

Thoreau Community Center decision postponed

Written by By Bernie Dotson Sun Correspondent
Friday, 28 April 2017 03:48



TCC director SCRAMBLES TO MAKE deadlines

The McKinley County Board of Commissioners postponed a decision on the funding of the Thoreau Community Center. The act took place at the April 25 county commission meeting and was unanimous.

Priscilla Manuelito, the executive director at the Thoreau Center, told commission members that after the year 2021 that an \$800,000 Substance Abuse Mental Health Service Administration grant from runs out and there is no more funding on the horizon. At the moment, there is \$200,000 received yearly by the center for the grant, Manuelito said.

"The center has proven to be very helpful with respect to preventing suicides," Manuelito, a Thoreau native and Thoreau High School graduate, said. "But we need funding to continue. That is the reason why I am here."

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The matter was listed on the commission meeting agenda as a review and action item, but was tabled to the May 9 meeting to give Manuelito, who now volunteers at the center due to the funding irregularities, more time to get paperwork together to show commissioners the status of the center.

McKinley County Manager Anthony Dimas continuously pointed out that the county has wanted to sit down with Manuelito and go over youth and adult attendance numbers and gauge whether it's worth county dollars to fund the place.

Commissioner Genevieve Jackson motioned to have Manuelito, who is the president of the Gallup-McKinley County Board of Education, return at the May commission meeting, but that request was met with some hesitation by Commissioner Bill Lee. Lee, a former McKinley County Manager, asked Manuelito about sharing the building with the Navajo Nation Behavioral Health and hours of operation at the center.

Commissioner Carol Bowman-Muskett said to Manuelito, "Your numbers have gone down." On some correspondence that Manuelito presented to commissioners, Bowman-Muskett added, "Do you have updated stuff that you've done?"

Jackson reminded Manuelito about the importance of keeping meeting dates with county staff. She also said Manuelito must "read the fine print" on lease agreements and pay extra attention to expiration dates.

"What are your hours of operation?" Lee asked Manuelito. "Are you OK with sharing a building with the Navajo Nation Department of Behavioral Health? It seems like the two of you could get along very well."

Manuelito said the center is open daily and serves kids and adults of various ages with after school programs, general equivalency degree assistance and youth activities, among other things. The attendance numbers have decreased over the years, with more than 1,700 youth served in 2015 and some 4,400 adults passing through the center in the same year. That decrease can be attributed to the fact that the center is fulfilling its mission, Manuelito suggested.

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But those numbers have decreased over the years, and Lee and Dimas questioned Manuelito on operation hours and availability.

“People comment that the center is not open,” Bowman-Muskett and Dimas said. “What are your hours of operation?” Lee asked.

Danny Yazzie, a bus driver with the St. Bonaventure Indian Mission and School, said he knows first hand about the suicide and other problems experienced by Thoreau youth.

“Definitely, the Thoreau Community Center is very much needed,” Yazzie, 23, said. “Closing it would be a blow to the community.”

Also speaking on behalf of the TCC were Virgil Manuelito, Jr., 15, DaMarco Pierre, 20, and Jacob James, 18.

“None of us wants to see the center close,” James said. “It is important to have the center open for everyone in the community. My friends tell me the same thing that they like the center and want it to stay open.”

The Thoreau Community Center was established in 2010 by former Thoreau High School math teacher Juliana Ko. Manuelito was one of the people who helped bring the former broken down TCC back to life and start a library and garden.

The center has received as much as \$60,000 from the county over the years, but the current building lease expired in 2015 and Manuelito lost sight of deadlines. McKinley County Attorney Doug Decker said the center pays \$1 a year rent for the use of the building. He said the purpose of the requested meetings is to show that there is a reciprocal effect on building use.

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