

OUR VIEW

North Port's Suncoast Technical College good investment

Sarasota County commissioners have about six weeks to ponder who gets \$7.5 million in hurricane recovery funding.

The money is just a fraction of the millions they'll be doling out to various projects. But the decision on where to spend it has been a thorny one for commissioners.

They originally said the money would be given to the Building Institute Association for a new site where they would construct a job training program for those going into the construction industry.

That drew some criticism and raised eyebrows.

You see the Sarasota County School Board would like that money to go to an already established program for students going into the construction field at North Port Suncoast Technical College. There are hopes and plans being considered to expand that facility.

Commissioners deserve credit for saying that in order for BIA to get the funding for its planned facility it would have to raise the other \$5.7 million of the projected \$13.2 million total cost of the project by this month.

A couple weeks ago, BIA asked for an extension on that requirement.

The Sarasota County Commission has set April 22 as the date to talk this out in public.

We have no reason not to want a second jobs training program in the county. The construction industry in Florida is always in need of more trained employees.

But there are some facts that make us lean toward giving the money to the college in North Port.

They include:

- Suncoast Technical College already has a program in place that could easily be expanded if the money is available. BIA, which seems to have some backing, is a somewhat unknown commodity that is a new nonprofit and needs a total of \$13.2 million to house the program at a facility the group would buy and rehabilitate at 1751 Cattleman Road, Sarasota.
- John Mast, husband of Sarasota County Commissioner Teresa Mast is said to be the candidate to be CEO of the BIA project. Teresa Mast, of course, can't vote on the decision. His role, although perfectly legal, makes the request and project a little uncomfortable for us.
- The BIA request placed last for community impact, project readiness and financial impact combined on a county survey and study.
- BIA estimated a five-year projected student count to be only a third of the school district's student projection size of 1,110, 60% of which are estimated to be lower-income students.

Originally, back on Sept. 10 last year, Commissioners Mike Moran and Neil Rainford proposed giving BIA \$13.2 million and giving what was left from a \$15 million appropriation to Suncoast.

Commissioners Ron Cutsinger and Joe Neunder would not go for that, arguing the school district's already functioning program was a better investment.

Commissioner Mark Smith proposed splitting the money between the school district and BIA. That motion passed.

But it wasn't long before BIA came back to ask commissioners for an extension on the timing.

Moran and Rainford are gone now. New Commissioner Tom Knight has strong reservations about splitting up the money, saying the North Port facility can do more with the money in a shorter amount of time. We believe, but don't know, that Cutsinger may agree.

It will all play out April 22. We believe if BIA had more skin in the game the outcome would be a toss-up. But right now, it is clear to us the money should go to Suncoast Technical College.