

County looking for other options with economic development

Written by George Browning

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The Washington County Council voted 4-3 at its regular meeting Monday to discontinue its funding of the Washington County Economic Growth Partnership to the tune of \$65,000 a year.

According to Councilman Mark Manship the council moved the money, in that section of the budget from line 02 to 03. The 02 line is the Economic Growth Partnership money and 03 is economic development money.

“We just took the money that we were planning to spend with the growth partnership and we put that back in to the line that is economic development in general,” Manship said. “What I hope to see, I don't know about anybody else, but what I hope to see is that as we get the four new members on the council, at some point the city and county sit down and sort of grind out what it is we want and what we expect for the taxpayers dollars that we use to support the partnership.

“We may end up doing the same thing with the same people, I don't know. There are going to be four new members and they are being lobbied hot and heavy by the partnership. Honestly though, we've put a lot of money in over the years and don't have a lot to show for it. The way things are economically, that just doesn't fly anymore.”

In a phone interview Wednesday morning, Manship voiced his displeasure over the way the economic growth partnership handled the hiring of Lana Sullivan as director earlier this year.

“For the most part, we were not made aware of pending changes in the director of the economic growth partnership last spring,” Manship said. “When we learned about it, the council, by phone tree agreed that we needed to sit down and talk about it. They (the partnership) didn't do that. They went right ahead and hired Lana, even though she had no experience; they gave her a full salary, minus what she was getting as a commissioner. The excuse was that they had a hot deal going and they needed her right then and there. That's the way it always is – it's a hot deal that has to be dealt with and here we are nine months later and still no deal. I think that caught the city government off guard by that as well.”

Manship said he expects the city to pull its financial support of the partnership, as well.

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"There has been discussion between the city and county about what we've been paying and what we've been getting," Manship said. "Basically, I know times are tough and we have to garner our resources, and I just think we need a change. I think we need a change in leadership and we need more transparency with the growth partnership and we need stewardship with the taxpayers dollars exercised a little more appropriately."

Salem Mayor David Bower said he couldn't speak on what the council will do as far as funding, but he agrees that government entities have to be mindful on how they spend taxpayers money.

"In these tough budgetary times, we have to look at every penny we spend," Bower said. "We have to make sure we receive maximum efficiency. We need all the bang for the buck we can get – now more than ever. If that means we can't do business the way we did 10 or 15 years ago, then so be it. We've challenged all the entities who receive funding from the city to be more efficient, to be more transparent and to provide us more services.

". . . I still support the growth partnership's efforts, but I think it's healthy periodically for elected officials to take a look at those groups who receive taxpayer dollars and ask, 'Are you doing the most that you can?' I think this is going to be a healthy process. I look for the city and county to get together in the coming months and I think what comes from it will be a more efficient, stronger entity that will promote economic growth in our community."

Those who supported the move in funding on the council were Manship, Mingon Marshall and John D. Fultz. Those opposing were Dawson Sowder, Jim Nice and Merwynn Fisher. That left a 3-3 tie and council President Jim Day cast the tie-breaking vote in favor of moving the money.

Jim Nice said he voted against the motion to move the funds because he feels like the partnership has some things in the works and this was not the time to pull funding.

"They have a lot of things in the works and I hated to dis-ban things with whatever projects they have going without a plan to replace it," Nice said.

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While the county's funding of the growth partnership has stopped, Manship doesn't rule out the possibility of another agreement being reached.

"I don't rule it out at all," Manship said. "They (the growth partnership) own that industrial park. As long as they exist, they own it, which gives them a place to put businesses. The fact that we are not giving them tax money on a guaranteed basis is not a sign that they can't go forward."

Manship said he was glad to see this move made with four members of the council leaving their seats. He said they made an informed decision and he hopes when the four new members join, they can sit down as a group and take the county in the best direction possible with economic development.

Washington County Economic Growth Partnership Director Lana Sullivan said the council's decision won't stop the EGP from moving forward.

" While we respect their (the council's) decision, we will continue diligently to carry out economic development projects and also continue to communicate with all elected officials," she said. The Salem City Council will meet Monday at 7:30 p.m. at city hall.

Check the Dec. 15 edition of The Washington County Edition for additional information.