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Seniors say funding for nutrition, better transportation among priorities for new \$11M millage

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A crowd gathers at a town hall on Washtenaw County's new senior millage at the Chelsea Senior Center. Jen Eberbach/MLive



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WASHTENAW COUNTY, MI — Older adults have a lot to say about how Washtenaw County officials should spend more than \$11 million a year in taxpayer dollars to benefit people 60 or older.

Seniors say support for nutrition and meal programs, improved transportation options, and help for senior centers are among their priorities. Some pushed back against the potential creation of a new county office, calling for administrative costs to be kept at a

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People packed the Chelsea Senior Center Wednesday, April 9 for a town hall on the county's new millage for senior services. The county has begun collecting taxes for the 0.5-mill, eight-year millage, which county [voters approved in November](#).

"Since I voted for it, I want to know where my money is going," Jan Carr, a 78-year-old Chelsea resident, said.

Senior housing and services like Meals on Wheels, and the senior center are priorities for Carr.

Senior centers across the county could see \$200,000 each a year, to help cover pay for directors or people in charge of meal programs, along with rent and utilities.

While the county Board of Commissioners has not yet finalized plans for the millage or allocated any dollars yet, commissioners have discussed the possibility of funding senior centers "straight off," as they nail down other plans, Commissioner Jason Maciejewski, D-Dexter Township, said at the townhall.

Maciejewski and Commissioner Shannon Beeman, D-Manchester, hosted the town hall to present potential plans, answer questions, and hear what older people think.

Beeman said the county might be able to "get money out as quickly as possible" to some programs, like Meals on Wheels and senior centers, while they continue to look at other policies.

Some in attendance wondered if more funds should go to less established senior centers with less funding or no local millages for seniors. Some worried about "overlapping" efforts or "duplication."

"I know some smaller centers might need a leg up, but the larger ones need support and maintenance," Carr said.

"The opportunity to have some guaranteed funding is a lifeline," Jennifer Smith, the Chelsea center's director, said.

While Chelsea's center is relatively well-established, it is still a small nonprofit organization. It receives some funding from local municipalities but also has to seek donations and grants.

"We spend our time with our hands out all of the time, which takes time away from meeting our mission," Smith said. "It's hard to do the best of what we can do when we're spending a lot of time asking for help."

Maciejewski noted the county is also considering accepting requests for proposals to fund senior-related projects. So, many different organizations could apply for millage dollars.

Senior centers could use county grants "hopefully to enhance what they are doing further" or start new programs, in addition to guaranteed payments, he said.

Improving transportation options for seniors is another priority for local seniors.

"They are doing a good job with the W.A.V.E, but I would like to see it even expanded more," Ted Campbell, a 75-year-old Chelsea resident, said about the bus service in western Washtenaw County.

"Right now, they do an hour loop, and a lot of times if you need to go to the bank, you don't need to stay there an hour, but that's the next time they come by," Campbell said. He suggested they add more buses to shorten the wait time by half.

Other priorities for residents and county officials include support for nutritional programs, door-to-door transportation services, and ending homelessness for older adults.

More ideas include support for health and wellness classes, adult day programs, behavior health, and caregiver support. Minor home repairs, legal services, and technology assistance are other possibilities.

Some townhall attendees pushed back against the idea of setting up a new call center to help seniors find resources.

A point of contention is whether the county should establish a new Office of Aging Services and hire a director and staff. Several residents called for the county to spend as little on administrative costs as possible.

While county officials have not yet made a decision on whether to create a new county office, the idea is on the table.

Options discussed at recent county board meetings include creating the office or housing the millage funds with the county's Office of Community and Economic Development (OCED). OCED officials asked earlier this year if they can be in charge of distributing the millage funds.

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Campbell worried about it becoming “an administrative boondoggle,” he said.

One suggestion from the audience was the county commission could commit to capping how much goes towards administrative costs, including staffing, office furnishings, and things like needs assessments, so people know most of the millage will go directly to services for seniors.

The millage “deserves to have its own office,” Maciejewski said. “I’m trying to make that as small as possible.”

Beeman pointed out that some OCED employees are federally funded. If they lose those funds, “that person gets cut,” she said.

It is possible county officials will hold additional townhalls, but that is to be determined Beeman said.

The county board is expected to make some millage-related decisions in the near future. They meet Wednesday, April 16. An agenda for the meeting had not been published.

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