

Largo agrees to help fund 2-1-1

By TOM GERMOND

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LARGO – City commissioners say they will help fund a telephone service that provides information and referrals to people in the county about many agencies and programs.

The majority of Largo commissioners agreed Nov. 17 that the city should fund 2-1-1 Tampa Bay Cares Inc., with \$5,000 being the recommended allocation.

Basically, the 2-1-1 call center services provide callers with information regarding health and human services and civic involvement 24 hours a day.

Mayor Pat Gerard said the Juvenile Welfare Board, a countywide agency which strives to use property tax revenue to better the lives of children and families, has funded 2-1-1 Tampa Bay Cares for many years. The board cut its funding for the program, she said.

County officials said they will take up a large portion of the funding, but they are asking the cities to contribute because it is a countywide service, Gerard said.

The Juvenile Welfare Board is offering a “challenge” grant for 2-1-1, meaning that it will match contributions from private entities and governmental entities up to \$100,000 for this fiscal year, Gerard said.

“I would like to see us do it,” she said.

Commissioner Curtis Holmes said he is sure that 2-1-1 is a “very benevolent organization and what they do is wonderful things.”

“But my problem with this is we are giving away somebody else’s tax money,” Holmes said. “It’s coming out of the general fund as property taxes.”

The commission would be donating \$5,000 of taxpayers’ money to the organization “whether they like it or not.”

Commissioner Harriet Crozier said she “would like to do it for a year to see how they would go.”

She questioned whether the county would be able to give 2-1-1 enough money for a year.

“The county will pony up,” Gerard said.

The county has several members who are on the Health and Human Services Coordinating Council, and Gerard said she has a commitment from two members on that board “who have said they will not let 2-1-1 go out of existence.”

“2-1-1 is kind of infrastructure for the social service system,” Gerard said. “They are the ones who have the giant data base with all the services for anything you can think of.”

The service will not go out of existence if funding is not replenished, but people will wait longer on the phone to get help, she said.

According to a memo from Micki Thompson, Tampa Bay 2-1-1 executive director, from Aug. 1, 2008, to July 31, 2009, 2-1-1 answered 4,865 calls from Largo.

"Certainly, we are very excited to have the support of the city of Largo for 2-1-1," Thompson said Nov. 19.

The city of St. Petersburg, which has provided funding for many years, has agreed to contribute \$30,000 for this year. The Sheriff's Office has agreed to contribute \$10,000. Tampa Bay 2-1-1 also is having discussions with Dunedin and Clearwater, she said, and also will be in contact with other municipalities.

"We have just started our new fiscal year," Thompson said. "We are just getting started down that path."

The services is requesting the equivalent of 20 cents per year per resident from each municipality in the county. Since the city has 72,732 residents, the amount requested from Largo was \$14,546.

2-1-1 provides information on food banks, clothing closets, shelters, rent assistance, utility assistance, support groups, child care, food pantry donation opportunities, tutoring and mentoring opportunities, drug and alcohol intervention and other programs and services.

Individuals also can volunteer to help the agency and make donations.

City officials said they will have an unspent salary of at least \$5,000 due to a current freeze on a vacant position. Staff recommended that \$5,000 be allocated to the service.

"I think they provide a good need for the community," Crozier said. "I think \$5,000 is a fair amount."

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