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Amory board of aldermen discusses deficit, dust complaints and a tank

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AMORY – The majority of the time during the Oct. 4 board of aldermen meeting was devoted to revisiting an item tabled from its last meeting. Tracy Hadley, representing the local Order of the Eastern Star, returned to continue her petition to the board for waiver of rental fee to use community center space for their meetings.

The petition launched a wide-ranging discussion of the financial standing of the city’s community centers. City clerk Lee Barnett provided reports, stating most of the city’s revenue to operate the facilities is derived from space rentals.

The bad news was that the rent collected has not even come close to paying the cost of utilities, let alone salaries and maintenance – to the tune of \$24,000 in the red for the past year. Barnett went on to say that the expenses to operate the West Amory Community Center were more than its East Amory counterpart due to the fact that East Amory Community Center was equipped with a newer, more energy-efficient HVAC system.

“If we keep giving stuff away, how can we continue to operate,” asked Ward 4 Alderman Glen Bingham, citing a long previous record of helping community service providers with free or reduced rent.

He asked Hadley if the \$30 rent is an excessive fee. She said she would take the matter back to her board to reconsider its request to the city but asked whether other nonprofit community service groups would be asked to step up and pay rent to which Bingham replied, “Yes.”

The discussion branched out even further to explore community response to enhancements at East Amory Community Center, located in a predominantly white neighborhood, as opposed to West Amory, where the population of the service area is predominantly African-American.

Hadley emphasized that equal treatment to both centers was vital to prevent racial friction in the city.

“A lot of issues are due to ignorance of the facts, not race,” Hadley said.

Ward 2 Alderman John Darden said that people who don't go to meetings need to be informed of events such as church services.

“The problem is perception. Effective communication is the key,” said Mayor Brad Blalock, who pledged to meet with Hadley and Amory Park and Recreation Director Rory Thornton to work out suitable arrangements for the Eastern Star chapter as well as other nonprofit community groups that would follow suit.

As the discussion wound down, the motion to grant Hadley's request for a fee waiver died for lack of a second to Darden's motion.

Another scheduled guest appearance from Monroe County Veteran's Association representative Carolyn Goldsboro presented to the city a very unusual proposition. An M60A1 Patton battle tank from the deactivated Nettleton National Guard Armory was offered to the City of Amory for adoption at no cost if the city could provide a site.

Goldsboro provided a visual of not only the tank but a map showing the proposed location on a city-owned island across Highway 278 from the existing Veteran's Memorial near Wilkerson's Furniture. The development of the site would consist primarily of the installation of a suitable concrete pad for the 50-ton tank.

Goldsboro said the veteran's group would approach local contractor Hob Sanderson about donating the concrete for the project. Blalock expressed his support for the initiative, as did Amory Police Chief Ronnie Bowen, who didn't foresee any traffic issues that might result from locating the tank at the site.

Goldsboro added that funds are in place for landscaping the site once the installation is complete. Further action on this item is pending.

Finally, Darden relayed complaints from residents of his ward, who he said are wheezing, coughing and constantly washing the dust off of their vehicles generated by the Enviva pellet plant.

Blalock responded that while the plant was in compliance with Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) standards, he would follow up on looking into any remedies possible, while the area still waits for relief from the extended hot and dusty summer conditions.

Amory Street Department Director David Moore added that recently, the prevailing winds have been easterly, causing more dust over sections of Ward 2.

Ironically, Enviva's introductory statement on its website proclaims its mission is to "develop a cleaner energy alternative to fossil fuels." It continues to say, "We work for lower emissions, healthy forests and strong communities."

While the emissions may not be environmentally threatening, the funnel cloud of dust over the plant can be unsettling when seen reaching into another cloud above, and the dust by-product persists for the time being.

Local officials at Enviva did not return request for comment.