

# Mental health advocates plead for Decatur council to reinstate allocation

By Bayne Hughes Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, October 14, 2015 12:15 am

Mental health advocates suggested taking money from the Princess Theatre and other city-funded projects, if necessary, to fund programs for those who suffer from mental illnesses.

Local mental health representatives pleaded unsuccessfully Monday evening with the Decatur City Council to reinstate a \$25,000 appropriation they said funds counseling, hospital care and medication for the mentally ill.

Facing flat revenue figures and rising expenses, the council cut the appropriation in fiscal 2015, and the money isn't in the proposed fiscal 2016 budget that will be up for a council vote Oct. 19.

Council President Gary Hammon said the city would have to cut other appropriations to reinstate funding to the Alabama Department of Mental Health.

"I don't know what we could cut," Hammon said.

Julie Moody Collins, of Decatur, was blunt in her response. She said Quest Recovery Center in Decatur is closing because of budget cuts.

"You doubled the Princess (Theatre Center for the Performing Arts) by \$40,000 the same year you cut mental health care," Collins said. "I love the Princess Theatre, but I don't love it that much. You can take it from the Princess Theatre, the business incubator, downtown development or the tax rebate that's going to the Cook Museum (of Natural Science)."

Said Suzanne Thompson, of Decatur, "I can't tell you any case where a person went and shot up a school because they were denied a chance to go to the theater. I can tell you of cases where they were denied mental health care."

Hammon said the tax incentive for the Cook museum is "two years down the road" and is based on anticipated revenue that may not come in.

"If you're giving tax rebates, you must not be broke," Collins said.

Darlene Barry, director of Wings Across Alabama, an advocacy group for the Alabama Department of Mental Health, said local programs lost state matching funds when the council zeroed-out mental health funding.

Local mental health officials could not say exactly how much state funding Decatur lost.

Collins said Decatur's residents are unable to get help because of the funding cut.

“They blame you; you blame them,” Collins said. “It makes no difference to me. Let’s just fix it. We live here. These are our families. These are our people who will be the ones who get hurt, end up homeless, end up in jail or end up on substance abuse. Come on, guys, this is our town.”

Councilman Charles Kirby said the Morgan County Commission’s appropriation is 1 percent of the state’s mental health budget, and most of that comes from Decatur taxpayers.

“If (the County Commission) gave you \$100, 70 percent of that \$100 comes from the residents of Decatur,” Kirby said. “Decatur is contributing to the mental health department.”

Hammon and Councilman Chuck Ard said Decatur’s previous appropriation isn’t enough to make a difference in the state budget.

“Y’all are telling us that we don’t get services if we don’t contribute 0.3 percent of their budget,” Hammon said. “That’s a choice by the (state mental health) board, not a choice by the council.”

Kirby said mental health funding cuts are a nationwide issue.

“We can’t fix it nationwide, but you have an opportunity to fix it here,” Thompson said.