

County budget revised for Coronavirus relief

Written by By Kevin Opsahl Sun Correspondent
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The McKinley County Board of Commissioners recently voted to increase the county's budget by more than \$4 million, using revenue from the CARES Act, the economic relief bill signed into law during the early days of the coronavirus pandemic.

Commissioners Bill Lee and Billy Moore approved a motion on the matter during their Dec. 8 meeting with little fanfare.

But County Manager Anthony Dimas, Jr., who spoke with the *Gallup Sun* afterward, stressed the importance of the funds, saying they are much needed in a place like McKinley County, which has experienced its share of coronavirus cases compared to other parts of the state.

"It's giving us (the ability) to be able to get PPE [personal protective equipment] and all the sanitizing, cleaning equipment and supplies to help protect the community and protect the staff," Dimas, Jr. said. "So it is huge for us."

So far, the CARES Act has allowed McKinley County to purchase personal protective equipment — including gloves, masks, gowns — as well as things like hand sanitizer, cleaning supplies and thermometers, the county manager said.

Dimas, Jr. said the commission's actions this past week allowed for the \$4 million to be disbursed into McKinley's budget generally, and it will be determined at a later time how the money will be spent.

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He noted that the money disbursed to the budget he oversees includes several nonprofits and other nongovernmental entities, but not the school district.

“We’re putting out there what we can,” he said.

According to McKinley County attorney Doug Decker, the CARES Act funds can be used to reimburse the county for any COVID-19-related purchase between March and June — when the new budget was approved — future expenses from September to Dec. 31. It cannot be used for any expenses beyond the new year.

Decker explained that, when CARES legislation was signed into law back in March, the funds went to the states, which then “built the criteria” for counties to apply for CARES Act funding.

Since those federal dollars were not built into the county’s budget, the commission approved the budget in June not knowing it would receive federal coronavirus relief.

“Now that we’ve got this chunk of money coming in, we have to amend our budget — to increase our budget — saying, ‘this is what it’s budgeted for and we can spend it,’” Decker said, referring to the motion made on Dec. 8. “So, we can continue on and have enough — I’m going to use the word ‘stuff’ — to go through COVID-19 for the duration of our needs.”

The \$4 million added this week is only a fraction of the \$16.1 million total in CARES Act money for McKinley County.

But that amount is not something the county has on hand, so the federal funding is being utilized in the form of a reimbursable grant, according to Dimas.

“We ... borrowed from ourselves, put it up front,” he said. “Then, we started doing expenditures and sent those expenditures to the state for reimbursement. Once those came back in, it was just that revenue, and we started again.”

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“So we’re rotating that money and as it gets paid, we’ll put it back into the budget — cash — to expend [on] the next projects,” Dimas continued.

He was hopeful CARES money would be available in 2021.

“We’re talking to our state legislators, our federal legislators and advocating that we need more funding ... in the future,” Dimas, Jr. said.

But it’s not a dire situation if McKinley County doesn’t receive more CARES funds by January. That’s because CARES has allowed for the county to get enough things for it to “stockpile” to “combat coronavirus into the future.

“We’re going to have PPE, gloves, masks, gowns, sanitizer ... at least we still have a little bit to get us through the next few months,” Dimas, Jr. said.

By Kevin Opsahl
Sun Correspondent