

Selectmen meet to discuss SMOC offer; no public response yet

By Dan McDonald/Daily News staff

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FRAMINGHAM — Selectmen have yet to go public with a response to the South Middlesex Opportunity Council's offer to settle a federal lawsuit that has cost the town \$750,000 and names four-fifths of the town's executive board as defendants.

SMOC filed the lawsuit in fall 2007, alleging a network of town officials tried to block expansion of its social services.

But in a letter dated July 6, SMOC offered to settle the controversial suit in exchange for establishing two committees that would help bridge the gap between town government and the social service sector in Framingham.

In its first meeting since receiving SMOC's letter, the board met in an executive session that lasted about 90 minutes to discuss the SMOC case and Town Manager Julian Suso's contract.

Attorney Jeff Robbins, who represents the town in the case, was present.

But the board is not responding publicly yet. Selectman Jason Smith, the board's liaison to the case, was mum on the town's response to the settlement.

After the board's public session concluded inside the Memorial Building's Ablondi Room at about 10:45 p.m., Smith declined to elaborate on the matter, only saying the board would respond "diligently and immediately."

He gave no indication as to whether SMOC's proposal was a starting point for negotiations or an untenable proposal that will be rejected.

Explaining his reticence, Smith said the case was pending litigation.

As part of its settlement proposal, SMOC wants a "Leadership Council," to be established.

The council would act as a bridge between the social services in Framingham and the town. The council would consist of 10 to 15 members, drawing from the business and social service communities, as well as elected and non-elected town officials.

The Leadership Council would be led by an outside expert affiliated with neither the town nor a social service provider with either judicial experience or expertise in fair housing issues.

Under the proposal, a zoning review task force would be charged with reviewing town bylaws, consist of five members, including SMOC and town officials, and a chairman agreed upon by SMOC and the town.

Specifically, SMOC wants the group to examine the projects that may or may not qualify for the Dover Amendment. Dover is a state law intended to allow projects with certain uses including educational and religious to circumvent local zoning.

In other business, selectmen set the water and sewer rates for next year.

The average household will see an increase of \$64.41 in their combined water and sewer annual bills, from \$793.20 to \$857.61, an increase of 8.1 percent.

For a business like a restaurant, the average combined annual bill will be increased by about \$6,077 from \$70,245 to \$76,323.

Tier 5 "super-users," such as Genzyme, will see an average increase of \$28,266, from \$320,757 to \$349,023.

Dan McDonald can be reached at 508-626-4416 or at dmcdonal@cnc.com

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