

County Commission battles over \$50K discretionary funds for districts

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Facing a tight county budget, two Bernalillo County commissioners on Tuesday tried to turn down an extra \$50,000 in “discretionary” funds for their districts.

It’s a small amount, but Commissioners Wayne Johnson and Lonnie Talbert said they wanted to send the money back – for use on routine social-service programs or to bolster county reserves.



But the idea triggered a bitter debate that ended with the commission’s three Democrats voting to take the money Johnson and Talbert wanted to send back and make it available for their own districts instead.

That means the three Democrats will get an extra \$83,000 each, rather than the original proposal of an extra \$50,000 for every district.

The vote reflects a growing divide on the commission, as Democrats complain that their Republican colleagues are willing to vote against budgets and bond proposals but won’t turn down the money that flows into their districts.

In any case, Tuesday’s vote ignited fierce debate.

“This is thievery on a political scale,” Johnson said, his voice rising. “You all ought to be ashamed of yourselves.”

Commission Chairwoman Debbie O’Malley, who sponsored the proposal, told Johnson he’d better “chill.”

“If you don’t want the money for your districts, you have a right to turn it down,” O’Malley said. “... I think it’s important to get resources for my district.”

O’Malley joined Maggie Hart Stebbins and Art De La Cruz in supporting the move to redistribute the money after Johnson and Talbert said they didn’t want it for their discretionary fund.

Hart Stebbins said the discretionary funds are a critical way for commissioners to fund nonprofit groups working in their districts and to pay for community events. She’s used the money to help groups that address homelessness and domestic violence.

“There are needs in this community that don’t get funded through our standard process,” Hart Stebbins said.

Each of the five commissioners has used discretionary funds over the years. It’s a pot of money they each get to spend largely at their own discretion.

Albuquerque city councilors have something similar, though it’s for capital projects. They each get \$1 million every two years as part of the bond program that goes before voters.

As for the county, the base budget for this year already included \$50,000 for each district. But on Tuesday, the county administration proposed doubling that to \$100,000 for each district.

That’s when Talbert said he wanted to make his money available for the county’s routine social-service spending and

stick instead with the original \$50,000 for his district. Johnson said he wanted to give up his extra \$50,000, too, and send it back to help the county rebuild its reserves.

Commissioners generally use the discretionary money in small increments, doling out just a few thousand dollars at a time. The money has been spent on film festivals, Dia de Los Muertos events, a homeless shelter and mentoring, for example.

The debate came as county commissioners gave final approval to this year's operating budget, which was squeezed by investment losses and flat revenue.

The budget package authorizes a \$15.5 million draw down of the county's reserves.

The county will still have reserves equal to about 33 percent of its annual \$247 million operating budget. The state requires reserves of 25 percent.

Under its own policy, however, Bernalillo County has kept reserves of about 42 percent.

County Manager Tom Zdunek said he doesn't expect the move to harm the county's high "AAA" bond rating.

The rating agencies "think we had an excessive balance to begin with," he said, and they've been notified of the plan.

Much of the money is for public-safety spending, particularly to help address overcrowding in the jail.