



REQUEST FOR COUNCIL ACTION

Title: Request for Council Action - Community Services Consortium Water Assistance Contract

Preferred Agenda: March 22, 2022

Submitted By: Brandon Neish, Finance Director

Reviewed By: Blair Larsen, Community & Economic Development Director

Type of Action: Resolution ____ Motion X Roll Call ____ Other ____

Relevant Code/Policy:

Towards Council Goal: Goal 3.3: Develop partnerships with regional services and work to connect them with the appropriate members of the public

Attachments: Community Services Consortium Water Assistance Contract

Purpose of this RCA:

To review a contract between the City of Sweet Home and the Community Services Consortium for water assistance provisions.

Background/Context:

Community Services Consortium, CSC, is a state-designated community action agency the provides programs and services to Linn, Benton and Lincoln counties. The City of Sweet Home has worked with CSC previously related to utility assistance payments and have directed customers in need of additional assistance to CSC along with other local organizations. In 2021, CSC entered into an agreement with Oregon Housing and Community Services (OHCS) who received \$13.8 million for a new federal program, the Low-Income Household Water Assistance (LIHWA) program. The program is designed to provide LIHWA funds to local agencies on behalf of eligible utility customers. In order for the Sweet Home community to be eligible for this assistance, a contract with CSC must be signed which will allow funds to flow from CSC to the City and allow the City to provide utility account information to CSC. The City Council has previously requested that contracts be brought before the Council for review. Once the contract is approved, residents of Sweet Home can begin applying for assistance under the new federal program.

The Challenge/Problem:

How does the City provide essential services and ensure that those who need additional support can obtain the help needed?

Stakeholders:

- Sweet Home utility account holders – It happens occasionally that customers get behind on their utility bills and, once behind, sometimes cannot catch up. Community services groups

such as CSC can assist customers who meet specific qualifications (in accordance with the federal program rules).

- City of Sweet Home Finance Department – Execution of this contract allows the City to share information with CSC which will aid in the decision to provide support to customers. Without the contract, information sharing is limited per state law.
- Sweet Home City Council – The City Council adopts the annual budget and reviews any utility rates for water, wastewater and storm water. The Council has expressed desires to limit costs for residents and provide assistance where able to ensure everyone has access to essential services.

Issues and Financial Impacts:

The financial impacts to the City are null other than staff time required to facilitate information sharing amongst the City and CSC. Providing utility assistance to customers can aid the City's enterprise funds in addition to residents as the increased utility revenue can be used for additional capital and operational needs.

Elements of a Stable Solution:

A decision on the contract with CSC would promote a stable solution.

Options:

1. Do Nothing – The City may continue to receive CSC payments through other programs available at CSC's disposal but no information sharing on arrears would occur.
2. Move to approve the contract with Community Services Consortium – The additional federal funds could be extremely useful for residents who have fallen on hard times and could make a huge difference. The City's involvement in administering these funds is zero and requires little staff time to interact with CSC staff.
3. Propose changes to the included agreement – The City Council could request changes to the agreement which staff would work to incorporate and obtain approval from CSC before being brought to a future Council meeting.
4. Attempt to find another partner or solution for assisting utility customers: The City Council could direct staff to pursue our own utility assistance program or find another agency with similar offerings. The OHCS has already initiated grant agreements with CSC to disburse these funds so another organization may not have the same capacity as CSC.

Recommendation:

Staff recommends option 2, move to approve the contract with Community Services Consortium. The CSC is built for these types of programs and already has the necessary contracts with state agencies to distribute these funds.