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Haverhill secures homeless, first responder backup housing

Non-essential city projects delayed

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HAVERHILL — Help for some of the city's most vulnerable is on the way as Haverhill hopes to stop the spread of the new coronavirus.

Mayor James Fiorentini Tuesday said backup housing has been secured for homeless residents and first responders who may need to quarantine as a result of the illness. A fund for coronavirus-related city projects was also established with more than $130,000.

An unused wing of the Best Western Merrimack Valley near Westgate Plaza has been designated as potential space for Haverhill residents who may need to isolate should they fall ill, Fiorentini said at Tuesday's City Council meeting. In addition to guests from Emmaus, including the emergency Mitch's Place shelter, the Best Western location could house first responders.

The housing is welcome news for Emmaus President Jeanine Murphy, who spent the last three weeks on a tireless crusade to reach out to area hotels, colleges and even convents to seek emergency shelter.

“During these extraordinary circumstances, we find ourselves blessed that we're surrounded by a community that cares for those in need,” Murphy said, praising the efforts of Fiorentini, state Rep. Andy Vargas, D-Haverhill, and others who helped coordinate backup housing.

The Best Western rooms may be supplemented by space donated by Atlantis Investments developer Jonathan Cody, who is converting the former St. Joseph's School into apartments on Broadway, Fiorentini said. According to the mayor, the Haverhill High School gymnasium is being eyed as a last resort option.

As of Tuesday, Haverhill has 56 cases of coronavirus. Fifty-five are city residents and one person infected is a New Hampshire resident who works for Haverhill Public Schools. According to Fiorentini, two patients remain hospitalized, one of them with underlying conditions. The others are isolating at home.

Fiorentini and members of the City Council used Tuesday's meeting to forecast what's ahead for Haverhill once the COVID-19 crisis subsides.

The governing body voted to create COVID-19 emergency fund with more than $130,000 after Fiorentini said he's putting as many non-essential city projects on hold as possible to curb costs.

“Next year’s budget is going to be very, very difficult,” the mayor predicted. “No one knows how bad it’s going to be.”

Fiorentini held firm in his resolve to keep constituents at the forefront of his coronavirus crisis planning.

“We are going to be very lucky to hold on to the services we have,” he said. “We're going to have some difficulties (next year) but services have to come first.”

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