

## City to hold funds?

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The City Council likely will vote next week to withhold a \$40,000 payment to the Fayetteville Partnership while the organization is being audited.

City Councilman Don Talbot, who will make the motion Tuesday to withhold the funding, also is pushing for a criminal investigation of Partnership Director Robin Huske Kelly.

“Law enforcement does need to investigate to determine if a crime has been committed,” he said.

Kelly, who has headed the Partnership for 15 years, used the nonprofit agency’s credit card to make more than \$2,500 in personal charges since 1996. She repaid the money, plus interest and late fees, after the information was brought to the Partnership’s Executive Committee in May.

Talbot took the personal charges to the Executive Committee, which ordered an audit of the Partnership’s credit card statements. City and county auditors are reviewing all of the Partnership’s financial dealings and expect to finish in about a week.

In the meantime, most council members don’t want the Partnership to get any money from the city. A majority said they would support Talbot’s motion to withhold funding.

Councilman Curtis Worthy said he isn’t satisfied with Kelly’s explanation that her use of the card was “poor judgment” and that the Partnership had no policy regulating use of the card.

“Perhaps there was a lack of policy,” Worthy said. “But at some point, common reason sets in. We’re paying her \$60,000 a year to use good judgment -- not poor judgment.”

Mayor Pro Tem Milo McBryde and Councilman Jimmy Kizer said they would vote to withhold the funding if it were legal to do so. Kelly could not be reached Thursday. She has apologized for making the charges.

Willis McLeod, president of the Partnership, was out of the country and could not be reached.

Partnership Treasurer John Monaghan said the agency has some money in the bank, but he didn’t know how long it would last if the city withheld its money.

“I guess it depends on how long it’s withheld and what other sources might come forward,” he said.

Council members said they are being barraged with telephone calls from constituents who are furious about Kelly’s charges and the Executive Committee’s initial decision not to reprimand her.

One resident, Kelli Ann Davis, is organizing a picket in front of City Hall during Tuesday night's council meeting.

"I am getting a lot of calls -- a lot," Councilwoman Betty Milligan said. "I think the Executive Committee should have shown some stronger leadership at their first meeting. Decisions should have been made at that point that could have avoided much of this."

The Executive Committee is reconsidering its decision not to reprimand Kelly and plans to make a recommendation to the agency's full board after the audit by city and county officials.

Councilman D.J. Haire said he would not vote to give the Partnership any money right now.

"My constituents are hitting me hard with this," he said. "Every one of them feels the same: that right is right and wrong is wrong. They don't want me to give any money to someone who has done this type of transaction."

City Attorney Bob Cogswell said the city's contract with Fayetteville Partnership allows the city to withhold payment or deduct a specific amount because of questionable expenditures. But Cogswell recommends against it because the Partnership would not be able to pay its bills.

In a memo to the council, Cogswell said that city auditors would review Kelly's invoices for the payment to verify the charges are appropriate.

The Fayetteville Partnership promotes economic development downtown. The agency gets \$160,000 -- half of its annual budget -- from the city. The county contributes \$60,000.

The council voted last month not to appropriate any money in the new budget year to Fayetteville Partnership. Instead, council members set the money aside for economic development downtown.

Councilman Mark Kendrick and several other council members have said they are leaning toward canceling the city's contract with Fayetteville Partnership, especially if Kelly remains.

"My constituents are saying to stop funding Fayetteville Partnership altogether, and I have to listen to my constituents," Kendrick said. Kendrick said he would consider allocating the money to the Fayetteville Area Economic Development Corp., which recruits industry mostly in the county. The city contributes \$30,000 annually to the organization.

"I think with that kind of money, they could change their focus a little," he said. "I'm excited about that possibility."

Kelly has said that Talbot, a critic of the Partnership, was trying to use her mistake to derail support for downtown revitalization.

Talbot said he's just trying to do the right thing. Earlier this week he sent an e-mail message to 25 fellow Republicans and dozens of other friends asking for volunteers to file a complaint with the Cumberland County Sheriff's Office accusing Kelly of embezzlement. "We have a city police officer who will sign the first line, but he wants to have two or three more county residents to join with him to sign the complaint form," Talbot wrote.

In the message, he asked supporters to respond to him by e-mail "and we will connect with you for instruction and information." Talbot said he sent the message at the request of the police officer, Jerry Schrecker. "I'm not orchestrating this," Talbot said. "People come to me for help, and it puts me in an awkward position. I'm not going to sign it, I've already done my part." Schrecker couldn't be reached for comment.

Talbot said the people who responded to his request want to wait for the outcome of the audit before pursuing a criminal investigation.