

Holyoke City Council supports \$350K for Miracle League Park project

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HOLYOKE — The City Council’s Finance Committee recommended approving a park project funded through the Community Preservation Act, but balked at a \$150,000 award for Girls Inc.

Meagan McGrath-Smith, who chairs the Community Preservation Committee, said the projects include \$350,000 for a Miracle League Playground for All, a fully accessible and adaptable playscape for disabled children.

Magrath-Smith said the city owns the parcel next to Kennedy Field in Holyoke’s Highland neighborhood. The accessible playground benefits families with disabled and nondisabled children, a chance to play together without venturing to another park.

According to Magrath-Smith, Miracle League assisted in constructing a similar playground in Westfield. “This will be something new for our region and be a great draw. It certainly addresses a need not currently being met,” she said.

The \$350,000 request was a “big ask,” McGrath-Smith told the committee, the second-largest funding request in the committee’s history. “They (Miracle League) already put a lot of skin in the game,” she said.

The original budget was \$439,425, but contractors must observe local prevailing-wage laws because the park resides on city-owned property. According to McGrath-Smith, as a result, costs climbed to \$477,822 or under 25%.

Fundraising would cover around a \$27,000 spending gap.

The second project would award \$150,000 toward renovating Girls Inc.’s new headquarters at 480 Hampden St. The award falls under the Community Preservations Act’s historic preservation category.

Formerly the home of O’Connell Construction, several law offices leased most of the building. The \$150,000 would pay for repairing the structure’s slate roof and exterior masonry. Girls Inc. conducts programs for girls 5 to 18 years old.

McGrath-Smith said that girls Inc. had already raised \$3.1 million for the construction project. The approval process for projects entails several meetings until a decision is reached. The prevailing wage issue for the playground and 480 Hampden Street’s historical designation caused delays.

Councilor At-large Kevin Jourdain chaired the opening of Monday’s meeting as Councilor Joseph M. McGiverin was delayed. Jourdain voiced reservations about the Girls Inc. project as the building came off the tax rolls.

The property was designated a tax-exempt property by the City of Holyoke. “We’re already taking a huge hit financially from a tax perspective,” Jourdain said. “That in and of itself is a gift to Girls Inc. They don’t have to pay property taxes anymore on the building.”

Jourdain disagreed with forking over \$150,000 in taxpayer dollars to Girls Inc. on top of “free taxes for life.”

McGrath-Smith said some residents had similar concerns about the building’s new tax-exempt status and a nonprofit receiving Community Preservation funding. “The legislation was created for nonprofits rather than for-profit companies,” she said, as state restrictions limit owners of private businesses.

She added that the tax-exempt designation remains in place even if the council refuses to approve the award. Jourdain listed several revenue-generating properties that fell off the city’s tax roll.

Ward 6 Councilor Juan Anderson-Burgos said he wanted to focus on Girls Inc.'s attempt to preserve the building's historic character and not the tax-exempt status.

Councilor At-large Israel Rivera said he understood Jourdan's concerns, but nonprofits are part of the application process with the Community Preservation Committee. "Although they are nonprofits and tax-exempt, they serve a large portion of our community," he said.

Rivera added that Girls Inc. almost did not "make the cut" in the second round of approvals, especially with \$150,000 out of the \$5 million construction budget was not significant.

"Girls Inc. is a longstanding organization in Holyoke. My wife went to Girls Inc. as a child, and my mother-in-law worked there," he said.

Rivera serves as the City Council's representative on the Community Preservation Committee. The council could reject Jourdain's motion and approve funding for both projects. Jourdain bundled both projects into a single motion.

In other matters, the Finance Committee recommended a \$3,000 transfer from the Veterans Benefit Account to Out-of-state Travel. Veterans Services Director Jesus Pereira said the transfer would allow him to attend the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers conference in Austin, Texas.

Pereira said the conference was the first live post-COVID-19 event and provided training and legislative updates. "This is a big year for legislative changes in the veterans' benefits administration," he said. "I'm interested to see what the priorities are of the association."

He promised to update the City Council on the information he gleaned. The \$3,000 transfer would cover airfares and hotel rooms for the June event.

The committee agreed to a \$4,440 transfer from the Veterans Services account to Contracted Professional Services. Pereira said the department had unspent funds and requested a transfer to the Personnel Department.

Pereira told Jourdain the Veterans Services Account was a moving target every year, with the current budget based on \$30,000 per month. However, he noted a decline in paid benefits in the last few months.

Also, several veterans died or moved out of Holyoke recently. Mayor Joshua Garcia said the \$4,440 would boost the Personnel Department's computer capabilities.

The Purchasing Department requested a \$22,768 transfer to reclassify two positions. Lori Belanger, the department's director, said challenges cropped up in January.

Belanger began reclassifying positions in the department two years ago and had hoped to finish the project before Fiscal 2023. She reviewed the current job and title descriptions considered "severely antiquated and outdated."

She collaborated with the Personnel Department to create updated job titles and descriptions and match them with contractual guidelines. "This is all in my budget given the shortfalls we've had since January," she said.

The new job titles would be accounts payable specialist and office specialist. Approval by the City Council allows Belanger to start the hiring process, including placing advertisements.

Belanger expected the reclassifications to impact the Fiscal 2022 budget. The transfers cover the remaining fiscal year that expires June 30. "It's incumbent for every office head to revisit titles, job descriptions and the STEPS (pay scale)," she said.