

Meeting highlights mental-health needs

By Justin Criado, Senior Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, November 15, 2016 5:20 pm

Area officials agreed more mental-health resources are needed in San Miguel County during an intergovernmental meeting Monday in Telluride.

Elected officials from the county, Telluride, Mountain Village, Ophir, Norwood and Sawpit met for nearly four hours to discuss several items, including the formation of a Regional Commission for Behavioral Health and Substance Abuse.

“We’re so happy to have everyone here at the table and have this discussion because we wanted it to include all the governments,” Mandy Miller, executive director of the San Miguel Resource Center, said.

Over the past several months, area social-service agencies, including the Tri-County Health Network, San Miguel County Social Services, San Miguel Resource Center and the Center for Mental Health have gone before local governments — mainly Telluride, Mountain Village and the county — to ask for financial support.

Miller said most of the meetings took place before the governments passed a 2017 budget. The proposed mental health commission did not ask for a certain amount of funding from any particular government, but would like to tap into annual sales tax revenues from alcohol and marijuana in lieu of relying on one-time grants.

“We’re here for a collective ask,” Miller said. “If we really want to move forward with this, we can move forward with a lot more chutzpah if we have enough dollars to do it.”

The group would like to establish stable funding sources to cover the commission’s budget needs, which are estimated to be nearly \$300,000 in the 2017 fiscal year. The biggest item would be hiring a part-time behavioral health coordinator.

Exact revenue numbers were not prepared for the meeting, but the combined tax revenue from alcohol and pot among the governments is estimated to be around \$1 million. Mountain Village does not sell marijuana.

Paul Reich, president of the Telluride R-1 School Board, said that the commission has not decided yet whether to request a percentage of sales or 100 percent. He pointed to similar initiatives in Boulder and Denver that use such revenues. California recently legalized marijuana and will allocate a portion of revenues towards mental-health initiatives, Reich said.

Miller outlined plans for implementing more mental-health services, including teletherapy and mental-health first-aid classes.

“We have a huge shortage in not just psychiatrists, but psycho-therapists in Colorado and nationwide,” Miller said. “... We need to get creative in matching people with the services that they need.”

Miller said a recent discussion with Norwood School District regarding the use of teletherapy went well,

and students would rather talk to someone via a computer than face-to-face due to the stigma of talking to a therapist, especially in a small-town setting. Teletherapy also would be used in the Telluride School District, Miller said.

The commission also wants to start a safe tourism campaign that would educate visitors on mental-health and substance-abuse issues, including what to do with excess marijuana or alcohol so it's not left behind for someone to find.

"People are leaving town and they're giving (marijuana) as tips to waiters. They're leaving it in their room," Reich said.

He said a similar safe tourism campaign is used in Crested Butte. Drop-off boxes for excess marijuana would be placed in tourist areas so visitors can properly dispose the substance.

"This is first and foremost a community and not a destination," Reich said.

Mountain Village Mayor Dan Jansen expressed his support for the commission.

"Our council is very supportive of (mental-health services)," Jansen said.

Telluride Councilwoman Ann Brady asked what the commission would do first if it had the proper funding.

Miller answered that hiring a coordinator would be the first priority.

"There's a lot more that we can be doing," Miller said of the current mental-health services. "We're on the right track, but there's oh so much more we can be doing throughout our community."

CELL TOWER

The meeting also included a presentation by Crown Castle, a company that specializes in wireless infrastructure, regarding plans to construct a new communications tower in Mountain Village.

The new tower would help improve cellular service for multiple carriers, which has been an issue over the years, according to Mountain Village officials.

Mountain Village granted Telluride Ski & Golf Company, in partnership with Crown Castle, a conditional-use permit in August 2015 to build a new 110-foot lattice communications tower on the ridge near the St. Sophia gondola station, next to the existing 90-foot KOTO radio tower. The Federal Aviation Administration explained that a light was required on such a structure.

The current conditional-use permit does not allow lights on the tower, but the FAA requires an eight-inch red light on the tower due to its proximity to Telluride Regional Airport.

A structure such as the proposed cell tower is considered a hazard per FAA regulations and must be marked appropriately. During a trial period from Oct. 26 to Nov. 7, a temporary pole with a red light was placed in the proposed location, which is in the Coonskin View Plane.

The county enforces the Ridgeline Covenant, which is intended to prevent lighting or buildings from

extending into the Coonskin View Plane. Such sights would be seen from Telluride and portions of the Telluride Valley.

During the discussion, opinions were mixed about the impact of the light.

County Commissioner Art Goodtimes, who leaves his elected seat in early January, started the conversation by saying there's no way he would let such a tower be built, if he were to remain in office.

"Incremental coverage convenience in the region versus permanent light pollution in Telluride, that's your choices here," Goodtimes said. "...Is incremental better cell coverage better than light pollution?"

Jeff Proteau, vice president of mountain operations for the resort, said improved coverage would create a better customer experience and also make the mountain safer, given better communication for emergency services.

Jansen said Mountain Village plans to improve communications regardless of the new tower.

Gina Childers of Crown Castle said that several alternate sites were considered, but coverage wouldn't be as sufficient for providers like AT&T, so they were not recommended.

If officials agree to move forward with the tower plans, Telski would have to apply and then go through a public-hearing process to amend the conditional-use permit to allow the safety light.