

City mayors, economic development president, Fort Bend ISD divided over division of federal COVID-19 relief funding

By [Kristi Nix](#) — Updated 2:11 pm CDT, Tuesday, May 26, 2020

As Fort Bend County officials decide how to distribute \$134 million in federal COVID-19 COVID-19 funds, a group of elected officials, business, school district and community leaders spoke during Tuesday's Commissioners' Court meeting about the priorities being discussed for the funds. Recently, county officials formed the Fort Bend CARES Act Distribution Advisory Committee to offer their input and several committee members were among those who spoke during the meeting.



Photo: Zoom Meeting ImageFaith-based community leaders, represented by Pastor David Sincere (left) and Fort Bend ISD chief financial officer Bryan Guinn (right) speak during public comments at Tuesday Fort Bend County Commissioners Court meeting.

Sugar Land Mayor Joe Zimmerman voiced concerns that cities are facing revenue shortfalls and CARES Acts funds are not structured to help offset those losses.

“It leaves a little bit to be desired at least from the city’s standpoint. We, like you, will be facing sales and use tax shortfall in revenue and although the CARES funding currently doesn’t help to cover that gap we believe the work we’re doing with Senator Coryn, Senator Cruz and Representative Olson, that could eventually be the case,” Zimmerman said.

Fulshear Mayor Aaron Groff and Meadows Place Mayor Charles Jessup also spoke during public comments as well as Fort Bend ISD Chief Financial Officer Bryan Guinn who said the district had been “on the front lines” since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, providing more than 400,000 meals to students and providing mental health services.

“Fort Bend ISD is deeply concerned with the scoring matrix,” he said and voiced concerns Fort Bend ISD and other county school districts’ services weren’t placed higher on the priority list.

“We strongly believe that focusing strictly on personal protective gear and sanitizing efforts ignores the critical efforts that have been undertaken by the school districts and that we need to ensure that the feeding and mental health services receive funding,” Guinn said.

Davis Sincere, pastor of the Fort Bend Transformation Church and CARES task force committee member representing a group of the county's faith-leaders asked that a portion of the funding be used to help people struggling to pay their rent.

"We want to try and protect people from homelessness and protect children from being put out of their homes," Sincere said and also urged the court to put a moratorium on evictions until August.

Jeff Wiley, president and CEO of the Fort Bend Economic Development Council pointed out the business community was underrepresented on the task force committee but added he supported prioritizing funds for personal protective gear, disinfectant, COVID-19 testing efforts and contact tracing. However, he said it was unclear how these items would be sourced, procured and distributed.

"While we figure this out there are a few immediate priorities that I think would be well served by getting underway this month, specifically payroll, reimbursement for governmental first responders, hospital improvements and equipment and business grant programs," Wiley said. "These three programs are the next three in priority after those mentioned, are time sensitive and address needed assistance today for strained governments, hospital and business budgets that have been under duress as well, as we approach 60 days into interruption of regular operations."

During the agenda discussions, Precinct 3 Commissioner Andy Meyers questioned how the funds would be divided and said he hopes there would be more help for small businesses in the county.

Judge KP George said he was planning to schedule workshop in the near future to allow a more in-depth court discussion about how the funds will be divided. Precinct 2 Commissioner Grady Prestage voiced optimism that he and other members of the court can craft a final budget in the near future.

"I see a happy ending to this for everyone. But we have to be careful how we handle this. We have to be more pragmatic and simple," Prestage said.