

Lehigh County revitalizes interest in state tree program

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In the end, the county will get its trees.

Lehigh County commissioners Wednesday reversed an earlier decision to reject a \$200,000 state grant for tree planting, this time voting 7-2 to accept the money.

The grant comes from the state TreeVitalize program and will be passed along to five cities and municipalities in Lehigh County and two in Northampton County to purchase and plant trees.

In Lehigh County, the initial grant called for Allentown and Bethlehem to get \$25,000 each, Lower Macungie Township to receive \$12,400 and Catasauqua and Lynn Township to receive \$3,500 each. In Northampton County, Easton and Tatamy were set to receive part of the county's share of the grant.

Last month, in a split vote, the commissioners rejected the grant after Commissioner Chairman Percy Dougherty objected to the state spending money on tree planting while cutting funds for human services.

Dougherty had said he wanted to send a message to the state to examine its priorities. Three commissioners were not at that meeting and the grant did not receive the five votes necessary to accept it.

But Dougherty, who describes himself as a "tree-hugger," changed his mind Wednesday and voted in favor of accepting it. He said he voted "under extreme duress" and said he still believes the state should not be paying for trees while cutting human services aid.

Commissioner Dean Browning, who opposed the grant when it came before the commissioners last month, stuck to his opposition, taking a cue from Dougherty in saying a message needed to be sent to the state. Commissioner Andy Roman also voted no.

"As valuable as the program might be it is just the wrong priority at this point," Browning said in an e-mail. "Allentown has a deficit and needs money to acquire new firefighting equipment or to put police on the streets, Lehigh County is spending more than it is taking in and will be faced with cuts from Harrisburg and the state is operating at a deficit and has frozen wages for nonunion employees. Yet the state is going to give us money, to be matched by local governments, to plant trees. That is like spending money to install an above ground pool while ignoring the leaky roof or not putting money in your kid's college fund," he said.

Several residents of the municipalities slated to receive the money attended Wednesday's meeting to speak in favor of the grant.

Michael Adams, a member of several Allentown and county drug, alcohol and anti-crime committees and a member of the city's shade tree commission, asked the commissioners to find another way to send a message to the state.

"It's an unfortunate set of politics to put something as valuable as tree planting against something as essential as serving the neediest population," Adams said.

After the initial "no" vote, elected officials in Lower Macungie Township and Bethlehem complained, saying the county should not stand in the way of the state's intentions. Some said the state would just send the money to another county to plant trees.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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