

TOP STORY

Mental Health Center funding request fails to make proposed budget

By Bayne Hughes Staff Writer Updated Oct 2, 2016

A \$30,000 funding request from the Mental Health Center of North Central Alabama is not in the proposed \$57 million fiscal 2017 budget the Decatur City Council will vote on Monday.

Center officials said the money would pay for psychiatric health care access for the city's indigent residents, but the request does not have the votes to make it into the budget.

Councilman Roger Anders said he supports the council majority in not funding the center's request, but he might be willing to change his mind if center officials could show the city would receive federal matching funds.

Bill Giguere, the Mental Health Center's development officer, said the city money would not be eligible for matching funds because it wouldn't be submitted to the state as required by the program.

"We'll use all of the city allocation locally," Giguere said.

Councilmen Chuck Ard and Anders sided with Council President Gary Hammon's stance that the request is a small percentage of the Mental Health Center's almost \$9 million annual budget.

Hammon and Mayor Don Kyle said the center can more easily absorb the cut than can some of the other nonprofits that depend on city funding to meet their financial needs. The proposed fiscal 2017 budget includes \$2.1 million in appropriations.

Kyle said he used a "fair assessment" that evaluates each agency and its operating budget.

The appropriations are awarded after the city funds "necessary services" like the library, Decatur Convention and Visitors Bureau, Morgan County 911 and the Decatur-Morgan County Chamber of Commerce, Kyle said.

"There's very little money left over and the Mental Health Center is one of the best-funded agencies in the city," Kyle said.

Ard, who was re-elected to a second term, said it's hard to justify giving money to the center "when only about a dozen people would benefit" from the appropriation.

Their arguments frustrate vocal center supporters such as Suzanne Johnson, especially when, according to her, Decatur benefits most in the center's three-county coverage area.

Johnson, who has family members who receive services at the center, said \$9 million "seems like a lot, but when you break it down, it's nothing" because of the expenses and the number of people who need treatment for mental health and substance abuse issues.

The center's budget funds treatment facilities, residential care, halfway houses, psychiatric care and medication and much more, she said.

"The Mental Health Center is operating on a bare-bones budget," Johnson said.

The center provided services to 2,103 people in August, with 624 coming from Decatur and 591 from Athens. Yet, Decatur is the only one of the three county and four municipal governments that does not allocate funds to the health center. The city last allocated money to the center in fiscal 2013, when it gave \$28,000.

Johnson said she has given up on the City Council. She is hoping the new council that takes office Nov. 7 will support adding the Mental Health Center request back to the fiscal 2017 budget.

The new council will feature three returnees and two newcomers. Councilman Billy Jackson, newly elected councilwoman Paige Bibbee and District 2 council candidate Jake Reed said the appropriation should be in the budget as a matter of public safety.

Reed's opponent, Kristi Huskey, said she would want to talk to Mental Health Center officials about how the money would be used before taking a position on the appropriation.

Jackson said the money should be considered a necessity because it could get indigent residents help before he or she becomes violent and creates safety issues for responding police or city residents.

Bibbee said mental health is something the city "will have to face sooner rather than later. It's a universal problem that will bleed over into normal society if we don't deal with it."

Bibbee and Johnson cited the Michelle Owens case as an example. Owens was ordered to undergo a mental evaluation to determine whether she is competent to stand trial on a murder charge in connection with the June 26 death of her husband, Lawrence Eddie Owens, at the couple's Lenox

Drive Southwest home.

At the time, family members said Michelle Owens, 44, had been diagnosed with schizophrenia. Court records showed her mental capacity was questioned by District Judge Brent Craig during an initial court appearance in June.

“Michelle Owens was looking for help and she was one of many who might have benefited from the Mental Health Center treatment,” Bibbee said.

Councilman Charles Kirby, who also was re-elected, said he’s “very conflicted” over the Mental Health Center appropriation.

Kirby said he believes mental health should be a state and federal issue, but he also thinks the council can afford the center's request if it can afford the other nonprofit appropriations, which he views as being of secondary priority.

“We’ve got to fund our basic needs before all other allocations,” Kirby said.

Kirby and Johnson said the Mental Health Center appropriation should be a higher priority than the \$235,812 in technology purchases recently approved for the Princess Theatre Center for the Performing Arts.

Ard and the council majority supported the Princess purchases as an economic investment that will support downtown businesses.

“I love a little theater,” Johnson said, “but it shouldn’t be funded over a program like the Mental Health Center when so many people need help.”

bayne.hughes@decaturdaily.com or 256-340-2432. Twitter @DD_BayneHughes.