

Our Opinion: Grant is grounded

Mission of Technology Center should go forward

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A community partnership created nearly 10 years ago to expose children living in Tallahassee's south side neighborhoods to the emerging world of technology has never been flush with money. It has been fueled by a commitment to help level the playing field as far as digital access.

Since its inception in 2002, what has evolved into the Apalachee Ridge Technology Training Center has helped hundreds of children from the community south of Orange Avenue and west of Jim Lee Road learn basic to advanced computer skills. It's made sure that they are better prepared for college or the workplace.

So it's seriously disappointing that the city of Tallahassee was put in the position of returning a \$1.2 million federal grant to expand technology training on the south side.

The blame for this lies squarely on the shoulders of Mayor John Marks, who voted for the grant without disclosing that he was a paid board adviser for the Alliance for Digital Equality, which would also benefit from the grant.

It's a setback that reaches far beyond City Hall, where the controversy has been swirling since March over Mr. Marks' role in helping to secure the grant.

The loss of the grant — and an additional \$400,000 that was expected in matching funds — doesn't alleviate the mayor's problems or doubts about his political future.

The immediate fallout hits any plans the center had to expand its services and to introduce computer technology to other lower-income south-side neighborhoods.

Current funding for the center is \$45,000, with \$40,000 of that coming from the city, Leon County Schools, Florida A&M University and United Way, and \$5,000 coming from Bank of America. Comcast also has provided support. Expenses run between \$30,000 to \$40,000 annually.

"One reason we are still viable is that we have been extremely efficient with the funds," director Terrance McNeil said. "The benefits have greatly outweighed the cost of running a program like that. Anyone looking to potentially support us only needs to look at our track record over the 10 years."

Currently, between 20 and 25 students daily visit the center, where they get help with computer technology as well as tutoring and mentoring. Students from Florida State and Florida A&M universities and Tallahassee Community College volunteer their time teaching computer skills and tutoring, which keeps costs low. Students use their knowledge gained at the center to continue with more advanced computer training and also to provide computer assistance to residents of Apalachee Ridge. Adults also have access to the center's offerings and the use of computers.

The city's Broadband Technology Opportunities Program grant included a far-reaching partnership with the Alliance for Digital Equality, the Go-Beyond Foundation and Florida State. Beyond Apalachee Ridge, it would have offered adults computer-based career training. It also would have included 800 refurbished computers for families over a period of time.

The decision by the city to return the money was essential, and a shame given its impact on local children who can be successful if given the tools to advance. What is needed now is someone to step forward to keep the basic mission of the center afloat.