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Fairbanks City Council debates Community Service Patrol funding

by Molly Rettig / News-Miner

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FAIRBANKS — The Community Service Patrol, a van service that picks up inebriates downtown, might receive more financial security from the city during the next few years.

An ordinance unanimously advanced by the Fairbanks City Council Monday would give \$50,000 in bed tax revenue to the CSP from 2011-2014. It would draw the money from the city's cut of bed tax — 22.5 cents of every dollar. The ordinance also would slice in half the grant for the Fairbanks Economic Development Corporation to \$50,000. While the council wanted to fund the program, they debated about where the money should come from.

The CSP, operated by the Downtown Association, patrols downtown Fairbanks south of the Chena River. The van service transports inebriates to a supervised home or treatment center.

The CSP reported handling 2,484 events in 2009 and is widely recognized for lightening the load of the Fairbanks Police

Department.

But it has been nagged by funding troubles and recently shrank its service area.

The city would like to see it expand again, said councilman John Eberhart, who introduced the issue along with Vivian Stiver.

“We’ve all heard Police Chief (Laren) Zager say this Community Service Patrol probably does the work equivalent of at least three full-time police officers,”

Eberhart said.

The council has consistently voiced the value of the program without backing it up, Stiver said.

“I’d like to advocate to other groups in the city to come on board, like the city has, and make a commitment,” she said.

The CSP has received money from the city but never with a guarantee. The city typically funds the Downtown Association from a discretionary pot nonprofits must compete for every year, and the service patrol receives a portion of that grant. For the first time, in March, the city allocated \$50,000 to the CSP to shore up its operations.

Mayor Jerry Cleworth encouraged the council to take the money from another beneficiary of bed tax rather than the city's share of the revenue.

“I strongly feel that however we fund that, it should not come out of the general fund,” Cleworth said.

Councilman Chad Roberts had doubts about funding CSP through any channel, especially at the expense of FEDC.

“I don’t support cutting FedCo in half. They do create industry in Fairbanks,” Roberts said.

He also was concerned about funding a third party to do police work, he said.

The ordinance would require the service patrol to coordinate with the police department and adjust the patrol boundary if needed. The service also would have to come up with \$140,000 in grant matching to procure city dollars. The CSP budget for 2011 is roughly \$200,000, a mix of funding from the state, borough, Fairbanks Memorial Hospital and other corporations.

“If CSP were to go away for lack of operational funds, the city would be dependent upon their own resources to take care of this,” said Dave van den Berg, executive director of the Downtown Association.

“This is moving closer to acknowledging what needs to happen and we’re really grateful.”

The ordinance will go to public hearing on Nov. 22.

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The City Council voted to increase business license fees starting in January to match the changes in the Consumer Price Index. Businesses with gross receipts more than \$50,000 will be raised 8 percent. The fees haven’t been raised for three years (since the fee was implemented) and the CPI has gone up 8.3 percent in that time. The base fee, for any business that generates less than \$50,000, will remain at \$25. The vast majority of people fall into the base rate, said Mayor Jerry Cleworth.

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