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County looking to establish COVID-19 small business assistance grant program

Volusia County unveiled preliminary plans on Tuesday for a grant program to help small businesses reopen their doors and rebound from the economic devastation brought on by coronavirus crisis. On Tuesday, officials said stimulating the local economy by helping small businesses get back on their feet would be a worthy use for some of the county’s federal funds.

Volusia County received relief funds from the U.S. Treasury Department last week. While the details are still being worked out, the county’s preliminary proposal includes setting aside a portion of the relief money to fund grants for local businesses in Volusia County with up to 25 employees.

“We worked very closely with the cities and our practitioners and stakeholders in economic development to come up with a process where we think we can help them to move forward,” Volusia County Economic Development Director Helga van Eckert said during Tuesday’s County Council meeting.

A provision of the federal CARES Act, counties with populations in excess of 500,000 qualify for the direct federal COVID-19 relief funds. Volusia County is one of 12 counties in Florida to qualify. On Tuesday, the County Council and county staff talked about how the money will be used. Pursuant to federal guidelines, the money can be spent to cover expenses that are directly attributable to the health crisis and aren’t accounted for in the county’s budget. That could cover a lot of things, such as medical and protective supplies, food delivery, rental assistance for residents, disinfection of public areas and facilities, expenses to improve telework capabilities for public employees and other costs incurred by county government related to the pandemic.

County Council members added a couple of additional items to the priority list – expanded COVID-19 testing and coronavirus messaging to targeted vulnerable populations, such as seniors and minorities. But everyone agreed that using some of the money to provide economic support to small businesses suffering from coronavirus-related employment interruptions was a high priority.

Van Eckert said the proposed grant program would help impacted businesses adapt to the changing health and business environment when they get ready to reopen. For instance, she said that businesses might need to invest in such things as plexiglass partitions, sanitary hand-washing stations and replacing doorknobs with lever handles so patrons could open doors with a push of the elbow instead of having to touch the doorknob. While positive, health-minded changes, they come at a price. The idea is for the county to establish a grant program to help businesses pay for retrofits that make them more resilient and safer for both customers and employees.

“All of these kinds of things can be put in place, but they get put in place at a cost,” said van Eckert. “That’s why we see this grant opportunity as the perfect format to allow us to cover the costs associated with helping the businesses to reopen in a manner that protects them, their employees and our citizenry.”

Though still in the development phase, the proposal was warmly embraced by the County Council. Councilwoman Heather Post, for instance, was emphatic that the grant program is exactly what small businesses need right now.

“These small businesses are full of anxiety right now and are really worried about what the future holds for them,” said Post. “I know we have a lot of small businesses that are looking forward to this assistance.”

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