

NEW JERSEY

Senate Panel Moves to Abolish State Poet Laureate Position

By IVER PETERSON

TRENTON, Dec. 12 — Gov. James E. McGreevey appointed Amiri Baraka as New Jersey's poet laureate without much of a hubbub in the fall. But the task of removing Mr. Baraka, now that he stands accused of reciting an anti-Semitic poem, has proved to be a great deal more difficult and time-consuming.

Faced with the judgment of government lawyers that Mr. Baraka could be fired, a State Senate committee took the first step today toward abolishing the position of poet laureate outright, with the idea that New Jersey should be supporting the arts in general, not individual artists.

By a unanimous vote and without dissenting testimony, the Senate Committee on Government sent on to the full Senate a bill to eliminate the position and kill its \$10,000 stipend, which has already been withheld from Mr. Baraka. No similar bill has yet been introduced in the Assembly.

Governor McGreevey had asked Mr. Baraka to resign, but was rebuffed. He is expected to support a bill eliminating the position, although he will face pressure from the arts community to reconstitute it. Other proposals have been made in the Legislature to change the law to give the governor the power to remove a laureate.

Senator Garry J. Furnari, co-chairman of the committee, said the Baraka experience convinced him that the post should not exist.

"We're eliminating the job totally," Senator Furnari, a Democrat

from Nutley, said after the vote. "I think we finally came to a policy conclusion that it would be best to promote the arts in general and not individually."

Mr. Baraka's star as New Jersey poet laureate lost its luster after he read a poem about the Sept. 11 attacks called "Somebody Blew Up America," in which he implied that Jews and the Israeli government of Ariel Sharon had foreknowledge.

Mr. Baraka, formerly known as LeRoi Jones, did not appear at today's hearing. Senator Furnari said that Mr. Baraka had not been invited, and that he had been led to understand Mr. Baraka would not attend without a personal invitation.

Shai Goldstein, regional director of the Anti-Defamation League, attended the committee session and applauded its outcome.

"He wears his anti-Zionism and his anti-Americanism as a badge of pride," Mr. Goldstein said of the poet. "His beliefs in this regard are not political, they are bigotry."

The offending lines in the poem read, "Who knew the World Trade Center was gonna get bombed/ Who told 4,000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers/ To stay home that day/ Why did Sharon stay away?"

Mr. Goldstein said, "In all my years, I've never seen a piece of legislation get through committee that fast and that easily."