

Council approves \$10 million in business assistance

BY JESSICA DYER / JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

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An extra \$10 million in help is soon to flow into the Albuquerque business community.

The Albuquerque City Council on Monday night unanimously approved using \$10 million of the city's \$150 million in federal coronavirus relief money to make grants to small businesses – more than triple the amount of COVID-19-related business assistance laid out in Mayor Tim Keller's current fiscal year 2021 budget proposal.

In a six-hour meeting that also saw the council strike down a couple of firearms-related bills, the business bill unified the nine-member panel.

Councilor Trudy Jones, who co-sponsored the legislation with Brook Bassan, said she considered it an urgent issue since so much of the city's economic health rests on small businesses.

"The people of our city need it now," she said, adding that many families' survival is tied to small businesses. "We're not just helping people who own businesses and are running businesses; we're helping all the people who come down stream from them – all the people who depend on those jobs in those businesses."

Under the ordinance, businesses with 50 or fewer employees can apply for grants of up to \$10,000. With \$10 million available, at least 1,000 businesses should benefit.

Keller's current budget proposal – now pending before council – had included about \$3.4 million for business grants and related assistance and otherwise earmarked all of the remaining federal CARES Act relief money for payroll or COVID-19-related programs.

Chief Financial Officer Sanjay Bhakta told the council that it would be possible to redirect enough to cover \$10 million in small business grants by pulling it away from other programs or making moves that would reduce the \$40 million "contingency" Keller's budget proposes taking into the next fiscal year.

Some councilors said they wanted another two weeks to look closer at the options, but Pat Davis' motion to defer a vote until Oct. 5 failed on a 4-5 vote.

"If we're behind this bill, we need to get this money on the street sooner rather than later," Isaac Benton said of the proposal.

The bill itself ultimately passed 9-0.

Bassan said the \$10 million reflects the need, noting that 1,400 businesses applied earlier this year for the city's "microbusiness" grant program that had only enough funds to help 150.

Bernalillo County – which received \$32 million in CARES Act support – has already exhausted the \$6 million it set aside for small business relief, a spokesman said Monday.

Businesses that received help from Bernalillo County or the state can still qualify for the Albuquerque grants, though their cumulative total cannot exceed \$10,000.

In other action Monday, the council rejected a bill that would have banned firearms from City Hall in Downtown Albuquerque, city libraries and many other city facilities, striking it down 3-6.

Council President Davis had pitched the bill – which would have exempted police officers – as a way to protect members of the public who are forced to visit the city/county building for certain business matters and for city employees exposed to agitated constituents, including at city council meetings themselves. The legislation cited more than a dozen shootings that have occurred at government buildings around the country in the last 25 years, including a 2017 library shooting in Clovis that killed two.

"There are things unique about this (City Hall) building and our jobs that require people to come here under heightened situations, under heightened emotions and, simply put, the mix of firearms and (those situations) has proven to be problematic," said Davis, who co-sponsored the bill with Benton and Diane Gibson.

Only the three sponsors voted for it.

Councilors Bassan, Cynthia Borrego, Don Harris, Jones, Klarissa Peña and Lan Sena voted against it.

Bassan said the bill might have required spending on things like metal detectors at a time when finances are tight. She said she also did not think it was safe to keep guns out of the meeting area.

“I want to be sure that someday when we’re in council chambers, if someone comes in to attack, I really hope the good guys are there to protect us.”