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Cape Coral council votes to scrap Community Redevelopment Agency

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Dozens of supporters and last-minute proposed budget cuts weren't enough to save the Cape Coral Community Redevelopment Agency on Monday night.

City Council voted 5-3 to disband the CRA's current board of commissioners and make City Manager John Szerlag its new executive director. Council will become the new governing board.

Councilmen Kevin McGrail and Chris Chulakes-Leetz, along with Mayor John Sullivan, dissented.

Council members acknowledged the positive work the agency had done in recent years, but said the the decision came down to finances.

Councilwoman Rana Erbrick said the agency would eventually run out of money, though she conceded it may not happen as soon as September, as Szerlag had stated. Erbrick also disputed claims about ulterior motives.

"This is not a money grab, this is not retribution for you asking tough questions, this is not a witch hunt," she said. "This is a financial business decision."

Councilman Marty McClain said he lost his support for the agency when it retained an expensive consultant recently. "We have a responsibility with your taxpayer dollars," McClain said.

In a last-ditch effort to save the agency in its current form, CRA Executive Director John Jacobsen presented a number of proposed budget reductions, including a 40 percent cut to payroll expenses that would have slashed his own \$107,500 salary by 25 percent.

McGrail, however, said he had taken another look at the finances and found they weren't as dire as he was led to believe.

"For us to move this forward and pound a nail through all of these people who have done nothing but good for the city of Cape Coral would be the complete wrong thing to do," he said.

Chulakes-Leetz, who proposed a similar ordinance earlier this year to bring the CRA under council control before withdrawing his support, said the city has enough problems to worry about.

"You gotta fix your own house before you can go and fix other people's homes," Chulakes-Leetz said.

He also wondered whether council and city staff had enough time to devote to issues in the downtown CRA district, a sentiment expressed by many residents and business owners who spoke on the agency's behalf Monday and recounted times Jacobsen and others had helped them navigate the bureaucracy of City Hall.

Some also questioned whether the city has a plan for the district.

“Tell me what you’re gonna do,” said Andrew Gray, owner of Rack’em Billiards. “Let’s see your concept of how you think downtown Cape Coral should look.”

Council will hold its first meeting as the new CRA board of commissioners on Nov. 7.

McGrail said afterward he is in favor of creating an advisory board that would meet monthly and report to council, which he thinks should meet on CRA matters at least quarterly.

He said it will be important to assure downtown businesses their needs will continue to be addressed.

“The board, meaning the City Council, will not abandon them,” he said. “It’s our job now to deliver to their expectations.”

Additional Facts

In other news:

At its regularly scheduled non-voting meeting following the special meeting on the CRA, Cape Coral’s City Council briefly discussed the issue of how to pay \$788,000 to improve scrub jay habitat in Alva.

The mitigation efforts would allow the city to obtain a special permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that would authorize construction anywhere in the city where the endangered birds decide to call home.

Council will vote this coming Monday on a payment plan and whether to authorize the city manager to conduct a special study to determine where the money should come from. Options include the general fund, an assessment on property owners and an increase in permit fees.
