

Lewis County commissioners approve homeless and housing contract with state

After a month of debate over contract, the original version has been approved, but commissioners signal they will have a closer look where money goes



Margaret Barth gives public comment on a resolution approving a contract that will fund local homelessness and housing assistance programs during a Board of Commissioners business meeting at the Lewis County Courthouse in Chehalis on Tuesday, Aug. 5.

By Jacob Moore / jacob@chronline.com
The Chronicle Thursday, August 7, 2025

After two days of discussion, the Lewis County Board of Commissioners ultimately passed a resolution to accept a contract with the state for \$6.5 million in housing and homelessness funding on Tuesday, Aug. 5, in a rare 2-1 vote.

Despite his original misgivings about the funding amount from the Consolidated Homeless Grant disbursed by the Washington state Department of Commerce, Commissioner Scott Brummer joined Commissioner Lindsey Pollock in approving the contract.

While passing the resolution, the two advocated for more stringent control of the funds at the county level to maintain essential service and impose more accountability.

Commissioner Sean Swope dissented and voted “nay,” maintaining his original stance that the county should send back the contract and sign a new version with \$1.4 million less in funding to better reflect what the county spent on services in recent years.

The decision comes after two days of active debate, with the commissioners discussing the contract on Monday during a Public Health and Social Services update and then again during the Tuesday business meeting. Both meetings played host to robust public comment from service providers and community members, as well as debate between commissioners.

Public comment over the two days was largely dominated by those testifying to the importance of the resources offered by the service providers, such as Hope Alliance of Lewis County and the Salvation Army of Lewis County, which are largely funded through the Consolidated Homeless Grant.

Many urged the commissioners to accept the full \$6.5 million grant originally proposed by the Department of Commerce. While many spoke of the need for the county to hold fast to its commitment to fiscal responsibility, they asked the commissioners not to leave money on the table that could help county residents.

Swope has been vocal in his opposition to the increased size of the grant, noting that Lewis County is one of the few jurisdictions that has had a drop in the number of homeless people.

“If you accept a grant, accept the full amount,” Margaret Barth of Centralia said. “There’s nothing there that says you have to spend it all. Instead, how about using fiscal responsibility and spending it wisely? If you don’t spend it all because somehow you get a better handle on what’s going on with our housing and homeless situation, that would be an advantage. If you cut it off now ... you will not have a buffer to support yourselves through this grant period.”

The day before, during the Monday meeting, most testifying took the chance to advocate for the Hope Alliance, a local nonprofit most known for supporting those fleeing domestic violence and sex abuse. That included testimony from the nonprofit’s Director Kris Camenzind and others who shared support for the service provider and the Consolidated Homeless Grant funds as a whole.

“Over the past four years, Hope Alliance has helped 230 head of household individuals retain their housing with eviction prevention or obtain affordable and sustainable housing,” Camenzind said. “Had I known that we were giving money back to the state, I would have

asked for more money, because we have been very frugal about who we're serving. The needs are far greater than what our funding for the previous year has allowed us to spend." Through the two days of discussion, the commissioners honed in on their main issue with the grant funding being the limitations on the spending imposed by the Department of Commerce. While Lewis County Director of Public Health and Social Services Meja Handlen testified that the county would likely not spend the full amount, she still advocated for accepting the full sum.

Handlen said her main concern with reducing the amount accepted would be that the Department of Commerce would likely reduce the funding overall and spread that cut across services, meaning services the county needs to keep current funding for could lose money while others that the county may want to scale back could still be allocated too much.

Swope shared that the Department of Commerce director has expressed a desire to work with the county to better tailor the funding. Handlen pushed back, sharing that, in her experience, the Department of Commerce is not as flexible as its director may suggest.

In debate between commissioners, Swope continued to drive home the idea that the limitations of the grant forced the county to spread out funding across services instead of focusing on its priorities. He even went so far as to say he would be willing to accept the larger sum if the county had more freedom to use those funds on specific services, such as those provided by Hope Alliance. He also continued to voice concerns over accountability in the contract with the state and the visible homeless population in Centralia.

"What we need are contracts that produce accountability," Swope said. "I saw someone make a comment that the 'housing first' when it's well funded does a great job. Well, we've spent billions of dollars into housing first in the state of Washington, and the situation has only gotten worse ... What we need to be funding are places like Hope Alliance. It needs to be funded, without question. But our mental health and drug treatment centers, that's where this money should be going."

Brummer and Pollock seemed to sympathize with the perspective, but still voiced support for approving the full contract, citing a lack of trust in the Department of Commerce to work with the county and a desire to accept the funding and take the role of financial oversight into the county's own hands.

"I think we can do that through internal budgetary controls rather than trying to trust that commerce is going to play ball," Pollock said. "I mean, how much did we have to eat for Packwood sewer? It was six figures. I don't want to get stuck in that position again."

The two also voiced concerns over getting caught in drawn-out contract negotiations. Since the previous contracts with service providers expired June 30, the county is footing the bill for essential services until a contract is signed and the county can be reimbursed for the

expenses. Brummer added that better tailoring the grant to the county's needs would be a legislative issue that would need to be worked on ahead of future contract proposals. "I think it's important to move this forward and execute the contract without further delay," Brummer said.

The Monday and Tuesday meetings put a close to the recent debate around the Consolidated Homeless Grant contract, which began at the beginning of July when the initial contract was introduced.

When it was first introduced, both Brummer and Swope sounded the alarm on the funding, calling for greater financial accountability and claiming that the funding was not having the desired result on reducing the homeless population in Lewis County. The two emphasized the need to tighten the county's metaphorical belt and crack down on growing budgets just after difficult budget seasons for both Lewis County and the state of Washington.

However, after first calling out their displeasure at the funding, Handlen, along with many of the service providers receiving funding through the grant, have gone to great lengths to assure the commissioners and community of the level of accountability already in place for the funding.

After Tuesday's meeting, the initial contract proposal has been approved and will give the county access to \$6.5 million in funding over the next two years for a variety of services.

To make good on the commissioners' promise of improving financial accountability with the grant funding, the board of commissioners has scheduled a workshop with the Department of Public Health and Social Services to review funding line by line. As a result, it is possible a funding changeup could still come as the commissioners look at the invoices in detail and decide if all the services being provided in the county are essential.



Kristine Camenzind, director of Hope Alliance Lewis County, gives public comment during a Public Health and Social Services update at the Lewis County Courthouse in Chehalis on Monday, Aug. 4.



Jan Leth gives public comment on a resolution approving a contract that will fund local homelessness and housing assistance programs during a Board of Commissioners business meeting at the Lewis County Courthouse in Chehalis on Tuesday, Aug. 5.