



Parents seek answers about future of Moorpark First 5

Budget cuts could close resource centers in Ventura County

November 30, 2018

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More than 50 parents gathered at the Moorpark First 5 Resource Center last Thursday to discuss the future of the community organization that offers parent classes and resources to families with children age 5 and under.

First 5 Ventura County, which oversees the Moorpark location, recently announced its budget would be halved in the next fiscal year.

The large drop in revenue, from \$13 million to \$6.5 million, is due to the decline in supplementary funds, such as grants, and the change in people's smoking habits.

First 5 was founded in 1998 when voters passed the California Children and Families Act, which added a 50-cent tax on tobacco to support programs for expectant parents and children up to age 5.

With funds from the tobacco tax, First 5 commissions, including one in Ventura County, are able to provide communities with year-round programs and services that support children's health and learning and their families.

But as tobacco sales have declined, so has the money being given to the organization to continue its work on a state and local scale.

"We knew this was coming for two years, so we've been working with programs, staff and community partners to determine how we best use the money moving forward," said Petra Puls, executive director of First 5 Ventura County.

To continue to do more with less, the organization chose to partner with Interface Children and Family Services, a Camarillo-based nonprofit social services agency that works to strengthen children, families and communities across the county.

The decision was confusing for many local parents who do not know how the contract will affect their First 5 location.

“First 5 is not going away. I have been hearing this so many times,” Puls said. “First 5 is not going away, but there will be changes.”

With the new contract, First 5 Ventura County will have resource centers that host classes such as Mommy and Me and offer support services to families.

The lack of funding means some services, such as oral health and the First 5 preschool program, may no longer exist.

First 5 Ventura County may also eliminate some of its 25 Neighborhoods for Learning locations, classroom-based centers for school readiness, health, family education and enrichment services. The funding for the centers is expected to drop from \$7 million to \$2.9 million.

“We want to keep as many as we can. Right now, many of those spaces we don’t pay rent for,” Puls said. “The more facilities that we can get that are no-cost and low-cost, the more facilities we can maintain moving forward.”

The organization has not decided if the Moorpark location at 612B Spring Road will be one of the centers that will close next year.

The meeting at the Moorpark First 5 was a time for parents to share what makes the location valuable, so leaders can determine how to best serve the area moving forward.

“I believe First 5 services are preventative when it comes to mental health, because people going through different challenges can come together and make wonderful other mommy and daddy friends, troubleshoot problems and celebrate the joys,” said Karmy McKee, who, along with her three children, participated in First 5 for seven years.

And another mom, Lucille Kosmatka, said the program helped her daughter grow from a shy 15-month-old to a social 4-year-old.

“Without this program, she would not have had the interaction with other children or developed as she had throughout the past four years,” she said.

Kristen Falsey, a mother of three, said the First 5 program helped her work through her postpartum depression after her twins were born.

“I was more of the recipient in what I took part in. The center was my lifeline getting through my severe postpartum depression,” she said.

Certain programs, however, like “Ready, Set, Grow,” helped her children learn their manners, letters and numbers.

“It set my kids up for kindergarten and they were ready to go,” Falsey said.

Puls said First 5 Ventura County is doing “all it can” to keep programs that provide valuable resources to parents and their young children.

The final decisions, however, will all come down to funding.