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CRA expected to continue to fund events

March 26, 2013

Island Reporter, Captiva Current, Sanibel-Captiva Islander

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The Community Redevelopment Agency decided it would be penny-wise and pound-foolish if it followed a recommendation by staff to discontinue funding of its major events.

Therefore, the Community Redevelopment Agency will continue to spend \$31,000 to fund events such as the four bike nights, the Arts Festival and other high foot-traffic events that draw upwards of a million people to the South Cape annually.

Dana Brunett, the city's economic developer brought attention to a memo he, acting CRA executive director John Szerlag and Public Information Director Connie Barron sent to the commission that said after a review of its marketing efforts, the CRA intends to focus on a "more traditional economic development and recruitment related activity."

The memo said it would not preclude the future of hosting events within the CRA district, but would not use its financial resources toward those events.

This would take effect during the next budget, the memo said, and it brought some business owners who came into a tizzy.

Jack Martin, president of the Rotary Club, expressed his displeasure to the plan.

"We've partnered on a lot of things. We're concerned that if you won't further support these events, they will go away," Martin said. "The Arts Festival brings in 100,000. Consider that."

Brunett justified the idea on "putting feet on the street every day, not just a few times a year."

"I'm an economic development guy. I'm thinking brick and mortar," Brunett said. "I want to build and hire people and see how it impacts the TIF so we can get more money and get others to come to the city."

Commissioner Marty McClain said Brunett and Szerlag needed to go back to the drawing board.

"The events that take place down there pay these businesses' bills. They need the backing of these events being there," McClain said. "We have made a commitment to them. Show me a Plan B and I'm on board."

"These events are what forge the identity of the South Cape, and I'm in support to continue that," Commissioner Kevin McGrail said. "It's events like the Farmers Market that makes Cape Coral a city people return to."

In the end, the commissioners did not put the matter to a vote (there were no votes taken throughout the meeting), but said they would be open to consider other ideas.

Earlier in the meeting, CRA consultant Frank Schnidman reminded

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the CRA board that economic development was not its primary goal, but rather to keep the area free of blight and slums, so long as it follows the CRA plan for redevelopment.

He also said the goal of the CRA was to follow past documents that guided the CRA into a clear path for the future. Specifically 2036, when the CRA was slated for sunset.

"That is your Bible, taking four documents and making them into one," Schnidman said. "This is an opportunity to use your advisory board who will work with the community to modify it. This Bible will take you through the next 23 years."

Schnidman made it simple. If it's not in the plan, you can't spend CRA monies on it.

"The CRA is a blighted area and its goal is to eliminate blight, not the goal to create jobs. You make it more attractive to be here," Schnidman said. "It relates to the fact there's a plan to guide the action."

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