

City Council OKs \$250,000 to help migrants

Two hours of commentary, both pro and con, preceded vote



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Archbishop John Wester addresses the City Council to express his support for the resolution to use \$250,000 of city money to help asylum seekers passing through Albuquerque.

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Following impassioned testimony
from local faith leaders, volunteers

and immigrant rights activists, the Albuquerque City Council on Monday approved spending \$250,000 to help asylum-seeking migrants passing through the city.

Officials say federal immigration authorities have in the past few months bused in more than 2,200 such migrants. Faith-based groups and other community organizations have thus far led the effort to temporarily house and feed them before they move on to meet sponsors or family members in other parts of the country.

The city administration can now apply the money toward grants and contracts with the groups doing that work.

The Democrat-majority Council voted 6-3 on party lines to approve Councilor Pat Davis' proposal after nearly two hours of commentary from the public and the councilors themselves. Speakers invoked the Old Testament and quoted Martin Luther King Jr., Robert Kennedy and Anne Frank.

"For more than 300 years we've been a crossroads for families," said Davis, who noted that the funding represents "one-4,000th" of the total city budget. "I don't think we should sit back and let history look back at our current chapter and say that we failed this test."

Staff from the city's Office of Immigrant & Refugee Affairs have helped the community groups in a coordinating capacity, but the city had not previously allocated specific financial resources.

Mayor Tim Keller issued a statement after Monday's vote to say using the \$250,000 for this purpose would not stall other city programs.

"Supporting our friends and neighbors who are doing the right thing while we continue to prioritize our community's own challenges is not an 'either/or' question," he said. "We are going to continue our critical public safety work while also standing for the families lawfully traveling through the Duke City to join their sponsors around the country and seek a better life."

Most of the roughly 40 people who took the podium Monday urged the

Council to approve the funding and contribute to an effort that has been powered by volunteer labor and donations.

Many who spoke called it a moral imperative to help those arriving at the southern border seeking refuge.

“We’ve come across people who have been shipwrecked by their life, and it’s up to us to reach out and sustain them and rescue them,” said Rev. Joseph Britton of St. Michael & All Angels Episcopal Church.

Many noted that asylum seekers have gone through a legal process and have been screened and vetted by authorities at the border before arriving in Albuquerque.

Some described city funding as a common-sense measure that would ensure the existing nonprofit and faith-based groups could continue their work and avoid a potentially chaotic alternative: bus loads of migrants being dropped off in town without a designated network to assist them.

Lawrence Rael, the city’s chief operating officer, said that would tax existing city services like the West Side homeless shelter.

Councilor Cynthia Borrego agreed.

“I think this process is actually ensuring safety,” she said before voting for the funding. “Without this process, it puts people on the street and then you’ll find them at your door begging for food and money.”

Others cited their personal experience with the migrant families in appealing for the Council’s support Monday night.

Steve Morrison said he had heard several harrowing stories since joining Catholic Charities’ effort to help asylum-seekers.

He said he had met a man who traveled across Mexico with 150 people in the back of a semitruck and a “woman whose daughter slept on her under a bridge in El Paso because the night before she received bruises while she slept on rocks.”

Morrison described himself as a registered Republican and social conservative but said the issue transcends party.

“This should not be a political issue,” he said. “This is a human issue.

Please be human.”

But not everyone who spoke shared his perspective.

A handful of commenters objected to any city-backed aid, saying Albuquerque has too many unresolved problems with crime, homelessness and childhood poverty to justify such an expense.

“We’ve failed in providing care to Albuquerque residents; the more appropriate use of funds is to help Albuquerque residents with child hunger, giving adequate access to educational programs, making sure our elderly have their next meal and providing (for) veterans who have fallen on tough times,” said Nick Layman.

Councilor Trudy Jones, who voted against the proposal, echoed those concerns. She said she would personally contribute her own resources to help asylumseekers but would not vote to allocate public funds for that purpose.

“(For) people on the streets and our children who don’t have homes and aren’t getting educated and have issues even greater than that, this quarter of a million could go a long ways,” she said.

But several councilors said the city is still working to tackle its own issues, citing the \$14 million for a new homeless shelter on this fall’s general obligation bond ballot.

“This is not a zero-sum game,” said Councilor Isaac Benton, who proceeded to detail historic instances of U.S. intervention in Latin America that contributed to the issues the asylum seekers are now trying to flee.

“We share a lot of that responsibility,” he said. “We share a responsibility now to welcome these people into our country.”