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Council looks at funds for 'outside agencies'

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BY EMILY BATTLE
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The nonprofit non-city agencies Fredericksburg funds in its budget become a roadblock in the City Council's budget deliberations every year.

As the city's shrinking budget becomes tighter and tighter, there is regular disagreement over what to fund, what to cut and even what to call these groups--"outside agencies," "partner agencies"?

Each year, council members tell each other that once the rush of budget season is over, they'll sit down and come up with a clearly discernible rationale for why taxpayer money should be sent out of City Hall.

On Friday, they learned that's easier said than done.

Councilman Brad Ellis suggested the council look at an across-the-board cut in the \$6.6 million that goes to these agencies.

"We complain about the General Assembly doing things like that but it's probably because how else do you get consensus on reducing expenditures?" he said. "An argument can be made for every one of these things."

But it turns out not all outside agencies are equally cuttable.

The largest portion of the \$6.6 million in this category of the city budget goes to the Rappahannock Regional Jail, which is budgeted at \$3.5 million this year.

City Council members have talked before about how the regional funding agreement for the jail saddles the city with more responsibility simply because more regional residents commit crimes in the city; but breaking the agreement doesn't appear to be much of an option.

The list of agencies also includes a lot of human services-oriented groups, like Micah Ministries, and quasi-governmental groups, like the George Washington Regional Commission.

Vice Mayor Kerry Devine said the human services groups prevent problems that would end up costing the city more.

Councilman Matt Kelly argued that governmental groups like the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization help the city to leverage more state and federal dollars.

Mayor Tom Tomzak wondered whether city contributions to nonprofits discouraged these groups from aggressively seeking private funds.

"They should technically be getting this money from the general citizens of Fredericksburg, not coming through us as a clearinghouse," Tomzak said.

Council members didn't make any decisions Friday, but they did decide to actually look at the 16-page applications the city requires all of these groups to fill out for funding when this year's budget process begins. In the past, they've been looking solely at city staff's funding recommendations for these groups.

Emily Battle: 540/374-5413

Email: ebattle@freelancestar.com

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