

MEMORANDUM

DATE: August 5, 2014

TO: Honorable Mayor and City Commission

FROM: Kenneth Fields, City Manager

RE: City Funding for the Historic Lake Wales Society, Inc.

SYNOPSIS: The Historic Lake Wales Society has requested that the City of Lake Wales provide ongoing financial support in order to keep the Depot Museum open.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the City not provide ongoing support to the Historical Society or sell any assets to provide short term funding to maintain operations of the Depot Museum Complex.

BACKGROUND

The Historic Lake Wales Society is a private, non-profit entity that currently operates the City's Depot Museum Complex and organizes the annual Pioneer Days festival. Its Director is Mimi Reid Hardman. Over the years, the Society and Ms. Hardman have made significant contributions to the City by acquiring and preserving historic structures and objects related to the City's history. In the past few years, as the Society's financial situation has deteriorated, it transferred ownership of its historic structures and some of its objects to the city, who assumed responsibility for major maintenance items and matters such as property insurance and security. Operation of the Depot Museum Complex, which houses the Society's historic objects, has remained a Society responsibility and it collects and retains any revenue the Museum generates.

At this time, the Society has indicated that it no longer has the financial or staff resources to continue operation of the Museum or the ability to be the organizer of the Pioneer Days festival and has requested the City either provide direct financial support of the Society or alternatively, allow certain assets that were transferred to the City, specifically the 1944 Whitcomb Engine and the 1916 Pullman Car, be sold and the net proceeds provided to the Society to allow it to continue. The Society has indicated it has no other prospects for long-term financial viability.

Over the course of my career as a local manager, budget director, and consultant to a major federal agency, I have often been required to evaluate the effectiveness and efficacy of providing funds to local non-profit organizations that provide services in a specific geographic area. It is my experience that the organizations which are most successful in this regard share certain characteristics: a broad and deep donor base who can provide financial resources over a long period of time; a large group of dedicated volunteers who can and do assist in regular operations; an involved and experienced board who provide expertise in management and a commitment to fund raising; and, finally, a clear shared vision of the organization's purpose and vision among all of the above. By its own admission, the Historic Lake Wales Society currently falls short in most of the above characteristics.

In addition to its lack of funds and staff, I do not believe the current Depot Museum meets the current standards of what a historic museum should be or do. There is a wonderful story to tell about this area's history, its unique geography and ecology, and the culture that developed in this area from its agricultural roots in cattle and citrus to today's tourism and quality of life environment. Old age alone does not make an object or building historic, and not every item that is historic is significant enough to preserve in a museum. The current Depot Museum contains many old objects but does not tell the

Lake Wales story in manner that today's visitors expect. One only has to visit the Visitor Center at nearby Bok Tower or the County Historic Museum in Bartow to see how visitors can be told a historical tale by the use of only a few objects and informative displays. To be successful, the Depot Museum must be modernized, the collection of objects professionally curated so as to be relevant to the Museum's purpose of telling the area's history, and the displays updated to meet current expectations.

To this end, I would recommend that the museum be closed for at least one year while the City forms a Task Force to develop a long-term strategic plan on what should be the Museum's focus, how the Museum should operate, and how to provide ongoing financial support for the Museum's operations. The Task Force would consist of individuals from the community knowledgeable in this area but not currently involved in the Museum's operation. It should seek technical assistance from the Polk County Historical Center and the State of Florida Historical Commission on how best to redesign the Depot Museum Complex and enhance it as a visitor attraction. With a clear concept of what the Museum should be, and a long term road map in hand for how it could operate, the possibility of obtaining funding to implement the plan from private and other government sources would be greatly enhanced. At that point, the City can determine if it wishes to operate it itself, or ask a reconstituted historic group to take responsibility. It is expected that the current Executive Director of the Historic Lake Wales Society would be involved in this effort.

Providing short term funding at this time will not solve the Historic Lake Wales Society's long-term problems; and selling assets to fund current operations is rarely a good approach to solving financial problems for any organization, public or private.

The City itself can take responsibility for organizing the annual Pioneer Days Festival as it already provides a significant level of in-kind services and only needs to make provisions for the acceptance and disbursement of sponsorship funds to support the event. This would not require any significant additional City resources beyond a modest increase in staff time already allocated to the event. Ms. Hardman would continue to play a significant role in this presentation.

The Historic Lake Wales Society's contributions are many and greatly appreciated by the City of Lake Wales and its citizens but it is time for a new approach to preserving and telling the City's story.

OTHER OPTIONS

Provide operating funds to the Historic Lake Wales Society from the City's General Fund budget or sell existing assets and use the resulting proceeds to provide funding.

FISCAL IMPACT

Including funding from the City's General Fund budget will require a reduction in some other area. Selling a City asset will not provide funding over more than a one-time basis.

ATTACHMENT

None