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City to begin review of Mayor Paul Soglin's 'community empowerment' proposal

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Madison Mayor Paul Soglin announces a proposal that would build community leadership as a solution to reducing violence at a press conference July 25.

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Madison elected officials will consider Mayor Paul Soglin's proposal to partner with a nonprofit community planning group to strengthen local leaders and implement short-term neighborhood improvements.

The resolution filed Friday would authorize a \$40,500 contract with the Project for Public Spaces to provide placemaking training in several neighborhoods and identify small-scale pilot projects in their neighborhoods to “grow the sense of empowerment and ownership” in the neighborhood.

In a press conference July 25 announcing the proposal, Soglin framed the proposal as a solution to recent violence in the community. Madison saw its 10th homicide early Wednesday morning, matching the city’s record number of homicides in 2008.

“The problem that has plagued our efforts here in Madison has been the absence of consistent community leadership in many of our neighborhoods,” Soglin said in an email to all alders.

The city's Finance Committee will consider the resolution at its meeting Monday and will report to the City Council Sept. 5.

The resolution defines placemaking as a “process of people coming together to create vibrant public spaces at the heart of their community.” Under the program, Project for Public Spaces representatives would provide a one-time training to establish permanent neighborhood leadership.

Ald. Barbara Harrington-McKinney, District 1, co-sponsored the resolution. She said the proposal could cultivate ownership over the problem of violence in the community — a necessary first step, she said.

“This whole initiative says we are going into the community to listen to the voices of people who live this everyday and empower the people who live there to say, ‘this is my block, this is my neighborhood, this is my community and this is not acceptable,’” Harrington-McKinney said.

Under Soglin's proposal, the nonprofit would work with current Neighborhood Resource Team (NRT) staff. These teams were founded in 1990 to facilitate neighborhood leadership by providing resources to residents and helping implement neighborhood priorities.

Ald. Maurice Cheeks, District 10, said residents in his district and across the city have had positive experiences with the existing neighborhood planning staff and if additional resources are needed, to considering hiring from the local community. He also said he expects the Finance Committee to question the placemaking proposal as a solution to violence occurring this summer.

"If this isn't Mayor Soglin's plan for addressing the deaths and the fear that our community is feeling under his watch, then the public deserves a clear explanation of what his plan is to keep our city safe," Cheeks said.

Soglin's proposal spurred Dane County Boys and Girls Club CEO Michael Johnson to pull out of another publicly-funded violence prevention effort.

Johnson and other community members have privately been responding to those affected by violent incidents. The Boys and Girls Club was supposed to be a part of a short-term peer-support program this summer but have since been removed from the contract.

Community Development Division Director said Monday a revised \$50,000 contract with Nehemia Development Corp., which plans to subcontract with the grassroots Focused Interruption Coalition, was signed and is in effect. The city has also budgeted \$25,000 for items need immediately after a violent incident such as food, clothing and housing.

The city is also moving ahead on a long-term peer support program meant to address those those affected by violence and those who have recently been released from incarceration.

Both the short- and long-term peer support strategies will be funded through \$400,000 the City Council approved in the 2017 budget to fund the first steps of a 15-point violence prevention plan that the Focused Interruption Coalition introduced.

Soglin suggested funding the placemaking proposal with the same \$400,000.

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