

Commissioner's pitch for homeless shelter not endorsed

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An impassioned plea from Commissioner Bill Carver to use federal funds to build a shelter for the homeless was rejected by his colleagues on the Lee County board.

Carver's request came during the second day of the county commissioners' two-day retreat during which the board discussed goals and strategies for the 2022-23 fiscal year.

Specifically, the board was discussing ways to use the \$11 million the county is receiving through the American Rescue Plan Act.

Residents were able to comment on what they believed were the most pressing needs, according to Lisa Minter, assistant county manager and finance director.

Some of the money can be used to fund planned renovations at facilities such as O.T. Sloan, Horton and Temple parks, Minter said.

About \$150,000 of the funds will be used to purchase a full-body scanner for the Lee County Sheriff's Office, Minter said.

Another suggestion was to create facilities to deal with people suffering from substance abuse and mental health issues.

Carver, noting that a homeless shelter was ranked low in the list of priorities, spoke of the need for such a facility.

"One that I have been working on with the Outreach Mission Inc and The Salvation Army is the idea of a homeless shelter," he said.

The shelter would, in fact, serve those in need of shelter but would serve as a base to coordinate community resources in the county. Through his work in the area, he said he has been impressed by the cooperation among various agencies which prevents a duplication of services.

The agencies also do well in securing grants and donations to help fund the services.

"The concept behind this is not to create a Taj Mahal for homeless people," Carver said. "The idea is how do we go ahead and address the homeless community."

At least 70% of men staying at the Outreach Mission's Shelter have been able to "change their status and become people who can take care of themselves," Carver said. "That's an example of how these kinds of things can work."

There is concern, too, over the number of homeless who suffer from mental health issues, he said.

"There's a lot of concern about that. We've got people with mental health issues and that's not going to change unless we can point them in the right direction," Carver said.

"We want to do things that will make a difference in the community," he said.

He suggested that the county build a facility on property owned by the Outreach Mission. For \$2.2 million, the county could build an 80,000 square-foot building to provide a shelter and a base for operations of other ministries.

The Bread of Life Ministries has been acting as a navigation point for the homeless for about eight months as a pilot project, Carver said.

“They’re helping people move in the right direction, but they have to have coordinated service to do so.”

While the county would provide the facility, it would be operated by nonprofits, he suggested.

Commissioner Cameron Sharpe then asked about the city’s homeless population and whether Sanford officials would help with funding.

County Manager John Crumpton did not embrace the proposition.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea that the county be in the business of building a building and then backing out. Who will be responsible? The county will,” Crumpton said.

A homeless shelter, he said, is a city project. “We have other things we need to take care of.”

The commissioners have been conservative in past years with spending in an effort to lower the tax rate, Crumpton said. Another concern is in getting into such projects and services, the funding need never ends.

“If you get involved in this project, you’re in. You’re in forever,” Crumpton said.

Commissioner Mark Lovick offered his thoughts, saying he has to put aside his personal feelings in making decisions that affect Lee County.

“I was elected to represent every person in this county and look at what’s going to be the best for more people.

“For us to think money will solve it all ... we could build a hundred homeless shelters and still not solve the problem. I have to make a business decision and not let my heart get into a project, but when you do county business, you have to do county business,” he said.