

Oxford agrees to pay one agency, but waiting for legal opinion to pay another

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OXFORD — The City Council on Tuesday voted to give an agency that handles Oxford's youthful offenders more than budgeted this year, but less than the agency asked for.

Council members agreed to give Coosa Valley Youth Services \$30,000. The youth detention facility asked the city for \$42,000 last month. The city had budgeted to pay the agency \$24,000 this year.

Several council members expressed concern over the requested increase during a work session prior to the council's Feb. 25 meeting, and the matter was tabled for further discussion.

Making an argument for the requested money, the agency sent council members a letter last month stating that Coosa Valley's youth detention center held 54 youth from Oxford in 2013.

"We only actually sent 16 to Coosa Valley last year, from us," said Oxford police Chief Bill Partridge, who was asked by the council to check Coosa Valley's estimate.

Partridge said the discrepancy may be because other police departments sent youth from Oxford to the agency, on McClellan Boulevard in northern Anniston.

"The ones that they had up there, the crimes may have happened in Anniston," Partridge said, and Anniston police would have sent the youth to Coosa Valley.

Councilwoman Hubbard suggested the city pay the agency \$30,000. After some discussion, the council agreed.

Another local agency is also asking the city for an appropriation this year.

Stentson Carpenter, CEO of Rainbow Omega, a faith-based residential and vocational program in Eastaboga for adults with developmental disabilities, asked the council to pay the nonprofit organization, as it has in the past.

About 88 residents live at the center, Carpenter told council members during a work session prior to Tuesday's meeting. The city has supported the agency over the years — giving about \$10,000 annually — Carpenter said, but Oxford hasn't yet agreed to pay the agency this year.

“And we need the money,” Carpenter said.

The city budgeted \$10,000 to pay Rainbow Omega this year, along with 13 other area nonprofit groups, but the council has been taking on those appropriations one at a time.

Councilman Steven Waits said council members greatly admire the work done at Rainbow Omega, but said the city is working to make sure any money paid to the agency is done so legally.

“It’s probably going to be another week or two before we have an answer to that,” Waits told Carpenter. “It’s something we’re trying to work through with our attorney.”

Alabama law restricts municipalities from paying taxpayer money to private entities, said city attorney Bruce Rice, unless the council determines the payments are in the public interest.

The city’s 2014 budget lists Coosa Valley Youth Services and two other agencies — the Calhoun-Cleburne Mental Health Center, and the Calhoun County Health Department — as “governmental appropriations.” Rainbow Omega and 13 other area nonprofit groups are listed as “community appropriations” in the budget.

One way municipalities can avoid that prohibition is to draft a contract with an agency to provide the city with certain services, Rice said.

Legal opinions from the state Attorney General’s office have changed over the years, Rice said, and cities have continuously changed the way they appropriate taxpayer money as a result.

Many municipalities are now drafting those contracts to provide services, Rice said.

Rice said he is currently looking into opinions from Alabama Attorney General Luther Strange’s Office on the matter, and he hopes to give his guidance to council members soon.

“We’re trying to make sure we’re doing the right thing,” Waits said.

In other business, council members agreed to rezone property at 564 Beck Road from General Business to Residential. The property, which has a house on it, is owned by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

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