 30-member board of the Greater Washington Educational Telecommunications Association

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(GWETA) notified the CIB board that it wants "clarification of . . . and changes in" the resolution's conditions.

Donald Taverner, GWETA

president, said that unless "there is elimination of any thought of program control as written in the CPB board minutes, it would not be possible to go ahead with the series."

GWETA is the parent body for Channel 26 and for the National Public Affairs Center for Television (NPACT) which would produce the series here.

Taverner stressed that the

GWETA board action was "neither angry nor volatile" and added that "we'd like very much to do the project—but we'll have no-over-the-shoulder production viewing."

Since the March 7 resolution, Taverner and other Channel 26 staffers have conferred with CPB president Henry Loomis and others about the conditions attached to the \$300,000 grant.

Yesterday's letter seeks a clarification at the scheduled April 13 CPB board meeting here.

Yesterday, Keith Fischer, executive vice president of CPB, said that "the sole reason the proviso was put in was because this—of all programs the board was asked to approve—was the only one which did not have a detailed program description."

"In all fairness to WETA," he went on, "they had submitted a number of others and they didn't have turn-around time to prepare a specific bid. I think we ought to know what the hell we're buying."

Fischer, as did Loomis at the time of the grant announcement, contended yesterday that CPB seeks only a general idea of what each program would contain on a long-range, advance basis,

which is current public broadcasting policy.

"The only issue," said Fischer, "is whether the corporation is going to be an executive producer—and it is not."

Both Fischer and Taverner predicted the issues could be resolved.

The GWETA president and his board resent suggestions that NPACT program proposals have not previously met the criteria of "balanced and objective analysis" which were set forth in the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. They feel that program-by-program judgments would interfere with "the integrity of the station's production."

The industry is known to feel that CPB would be setting itself up as a pre-broadcast censor if the WETA condition were to stand.

Two other public affairs

programs, "Black Journal" and "The Advocates," were refunded for 1973-74 without conditions. Fischer said yesterday that these were "familiar shows; we knew what they could do. Only this WETA series is kind of experimental."

At this time, program proposals for the 26 WETA shows have not been determined. Taverner and James Karyan, NPACT president, agree. The series could possibly be a follow-up on the current "America '73" programs and the original "A Public Affair '72," which was co-anchored by Sander Vanocur and Robert MacNeill.

Vanocur resigned from NPACT at the end of last year, following congressional and White House criticism of his \$35,000 salary, alleged liberal viewpoint and links with the Kennedys.