

City will be eligible to apply for block grant funds

By Jeanne Davant

Manitou Springs will soon become eligible for federal funds under El Paso County's Community Development Block Grant program.

City Council members voted unanimously Tuesday to join the program, which administers funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Manitou will be able to apply for a portion of about \$ 1 million the county will receive annually after it is recertified by the department.

The funds can be used for a variety of projects designed to benefit low- and moderate-income citizens, improve slums or blight, and address other urgent needs.

Grants could be awarded for projects such as improvements to the library that would make it accessible for wheelchair-bound patrons.

A 10-member board makes recommendations on distribution of the funds, said Tiffany Colvert, community development specialist with El Paso County. Manitou will have representation on the board.

Manitou benefited indirectly from the program this year when the county received \$16,500 for cleaning up graffiti and installing video cameras at Rainbow Falls.

Other awards this year included an upgrade to Calhan's baseball park, paving and curb and gutter installations in Ramah and two programs that offered Fountain residents assistance in installing energy-efficient improvements and upgrading their properties.

There is a strong emphasis on projects that benefit low- and moderate-income residents, Colvert said. She said there are two areas of Manitou where the percentage of low- to moderate-income residents would qualify projects for funding. Projects for certain segments of the population, such as seniors, also would qualify. Participation also opens the doors to funding for local nonprofits.

By joining the county program, Manitou will no longer be eligible to apply for Small Cities funds from the state of Colorado. While more funds are available through that program, the competition is more intense and eligibility guidelines are more stringent, Manitou City Administrator Jack Benson said.

Colvert said the county application process was somewhat easier than the state process and that her department assists applicants with strong customer service.

The average grant size for county block grant projects is \$44,000, a smaller amount than the state average, Colvert said. The county generally receives 30 to 40 applications per year and funds about 15 of them. As a new participant, she said, Manitou's requests likely would be looked upon favorably. Furthermore, Manitou's participation could increase the total amount of funds the program will receive.

Manitou Council members agreed to send a letter by June 3 indicating the city wants to join the program for a three-year period. The city will be able to send a representative to the advisory board's next meeting July 13, and could submit applications for projects in the fall. Funds would be available in April 2012.

County seeks planning funds

Clark told Council members that the county is seeking \$325,000 in grant funds to complete plans for "No Man's Land" on West Colorado Avenue and Rainbow Falls.

No Man's Land, a stretch of Colorado Avenue that includes portions of eastern Manitou Springs, unincorporated El Paso County and western Colorado Springs, needs numerous improvements, including replacement of the bridge over Fountain Creek and installation of curbs and gutters.

"There are a lot of moving components to this," Clark said after the meeting. "We have initial plans, but we really haven't taken them to the public to get their input. So many residents and property owners are going to be impacted."

The grant would allocate \$300,000 for planning, including gathering information from affected residents, property owners and other interested people.

"Our chances of getting the grant are excellent," Clark said. "We have been told that the money is available."

The remaining \$25,000 of the grant would be used to determine what repairs are needed to stabilize the creek banks and to address other issues at Rainbow Falls, Clark said. A master plan for Rainbow Falls has already been approved, and this grant would allow details of erosion control to be worked out.

Questions remain on parks funding

Also Tuesday, Council members heard a presentation by Trails and Open Space Coalition member Bill Koerner on the Great Parks-Great Communities initiative. The initiative seeks to provide stable funding to maintain parks, trails and other recreational facilities across El Paso County through a sales tax increase.

Following a telephone survey, Koerner said, the coalition has revised its recommendations.

The group was considering asking voters to approve a countywide sales tax increase of up to 0.3 percent but now is suggesting a 0.15 percent increase. That would amount to 1.5 cents on a \$10 purchase. It would increase Manitou's sales tax to 8.9 cents on each dollar spent.

City Finance Director Mike Leslie said the increase would generate about \$79,000 based on the city's 2010 budget figures. Councilman Matt Carpenter said he figured it would generate about \$84,000 based on the 2011 projected budget.

Of the total funds collected throughout the county, which would amount to about \$9.5 million a year, Colorado Springs would receive 78 percent, Koerner said. Manitou and other local jurisdictions would split the rest.

Koerner asked council members to pass a resolution supporting placement of the issue on the November ballot before the County Commission takes up the question on June 21. Manitou also probably would have to pay at least a portion of the \$300,000 it would cost to place the issue on the ballot.

Council members said they still have questions and want more information before passing a resolution.

"Several numbers have been thrown out," Councilwoman Aimee Cox said. "I'm not sure how we benefit from this as a small town. It does push our sales tax up, and that takes away our capacity for sales tax initiatives for other things. I would like to see what this really means for Manitou Springs."

Mayor Marc Snyder said he was concerned about who would have the final authority for making decisions on distribution of the funds.

Council asked Leslie to present more information about the impacts of a sales tax increase and Manitou's portion. Council will consider the matter further at its meetings June 7 or 14.

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