

Grants *from A1*

employees;

• During any month within the period of March 1, 2020 to present day the business was forced to close by executive order from the Governor of the State of Oregon, or was impacted by mandated COVID restrictions on capacity/operations, or experienced a reduction in sales compared with the same month in the prior year.

Businesses will be eligible for a grant award in the amount equaling the sum of eligible utility bills incurred with the City of Cottage Grove during months in which the business was impacted, up to:

• A maximum of \$1,000 for business which were forced to close by executive order, or;

• A maximum of \$400 for businesses which were impacted by mandated COVID restrictions on capacity/operations, or experienced a reduction in sales compared with the same month in the prior year (these amounts are tentative and subject to change per demand).

Applicants must include copies of all utility bills incurred by the business with the City of Cottage Grove during periods when the business was forced to close by executive order and/or impacted by mandated COVID restrictions.

Utility records may be obtained by contacting the City of Cottage Grove at 541-942-3346 or at www.cgwater@cottagegrove.org.

In creating the Small Business Emergency Loan Program last year, the city chose to grant the third-party Community LendingWorks stewardship over the program's funds.

During a May 11, 2020, city council meeting, councilors Mike

Fleck, Greg Ervin and Candace Solesbee declared conflicts of interest as their organizations or businesses could hypothetically qualify for the loan program.

Though Fleck and Ervin said they had no intention of applying for the program, Solesbee said her businesses would.

City Attorney Carrie Connelly weighed in at the time: "I actually believe that Councilor Solesbee has a 'potential' conflict of interest because even if she's planning to apply, there's no guarantee that she would be awarded. Therefore, I believe that it's fine that she's participating [in the discussion]," she said.

Meyers added that the third-party administration of the funds by Community LendingWorks supported this as it removed bias from the process.

Cuts to a planned "visioning" project, city layoffs due to COVID and taxes from alcohol, cigarette and marijuana sales contributed to the city's ability to establish the fund, said Meyers in an interview with *The Sentinel* at the time.

Around a quarter (\$25,414) of the funds were set aside as grants and established as a matching grant with Business Oregon in hopes of bolstering aid opportunities. The remaining \$74,500 was made available as loans to the community.

Initially, the grant portion was established by Lane County and Community LendingWorks in partnership with the cities of Coburg, Cottage Grove, Creswell, Eugene, Florence, Lowell, Springfield and Veneta and it wasn't until December that the online portal for application to the grants opened.

When it did, the grant portion had fortuitously been matched to a higher ratio that initially

expected and a total of \$85,000 was made available to Cottage Grove.

While the city reported that the grant money was quickly used up in 11 grants to local businesses, the loan fund found a less enthusiastic response as only four businesses opted to take on debt and just \$40,000 in loans were distributed through the program.

With just under \$35,000 sitting in the loan fund unused and local businesses still in need of aid, the program became part of a city discussion about addressing local financial needs.

In February this year, the Cottage Grove City Council approved an assistance package which, among other aid measures, proposed that \$15,000 be taken out of the loan fund and used for Community Sharing's H20 program, which helps residents with water and sewer utility bills.

Councilor Fleck, who is also executive director of Community Sharing, stated in a Feb. 22 city council meeting that he did not have a conflict of interest in the matter.

"Community Sharing is where I am employed, but every dollar of the H20 Program goes directly to the client," he explained. "Our agency does not receive any sort of administrative fee for doing that."

The H20 Program, which has served the area for nine years, offers utility assistance to Cottage Grove ratepayers who are in jeopardy of having their water shut off by the city due to outstanding bills.

The program is funded almost entirely through donations from ratepay-

ers, who produce an average of about \$1,000 in assistance per year.

As part of the city's new assistance package plan, the remaining funds stayed with Community LendingWorks to be converted to a grant fund to assist local businesses with utility costs under the Small Business City Utility Assistance Grants Program.

City staff estimated that just under \$17,000 should be available after administration fees incurred for issuing the grants.

Meyers emphasized the need for the grants as some businesses must pay a stormwater fee alone of \$350 a month (due to large, impervious surfaces on the properties) while remaining closed, which has significantly burdened them financially.

Community Blowback

However, controversy arose on social media this March when members of the public demanded to know who in the city had received money through Community LendingWorks.

Much of the dust-up started when Cottage Grove resident Duane Taddei posted an image of the city's \$100,000 check to the Springfield-based Community LendingWorks, a document which he obtained through a public records request.

The posting caused some unintended consequences, however. As nothing on the check had been redacted, the image included the city's bank account number and check format, information which could

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