Earning their money for Fairbanks: Borough Assembly should support the Community Service Patrol

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The Community Service Patrol will be up for $75,000 in funds for the next fiscal year at tonight's meeting of the Fairbanks North Star Borough Assembly. The program deserve every penny.

First and foremost, the program saves the city of Fairbanks money — potentially lots of it. Last year, CSP took 1,695 public inebriates into protective custody within the downtown service area, taking them to places where they could receive proper care. This cost $175,000. In areas outside the downtown patrol area, Fairbanks police officers and firefighters performed the same service for slightly fewer people, about 1,400. The estimated cost of having uniformed officers do the job? $375,000. And that's just the bottom-line cost; it doesn't factor in the opportunity cost of having highly trained officers deal with situations far below their pay grade. Fairbanks Police Chief Laren Zager has testified to the City Council on multiple occasions that the CSP is a win-win for the city, saving money while freeing up officers to handle more serious incidents.

With that in mind, city Mayor John Eberhart and the council opted to help fund an expansion of the CSP's coverage area to include the entire city of Fairbanks. That expansion wasn't an action the Downtown Association, which administers the patrol, took lightly. "We wanted to make sure we weren't overstepping ourselves, because we're the Downtown Association and we would be moving outside the downtown area with the program," said David van den Berg, the Downtown Association's executive director. But the group decided it could take on the added responsibility and this year is serving all of Fairbanks.

That service requires more funds, something the city pledged to help with. The Legislature also recognized the cause as worthy, allocating $250,000 to the group in the waning hours of its session last month. Now the ball is in the borough's court, as a proposed $75,000 in funds for the CSP will be on the table tonight as the assembly considers the budget for the 2015 fiscal year.

Some may say that funding the patrol lies outside the borough's purview, as it operates only within city limits and the money saved takes pressure off the city police and fire budget.

That's a small-minded way to look at the issue.

All of us who live and work in the greater Fairbanks area benefit from the CSP's work, whether we come into the city to shop, have a meal at a downtown restaurant, do business at the courthouse or take a walk on the banks of the Chena River. And with visitor season just beginning to ramp up for the summer, there are hundreds of thousands of people who will pass through town, many of whom will see the city and borough only once in their lifetimes. The CSP helps ensure that their first impression of the Golden Heart City is a good one.

There's room for debate on many aspects of the borough budget, but with a proven track record, a tight budget and a sensible approach to the people they help, the Community Service Patrol is as close as it comes to a home run for local programs. It has the support of the local business community, the city, and the state. It deserves that of the borough as well.