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## Doling out community appropriations often requires tough choices

By Bayne Hughes Staff Writer Updated 23 hrs ago



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Community appropriations have become an annual budget debate that has grown more heated as the Decatur City Council deals with rising expenses and perpetually flat revenue.

The parade of nonprofits requesting increases begins in August, sometimes before budget talks actually begin. The city received 29 requests seeking \$2.5 million, but only 23 requests worth \$2.2 million made the final cut.

Community appropriations represent less than 4 percent of Decatur's almost \$58 million budget.

"Deciding who gets money is always difficult because there are so many good causes, but there's a limited amount of money available," Council President Gary Hammon said. "Everybody needs money, but we've got to keep the police cars and fire trucks on the road and the city operating."

One of those not making the cut was a \$30,000 request from the Mental Health Center of North-Central Alabama. Last year, mental health advocates flooded a council meeting to push for the appropriation but were turned down.



Billy Jackson

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Bill Giguere, Mental Health Center development officer, said the requested funding could reduce the possibility of a mentally ill resident having a run-in with a police officer or hurting someone.

"Our request might not seem like much, but it could buy (psychiatric) medication that they could not otherwise afford for almost 40 indigent residents," Giguere said.

Reduced revenues in recent years forced city officials to focus on nonprofits that depend on the city to survive, agencies that create an investment for the city and agencies that are a part of the city's operations, Mayor Don Kyle said.

"We have major agencies in which 75 percent of their budget is a city appropriation," Kyle said. "They depend on the city to keep the doors open."

The Mental Health Center's request is less than 1 percent of its overall \$9 million budget, so it hasn't qualified for a city appropriation in recent years.

Hammon said the request is a small enough percentage of its budget that the Mental Health Center could provide the same services with a simple reduction of its expenditures.

"In 2011 and 2012, our police and fire departments had to cut 10 percent from their budgets without any loss in services," Hammon said. "If they can do it, I'm sure the Mental Health Center can do it, too."

Giguere admitted the request is a fraction of his overall budget but said the money would be "used exclusively to help Decatur residents who are financially indigent and have been diagnosed with a mental disorder."

Mayoral candidate Tab Bowling said the Mental Health Center appropriation should be a city priority and is one of the platforms in his campaign. He said the center could turn a \$28,000 appropriation into \$109,000 through Medicaid's Federal Matching Assistance program.

"That's free money," Bowling said. "This is a matter of safety that we will pay for one way or another. We can either provide the appropriation for the matching funds or we can deal with them in the judicial center or when somebody gets hurt."

Giguere said Bowling is right that the Medicaid assistance program is available, but added that getting approval is a complicated process that runs through the state Department of Mental Health.

Hammon said he wasn't aware of the assistance program until he discussed the issue with Bowling.

"It is something to think about," Hammon said.

Councilman Billy Jackson said the Mental Health Center's appropriation should be funded over other allocations that he believes are unnecessary.

“There are a lot of very deserving organizations,” Jackson said. “But some that just seem to find a way to put money in there for their pet projects.”

Jackson said he thinks Decatur-Morgan County Chamber of Commerce \$65,000 in appropriations are “payback” for the people it supports.

But Hammon and chamber Executive Director John Seymour disagree.

“The chamber funding is an investment,” Hammon said.

Seymour said the chamber receives \$15,000 to help the city with retail recruitment and \$40,000 for economic development and public policy. The chamber matches this retail funding and then works with the city to launch new businesses.

Former Mayor Julian Price asked the chamber to help with retail recruitment in 1996, Seymour said.

“We bring in a lot more money than they give us,” Seymour said. “The new businesses create sales tax revenues and that helps the city.”

The economic development funding supports lobbying trips to Washington, D.C., and Montgomery and the chamber’s workforce development initiatives.

Seymour said he knows people try to connect the city’s appropriations to the chamber with the chamber’s Prosperity PAC, which supports candidates in municipal elections. He said the PAC is funded with private contributions.

“None of the money we get from the city or the chamber dues goes to the PAC,” Seymour said. “They are completely separate.”

The decisions on appropriations are difficult because so many groups come to the council asking for money, and some ask for increases when the city’s financial needs are also great, said Councilman Chuck Ard

The proposed fiscal 2017 budget compares the allocations back to 2011. The same groups routinely receive funding and those amounts rarely

change despite repeated requests for increases.

Decatur Public Library was successful this summer in getting a \$41,000 increase, to \$421,800, into the proposed fiscal 2017 budget.

The Carnegie Visual Arts Center has asked for a \$27,500 increase to \$47,500, and the Princess Theatre Center for the Performing Arts has asked for its allocation to be doubled to \$120,000.

Both are touting their impact on the city's culture and downtown business.

"We've been functioning on a flat budget, so we just need the funds to grow," Carnegie Director Kim Mitchell told the council last week.

Princess Director Anne Scarbrough said the theater would like to return to previous funding levels to help it roll out its new program series that includes quality acts.

"We depend on the city allocation a great deal," Scarbrough said.

Councilman Charles Kirby said it's difficult for the council to increase allocations when a high percentage of residents live in poverty and the nonprofits cater to a more affluent population.

Scarbrough said she wants the Princess to do a better job of involving low-income residents into the theater by offering after-school and weekend programs for children or providing leftover tickets to low-income families for some productions.

"We want them to see us as essential," Scarbrough said.

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