

Los Altos considers cutting service grants

By Diana Samuels
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Posted: 12/13/2010 08:04:43 PM PST

Updated: 12/14/2010 12:36:50 AM PST

Cash-strapped local community service agencies could soon be out a few thousand dollars if the Los Altos City Council tonight decides to get frugal.

The council will consider ending its practice of distributing about \$30,000 in federal "community development block grant" funds each year to local nonprofits.

Santa Clara County distributes the federal funds to local cities, and Los Altos' annual share is about \$130,000. Although most of that money must go toward capital improvement projects, Los Altos traditionally has distributed about \$30,000 to local service organizations. In the federal fiscal year from Oct. 1, 2009, to Sept. 30, 2010, the city distributed funds to nonprofits such as the Day Worker Center of Mountain View, Santa Clara Family Health Foundation and Live Oak Adult Day Services.

But for efficiency's sake, Assistant City Manager James Walgren recommends that the council use all of the funds for capital projects in the 2010-11 federal fiscal year. Because of complex federal paperwork, he said the city spends more than \$15,000 worth of staff time to hand out the \$30,000 to nonprofits. While the grants usually include about \$15,000 to cover administrative costs, the county has said it will keep that money this year to cover its own costs, Walgren said.

"This requires all kinds of applications, auditing, county reporting requirements," Walgren said. "It's a very labor-intensive program."

Capital improvement funds

generally have paid to make sidewalks more accessible to people with disabilities, Walgren said.

"There are a lot of older sidewalks in town. When you really look at them closely, they might have a fire hydrant in the middle of the sidewalk, a utility pole," Walgren said. "Effectively, it obstructs the sidewalk."

Walgren suggested that the council could decide to give the service agencies \$30,000 from the city's general fund so the subsidy would not have to meet federal reporting requirements.

Leaders of local nonprofits urged the city to continue the grants. Jim Boin, development director for the Community Services Agency, said the money is critical, "particularly in this era of increasing need in the community." His organization received \$8,147 from Los Altos this year.

"When people are at the end of their rope, they come up to us," Boin said, "and we keep getting less and less rope from the government to hand out to them."

Catholic Charities of Santa Clara County received \$3,625 in the past year for its ombudsman program, which advocates for seniors in long-term care. The donation made up only about 1 percent of the program's budget, said CEO Gregory Kepferle, but the money can be leveraged to get more donations. "Every little bit helps," he added.

"The cities and the county have to figure out how are they going to allocate these monies, what are their priorities, and I understand that absolutely,"

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Kepferle said. "It seems like one of the priorities should be to care for the most vulnerable."

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IF YOU GO:

What: Los Altos City Council meeting, including discussion of discontinuing community development block grant funds for local service agencies

When: Tonight, 7 p.m.

Where: Council Chambers, City Hall, 1 North San Antonio Road, Los Altos

More info: <http://www.ci.los-altos.ca.us/>

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