

Riley County receives \$15 million fund for COVID-19 relief

By Kyle Ruder

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Gov. Laura Kelly reviewed and approved the Strengthening People and Revitalizing Kansas, or SPARK, funds for the state over the summer. This approval gave \$400 million to local governments for COVID-19 expenses. Of that \$400 million, \$14.9 million was allocated to Riley County.

From the county funding, the city of Manhattan received a little over \$2.9 million and Kansas State received roughly \$2.4 million.

The \$15 million was divided between the cities of Manhattan, Riley, Leonardville, Randolph and Ogden. In addition, USD 378, 383, and 384 received funding, as well as the Manhattan Catholic schools, Manhattan Christian College and the technical college.

Lastly, the Riley County Police Department received \$288,400 and there was also a small business grant of \$2.5 million to local businesses.

Manhattan City Commissioner Aaron Estabrook said the city requested closer to \$10.5 million, but received much less.

“The \$10.5 million was based on a formula that took the per population and distributed it based on population in the city of Manhattan,” Estabrook said.

All of the funding applied thus far only addresses the expenses between March 1, 2020, through the end of the year. The funding the local government received from SPARK is to help offset the additional expenses that local governments had because of the pandemic, but not to help offset any revenue losses.

“What was good about this was that it allowed us the opportunity to reimburse the public entities for some of the early expenditures,” John Ford, District 1 Riley County Commissioner, said.

As a public entity, some of the money K-State received helped with student-based needs to cover for personal protective equipment, sanitizing stations and ways to maintain social distance through hybrid learning.

Riley County hired the company Witt O’Brien’s to help with this process of emergency funding.

“In the beginning, it was creating a plan on how we would distribute the funds, and we have a committee here that is made up of six people to help with this as well,” Tami Robison, budget and finance officer for Riley County, said.

“They are the same firm that has worked with Sedwick and Johnson County with their funding,” Ford said.

The six committee members are the budget and finance officer, the county treasurer, the county clerk, the public works director, the planning and development director and the county counselor. This budget and planning group assisted Witt O’Brien’s in meetings regarding how the funds could be used and what was eligible.

“They have done very well and have done what we probably wouldn’t have been able to do, and that was working with the \$15 million and how it will be used in a timely manner,” Ford said.

The city plans on using its allocated funds as reimbursement for expenses related to enhanced cleaning equipment, materials and supplies, and expenses related to addressing telework needs and building changes to promote social distancing and other practices encouraged by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Since many different public entities need funding, the money may be distributed based on what issues are most important.

“The Riley County Health Department received their own disbursements from the county so that things like rapid testing and PPE that keep the community and students moving quicker are available,” Estabrook said. “We need to have that rapid testing and we have had community testing go on weekly for free.”

The students and university will be impacted by this as well. The university has \$125 to spend for each student that was enrolled at K-State in 2019.

“What we did was we actually took your tuition, your FTE’s, and we gave them a per dollar amount. So with the University, we gave them \$125 per student,” Robison said.