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Nonprofits worry money won't cover all - Hearing held about \$1m likely from block grants

Telegraph, The (Nashua, NH) - Tuesday, March 31, 2009

Author: PATRICK MEIGHAN ; Staff Writer

NASHUA - Speaker after speaker told the same story: As the economy sinks, more people suffer unemployment, hunger and sometimes homelessness, straining the ability of nonprofit agencies to help them.

"The nonprofits are really a safety net for the people most vulnerable," said Lisa Christie, executive director of the Nashua Soup Kitchen & Shelter.

With the recession, this is the "worst possible time" to cut back on funding, Christie said.

She was among more than a dozen representatives of nonprofit groups who spoke Monday during a public hearing on plans to divvy up what could wind up being nearly \$1 million in federal grant money, though no one is sure exactly how much the city stands to receive.

The money is the annual pool of Community Development Block Grants, dispensed by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Following the public hearing, the aldermen's human affairs committee went line by line through an amended resolution drafted to balance the needs of social service agencies with broader city needs, such as purchasing snowplows and creating a revolving loan for businesses.

The resolution is a hybrid of one Alderman-at-Large Lori Wilshire sponsored that emphasized funding social service agencies and one Mayor Donnalee Lozeau sponsored that gave more priority to city projects.

Or, as David Villiotti, executive director of the Nashua Children's Home put it, the funding debate is a struggle between alleviating suffering and promoting economic vitality.

"I'm suggesting that they're not mutually exclusive. You can do both," Villiotti said.

Nonprofits are "a huge collective economic force in the community," said Mary Jordan, executive director of the Nashua Adult Learning Center.

"We hire hundreds and hundreds of people. We pour millions of dollars into the community," Jordan said.

Other groups represented at the public hearing included Neighborhood Housing Services of Greater Nashua, VFW Post 483, Boys & Girls Club of Greater Nashua, Nashua Home, Health and Hospice Care, the Nashua Area Health Center and Bridges.

"I know as a nonprofit, funding sources are getting more and more scarce," said Carol Furlong, vice president of operations for **Harbor Homes** .

A strength of Nashua-area nonprofit agencies has been their ability to work together and not compete with one another, said Susan Stearns, director of development for the Greater Nashua Mental Health Center at Community Council.

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Some speakers worried that nonprofits found themselves having to compete for limited funds.

CDBG is a longstanding HUD program created to fund local programs such as affordable housing, anti-poverty initiatives and infrastructure development.

In recent years, the city has spent most of the loan money to fund nonprofit agencies. For example, last year less than \$40,000 went to city projects.

That's a far cry from the 1990s, when the brunt of the loans funded such city projects as road improvements and sidewalks.

Scott Slattery, the city's urban programs manager, said the city expects to hear within a few days how much money it's slated to receive. Slattery said there are indications the city will receive at least as much as it did last year, about \$744,000.

However, the need for services is rising steeply, some speakers at the public hearing said.

With warmer weather, there are usually vacancies at city homeless shelters, Furlong said. However, the shelters are still overflowing, she said.

"The difference: There are people who have never been homeless before," Furlong said.

In her 19 years at the soup kitchen, Christie said she has never seen so many people lining up for meals or food bags.

Many have told her they had been laid off, sometimes having to choose between paying rent and buying groceries, she said.

Some have told her, "I have never had to come to the soup kitchen before," Christie said.

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