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City targets rehab funds at Ricktown Arts District

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City Council agreed Monday to spend up to half of the \$75,000 in its Major Systems Rehabilitation Program on the Ricktown Arts District, the downtown area targeted for extra housing investment.

The rest of the money will be spent citywide, helping owner-occupiers fix up such systems as furnaces and leaky roofs.

The money isn't much; it might help about 14 homeowners in total. But in agreeing to Ricktown, council turned down one of the major recommendations in its draft housing plan: Start housing programs first in an expanded Centre Park area, then move to Ricktown.

Councilwoman Donna Reed was the sole vote against the move, claiming the city can't let its strong neighborhoods such as Centre Park be weakened.

"When are we going to start rewarding people in the stronger neighborhoods for the work they've done?" she asked.

However, Ronald S. Miller, executive director of Neighborhood Housing Services, which will run the program, argued for focusing on Ricktown to protect the investments already there, such as the Goggleworks, the new Reading Movies 11 and the GoggleWorks Apartments now under construction.

"There's so much public and private investment in that area, we can't let it deteriorate," agreed Councilman Dennis M. Sterner.

Council also authorized police Chief William M. Heim to begin the process of hiring 15 new police officers.

The department's authorized strength is 174 officers, but it only has 158, with five more about to retire.

Council approved a lease with Berks County, which plans to build a 300-foot radio tower on city-owned land atop Mount Penn.

That new facility, adjacent to its existing radio tower just north of the fire tower, is part of the county's major upgrade to the emergency communications system. County Commissioner Kevin S. Barnhardt said it's the most critical tower site in Berks.

The county will pay the city \$1 a month for the lease.

Meanwhile, council agreed to create six new jobs at the wastewater treatment plant and eliminate four others.

Among the most pressing needs is hiring an accountant to keep track of the grants coming in and the expenses being paid for the new plant that's now in the planning stages, said plant Supervisor Ralph Johnson.

Those accounts now are being tracked by an outside consultant at considerable expense, and it would be cheaper to bring the work in house, Johnson said.

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And council introduced several new ordinances, among them:

- Authorizing Mayor Tom McMahon to set up, along with the Reading School District, a joint Reading Recreation Commission.
- Putting a ballot question on the 2012 primary ballot, asking voters to raise the qualifications needed to run for city auditor.
- Approving a lease that would allow the Olivet Boys & Girls Clubs to build a 13,000-square-foot clubhouse in Pandora Park, along 19th Street.

Contact Don Spatz: 610-371-5027 or dspatz@readingeagle.com.

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