City Council approves $51,000 in community contributions

November 23, 2018
By Nathaniel Smith • The Times-Independent

In an effort to be more transparent and systematic in funding community organizations and special events, the City of Moab implemented a new system of how it handles community contributions and event sponsorships.

At the regular meeting on Tuesday, Nov. 13, the city council approved $51,000 in community contributions to various organizations to kick off the first year of the program.

During the meeting, Assistant City Manager Joel Linares presented the rubric developed by a five-person committee that categorizes all the applicants as “essential,” “important” or “worthy,” and divides funding based on those rankings. The ad hoc committee was comprised of Linares and other city employees including Eve Tallman, Carmella Galley and Lisa Church, as well as Joe Kingsley, citizen representative.

According to the document presented to the council, “essential” services “primarily involve health and safety, as well as multicultural translation and advocacy programs that complement health and safety concerns.” The next tier of “important” programs “is provided by entities that are dependable, innovative and which the committee members trust will meet a proven need.” The remaining projects the committee recommended funding were called “worthy” and “deserve a modest contribution from the city.”

Linares told the council that the committee had approximately $85,000 in the pool, a portion of which needed to be saved for event sponsorships that will be decided early next year. “The total for what was requested from all applicants before we did anything was $120,000,” Linares pointed out. The committee decided to set aside about $50,000 to fund those requests while leaving more than $30,000 for event sponsorships.

According to Linares, criteria for categorizing applicants was based on, “if they were helping people, what type of service they were providing, how essential that program was to the community.” The committee also took financial circumstances into account. “If they could get funding in other places or if this was pretty much their sole source for revenue weighed in on how we divvied the amounts,” Linares added.

Council Member Rani Derasary asked how subjective the ranking process was for the committee. Linares responded, “We recognize that it’s subjective and we recognize the council is the fiduciary of the trust of the taxpayers’ income and these are your decisions.” He then explained that the “essential” category was reserved for organizations providing services that can make a life or death difference. Linares noted that certain applicants,
particularly youth organizations, were very close to the border between “essential” and “important.” Linares said, “We did acknowledge there was some overlap and it wasn't as easy as A, B and C.”

In total, 13 organizations requested funding from the city. The three ranked as “essential” were Seekhaven, the Moab Valley Multicultural Center and the Moab Free Health Clinic. Only two organizations that requested funding were denied.

Mayor Emily Niehaus suggested that organizations deemed “essential” be funded at 100 percent of their request. She also thought WabiSabi should be moved down from “important” to “worthy” while Moab Solutions and the Youth Garden Project be shifted up into the important category. The council decided to reject the mayor's suggestions.

Council Member Mike Duncan expressed concern over funding organizations at 100 percent of their requests because it could encourage organizations to request more than what is actually needed. “I was pleased with the work that the committee did, and I’d be perfectly happy to leave it that way,” Duncan said. Council Member Kalen Jones agreed with Duncan and shared his hesitancy to go against the committee's suggestions. “I'm reluctant to mess with it, but if we did, I would rather take from the event waivers than defunding bottom tier organizations,” Jones said.

Linares argued for WabiSabi's placement above the Youth Garden and other organizations because of the services, like education and help with grant writing that WabiSabi provides for other nonprofits in the community. “It [WabiSabi] was not deemed essential by any stretch, but the benefit that it's providing to a community of this size is probably really important,” Linares said, also referring to “the domino effect” that makes WabiSabi very influential in Moab's small community. Linares then shared how impressed he is with the number of nonprofits active in Moab.

As the council discussed providing more funding to the Free Health Clinic, Linares told them, “It's really easy to get lost in what you're not giving in something like this, and what you need to remember is that you're giving $51,000 that wasn't in the community before.”

Following their deliberations, the council decided to accept the committee's rubric and funding suggestions without making any changes. Duncan made the motion, which Council Member Karen Guzman-Newton seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

“I am really excited that we’re supporting all these great organizations in a way that we haven't before. They provide such great services and really fill in some gaps. I am really appreciative to all the applicants and hope this project grows and increases the vitality of the community,” said Jones before the vote.

The deadline for applications for special event sponsorships is Feb. 1. That program is for organizations seeking funding to defray the cost of hosting a local event. It is meant to replace the fee waiver system that was phased out early this year. Applications and guidelines can be found at moabcity.org.