

Council scrutinizes its grants process for nonprofit groups

■ Goal is to make reviews fairer and easier to understand

On Tuesday, two County Council committees continued work on streamlining how the council allocates money to nonprofit groups.

Council members agreed to a proposed resolution that would require

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applicants to have a 501(c)(3) status; require a grants information forum in January; and, most importantly, direct the Grants Advisory Group to submit recommendations to the council without numbered rankings.

Some council members and nonprofits criticized the group for submitting unauthorized rankings to the council last year.

"We are concerned about the [grants review] panel, including who sits on the panel, how they evaluate applications and how they report their findings to the council," said Rabbi Sarah M. Meytin, assistant director of the Jewish Community Relations Council. The JCRC does not apply for county grants, but helps at least seven other Jewish organizations with the application process.

"Every year the panel has gotten away from its original goal of consolidating grant requests and helping the council," Meytin said.

To avoid the problems, council staff recommended that applications be sorted into categories, then ranked in tiers. But some members of the Health and Human Services and Management and Fiscal Policy Committees said the tier system is flawed.

"I'm concerned that the tiered system would lead to rankings, and that it will end up driving the trend [of which requests get funded]," said Councilman Steven A. Silverman (D-At Large) of Silver Spring.

Another concern is with finances, said Councilwoman Marilyn J. Praisner (D-Dist. 4) of Calverton. "There's always the issue of how much money is available in any year," she said. "The reality is that these are grants and there's not guarantee that anyone is going to get the money until we've gone through the [budget] process."

Organizations seeking grants must apply by Feb. 1.

The council is also looking for volunteers to serve on the Grants Advisory Group. Applicants cannot be a member of a board or group that applies for funding. Deadline is Nov. 9.

In other council news

•Oldest trees protected: The council voted unanimously on Tuesday to pass to for a bill protecting the county's oldest trees.

The legislation, proposed by Praisner and Howard A. Denis (R-Dist. 1) of Chevy Chase, broadens the forest conservation law and applies it to all

"champion trees," the name given to the largest tree of a species as designated by the county Forest Conservancy District Board. The current law covers only champion trees that are on a large lot or in a larger forest area.

"There is a larger problem that was addressed in the public hearing, which is that we are losing our tree canopy ... this [bill] is a part of protecting that canopy, but we still have more to do," Denis said. He plans to introduce broader legislation for the next council to consider.

The newly created Forest Conservation Advisory Committee use this law and others to develop a comprehensive plan for preserving county's tree canopy, said Councilwoman Nancy M. Floreen (D-At Large) of Garrett Park, chairwoman of the Transportation and Environment Committee.

The law will be effective as soon as the county executive signs it.

•Water runoff: Also approved Tuesday was a bill requiring builders to use various methods to contain or convey water runoff.

The bill, sponsored by Floreen, addresses problems of water draining from new construction sites onto existing properties. The law takes effect March 1. Proposed methods for builders included include using rain gardens, green roofs and natural buffer areas.

•Cable rules: The council voted to make the county's cable communications law consistent with federal and state laws.

Tuesday's vote also makes the county's Cable Compliance Commission a permanent panel, and requires cable companies with county franchise agreements to have their annual financial statements certified and audited by an authorized company officer and certified public accountant. The law was amended to require the county executive to determine whether companies seeking a cable franchise have submitted all the required information.

The changes come as the council is scheduled to vote on a cable franchise for Verizon. A public hearing is scheduled for Oct. 31, and the council's Management and Fiscal Policy Committee will review the agreement on Nov. 13.

•Lake Needwood Dam repairs: Maryland-National Capital Parks and Planning Commission is asking for \$3.8 million to repair fissures and other damage at the Lake Needwood Dam in Rock Creek Regional Park.

During the downpours of late June, the dam strained to contain the lake that reached 23 feet above its normal level. More than 2,400 people in the Needwood area were evacuated from their homes for almost 24 hours when the dam threatened to rupture.

A public hearing on the appropriation was held Tuesday. The state has required that repairs be made by March. The Planning, Housing and Economic Development Committee is scheduled to discuss the funding request on Oct. 23.