

City council approves hazard pay amid virus surge

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
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The new surge in COVID-19 cases has led to many states imposing stricter closures and measures aimed to keep people home and safe. But this surge also means essential employees face a higher risk of being exposed to the virus.

To that end, the Gallup City Council held a special meeting Nov. 13 to discuss using \$918,000 in CARES Act funds to provide hazard pay for essential city employees.

City Manager Maryann Ustick said the CARES funds were meant to reimburse the city for COVID-related expenses such as PPE and plastic barriers, and it frees up budgeted city funds to help the city weather the financial strains created by the pandemic.

While McKinley County received \$16 million in CARES funds, the city received just under \$1 million. The county allotted \$2.5 million of CARES funds to provide hazard pay to their employees during this new surge.

There were two tiers created to designate the pay levels, with the first tier being for first responders and the second tier being the rest of the county employees, which Ustick said the city is emulating.

“Our city staff has extreme risk of exposure to the virus, and the city provides more services than the county does, such as solid waste, electrical services, water and wastewater, and library and park services,” Ustick said. “We have a myriad of ways our employees can be exposed.”

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While Ustick said the city was going to wait to see how its finances looked before deciding how to allot the CARES funds, the new surge of COVID cases spurred the city to opt to use the funds for hazard pay now.

The hazard pay will continue until either the governor terminates the public health order or the CARES funds run out.

Chief Financial Officer Patricia Holland said starting with the pay periods in December through March, tier one employees will receive \$570 as a flat supplement per pay period, while tier two employees get \$285 per period.

"It's not as much as we could have been able to do, but we just didn't receive the same reimbursement funding the county did," Holland said.

Dist. 4 Councilor Fran Palochak said she hopes the city employees appreciate the extra pay while also realizing the city is doing everything it can with what it has for them.

"We do value you. We do appreciate all you do for us. We know you've been exposed. We want to do something. We're doing the best we can, and we hope that's enough to keep you with the city and stay and take care of the city in the wonderful way you do," Palochak said.

The motion to provide hazard pay for city employees starting in December was approved with a 4-0 vote.

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