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County decision blocks Clover, York from additional housing funds

BY JIE JENNY ZOU

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The York County Council's decision this week to reject additional funding for housing improvements has also blocked two municipalities from participation – causing confusion and disappointment among local leaders.

"It deals with federal dollars coming back to us – that's it in a nutshell," York Mayor Eddie Lee said Wednesday of a proposed housing consortium rejected by the county council on Monday. "I don't understand it."

The council's decision means the city of York and the town of Clover are ineligible to participate in the program. Member municipalities must be contiguous – or touch – in order to participate.

While York and Clover cannot participate, Rock Hill and Fort Mill have joined since they connect to Lancaster County – the lead agency in the consortium.



York Mayor Eddie Lee stands in front of a foreclosed house on Herndon Ave. in York that the city has taken over. ANDY BURRISS — aburiss@heraldonline.com **Buy Photo**

The York County Council voted 5-2 against joining the consortium proposed by the Catawba Regional Council of Governments, with Councilmen Bump Roddey and Chad Williams in favor. Among those opposed was Chairman Britt Blackwell, a council of governments representative.

Calls to Blackwell for additional comment were not returned. Councilman Michael Johnson, who previously warned others on council that a 'no' vote would effectively block Clover and York from participating, could not be reached for comment.

The consortium would pool thousands of dollars annually in additional federal grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which can be spent on housing rehabilitation projects and other improvements.

"This is unfortunate because Clover has many neighborhoods that would have met the eligibility requirements and could have benefited from this program," wrote Clover Town Manager Allison Harvey in an email. "Our low to moderate income residents will see no benefit and that's a shame when there is money out there to help them."

Councilman Bruce Henderson was the most vocal opponent against joining, citing concerns over federal control from HUD. Henderson's district includes Clover and Lake Wylie.

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York County pays membership fees of \$87,000 annually to the Catawba Regional Council of Governments, which solicits federal grants on behalf of members. The council of governments includes 24 municipalities from York, Chester, Lancaster and Union counties.

York County has been a council of governments member for 44 years, with county staff securing \$22.7 million in HUD grants, including money for water and sewer updates in York and Sharon.

The York City Council voted unanimously to join the consortium Tuesday night, even though the municipality was technically no longer able to participate.

"We've had tremendous success with HUD grants," Mayor Lee said Wednesday. "I know the city of York, this is the type of thing they consider to be very dear."

Lee called housing needs "critical" for York's development. "We want people to have decent, affordable housing."

County Councilman Joe Cox, whose district encompasses York, was one of five who voted down the measure, citing concerns on increased federal control.

"It's what the effects are long-term down the road," Cox said Monday. "We're getting too tied into federal grants and the strings attached to the federal grants."

He emphasized that he is not against the Catawba Regional Council of Governments and cited disagreement with Section 8 subsidies to builders, calling it an "unfair playing field" for developers.

The county will continue to receive HUD funds, but won't have access to additional grants available to consortium members last estimated at up to \$790,000 annually. Membership in the consortium is free, though local matches covering a small percentage of HUD grants are required. Matches can be in the form of land and other non-monetary sources for greater flexibility, according to council of governments staff.

County Councilman Bump Roddey pointed out funding isn't just for new home construction as some believe.

"This money could have really been utilized for some of our seniors who own their homes, who could use it for rehab to make their houses more livable," he said. "Some people just don't get it."

Roddey said he wasn't surprised the issue was politicized.

"Some people still interject national politics into local government," he said, adding he was especially let down by Blackwell's decision. Roddey, Blackwell and County Councilman Williams are council of governments representatives.

Angela Kirkpatrick of the council of governments confirmed the county's participation is necessary to include western York County. "This effectively eliminates the western and unincorporated areas of York County from participation," she wrote in an email.

In order for the council to reverse its decision, one of the five councilmen who voted against the measure must make a motion to reconsider. "I don't see that happening," Roddey said.

Jason Weil, director of housing and neighborhood services for Rock Hill, called the consortium "one more avenue" for the city to build on its "strong track record of supporting affordable housing and community development."

"It'll open up a pot of funds that historically has not been available to use," he said specifically of HOME grants that go toward housing rehab.

Mayor Lee said he hopes the county council reviews the program more thoroughly.

"People who don't like government need to realize this is bringing that money back home," he said. "There's no such thing as federal money, it's our money and we're trying to get it back."

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Too much money is being made in York and Clover on fining and locking people up. And this money is being used to build more courts and jails. It would be nice if they would let Mayor Lee, do things his way for a change. Work with the people instead of against them all the time.

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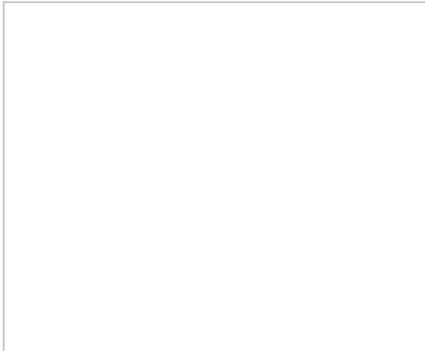
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