

Commissioners split on city housing plan

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A rare split vote by the Lycoming County commissioners Thursday didn't stop an action item on their agenda from passing, but it did show some disagreement on a planned senior housing project to be built in the city.

Commissioner Tony Mussare voted against applying for grant funding to be used for a 32-unit residential complex on vacant property along Grove Street. He said the project - with an original price tag of \$7 million - is just too much to spend on that number of residences.

While the price has come down by nearly \$1 million, Mussare said that equates to about \$200,000 for each home. He said that's too expensive and doesn't add up since the senior citizens who live there only will be paying about \$550 a month with fully paid utilities.

He also said he wasn't satisfied with the bidding process for the project and would have liked more competition.

Mussare said he's more interested in development that's created by private enterprise instead of being heavily tied to government funding that could inflate projects.

Included in the grant application, which ultimately was approved with positive votes from Commissioners Jeff C. Wheeland and Ernie Larson, are projects for the Brodart Commons housing initiative on Memorial Avenue and related neighborhood improvements.

A portion of the funding for the housing projects comes from natural gas drilling impact fees that recently were released from the state.

William Kelly, county Department of Planning and Community Development deputy director, said the county is playing a supporting role to the city in the project.

"The city is in the lead on this, but we'll be at the table helping them," he said.

"We'll be looking all over the county for (housing) projects," said Wheeland, noting the impact fees are not a one-time funding opportunity.

"There's a lot of need out there," Kelly added.

Related to the Brodart Commons project, commissioners approved spending \$140,000 from impact fees to help pay for asbestos removal and demolition costs on the old Memorial Avenue warehouse.

Kelly said cleanup will be completed using state Department of Environmental Protection guidelines. Ground water and soil contamination issues are present underneath the 3.4-acre site, he said.

There are initial talks with developers to build on the site.

"Nothing good happens to vacant buildings," Kelly said.

He said the area's stock of housing has been cut by almost 200 homes from projects such as the Williamsport Regional Medical Center expansion and planned new YMCA. The Brodart Commons project helps restore some of those, he said.

In other business, commissioners also approved a \$550,000 grant contract that will be used to identify and evaluate Brownfields sites. Kim Wheeler, county community development planner, said the grant will focus on sites in the city and Muncy areas, but any county site has the potential to be included in the project.

The grant lasts until Sept. 30, 2015, Wheeler said.