Community Action May Be Slammed By Bush Proposals

by Glenn Tolbert

A proposal being heavily lobbied by the Bush administration could result in the gutting of many programs administered by the Garrett County Community Action Committee Inc. (GCCAC), including subsidized housing, transportation, and programs for the elderly.

An estimated 20 people at GCCAC, many in administrative positions, could lose their jobs as part of the proposed change in how to allocate monies, according to Duane Yoder, president of the agency.

The move by the administration comes as Bush officials want to transfer funds now allocated by the Department of Agriculture (USDA) to the Department of Commerce. The concept seems to be that the administration believes that the monies could be better utilized to help fund commercial efforts rather than nonprofit projects in rural sectors of the country. President Bush has proposed to eliminate community services block grants, which are the core funding for the 1,100 Community Action committees around the country. In Garrett County alone, it would mean losing half of GCCAC's administrators, according to Yoder.

In addition to eliminating those grants, another important source of money for GCCAC would also be eliminated. Known as Community Development Block Grants, these monies in Garrett County have been used in the past to help develop small businesses under a program known as Microworks. The monies also helped to build the Overlook Center, to redo the Appalachian Crossroads building, and to construct the basketball and tennis courts at Glades Park in

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"If we lose these monies from what was the USDA Rural Development Program, we lose water and sewer money, community facilities, loan guarantee money, and the operation of such places like the Garrett Rehab Center and the outreach office in Grantsville," Yoder said.
He explained that the programs his organization has to subsidize would be the first to go. These include the Area Agency on Aging, which provides the "Meals on Wheels" program, as well as meals for seniors at centers around the county. The agency also makes visits to the homes of seniors to help them do basic chores and provides health and nutrition information.

Some of the other clients of Yoder's agency who will be affected include those receiving rent subsidies. It will be nearly impossible under the Bush administration's proposed cuts to run Section 8 housing, Yoder said. It may be impossible to continue subsidizing rents.

Others affected will be those who depend on the GCCAC's transportation service, which makes hundreds of thousands of passenger pickups and deliveries each year for those who can't afford their own transportation or are incapable of driving.

"Obviously, this would drastically affect the way we do business," Yoder said. "We were hoping to do a home ownership project in Kitzmiller, help turn the Pritts garage in Oakland into an artisan center, and continue doing other things like the home repair program. If this legislation passes, all of these will simply be gone," he said.

Yoder said that what bothers him the most about the news is that so many different groups in Garrett County have worked so hard for things to get better.

"And things have gotten better," he said. "We've just turned the corner with the help of people like the county commissioners. This kind of thing could make us slip back again. I just don't want to lose what we've gained." Garrett County has a medium income of $36,000, yet the people who seek the services of his agency earn less than 60 percent of that. The medium income for the state is $64,000.

Despite this blow to his agency, Yoder still offered some points of optimism. Even though the Bush Administration fought back even harder with Congress when it appeared that there was bipartisan support against the proposal, Yoder feels that part of the key is for people to contact their two senators and one congressman.

Speaking to a reporter on Wednesday evening having only hours before returned from Washington, D.C., where he had a discussion with Rosa DeLauro (D-Connecticut), ranking member of the Appropriations Committee, Yoder said that she seemed to understand the hardships that the Bush proposal would cause.

"I really believe that we have a lot of bipartisan support in Congress. Congressional people are out in their community more than administration officials, and they see firsthand the good work that's being done. But we've got a hard road to go.

"My gut feeling is that we can pull it off in Con-