

## Monroe Council debates travel spending

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MONROE -- The Monroe City Council is getting some pressure after a strategic planning meeting unveiled what some are perceiving as overspending and extravagance by some members.

Their Dec. 4 meeting revealed that Council members Franco McGee and Surluta Anthony spent thousands of dollars on trips to Los Angeles at the expense of tax payers.

The purpose of their trips was the same, to attend the National League of Cities conference. According to the NLC's website, the purpose of the organization is to be a "resource and advocate for the nation's cities and their leaders." It is a professional development and networking event for city council members across the nation.

According to financial documents from the City of Monroe, Franco McGee attended the event from Nov. 6-11, 2018 and stayed at the Sheraton Grand Los Angeles. He brought his mother on the trip. The total cost of the trip was more than \$4,012.73 and his mother's travel expenses were reimbursed by the city. Surluta Anthony attended the event from Nov. 7 to Nov. 11, 2017 and stayed at the Holiday Inn Express. Her trip cost \$2,854.37. She traveled alone.

Among the receipts during McGee's trip to Los Angeles was for a hotel breakfast that totaled \$62. The bill includes

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\$18 for a three-egg omelet, \$5 for juice, \$5 for a fruit cup and \$5 for coffee. The bill was \$51.19 and the tip was \$10.81.

The travel budget allowed for \$68 per day for meals, but McGee went well over budget on Nov. 7, 2018. In addition to spending \$62 at breakfast, he spent another \$68 on dinner at the hotel -- including \$29 for short ribs and \$17 for a burger. After returning from, he asked to be reimbursed for the overage he spent and was granted his request.

During the Dec. 4 meeting, Anthony said the trips are legitimate and that council members were not making requests to go on those trips for vacation or "fool around."

According to City bylaws, the mayor is given \$6,000 for travel expenses per fiscal year; \$5,000 is given to the Mayor Pro-Tem and \$4,000 is given to each council member. The travel allowances are given each fiscal year. Combined, the council has \$31,000 allotted for traveling purposes.

Franco McGee suggested that unused travel allowances should be used to cover expenses when one or more council members go over their allowances. "I don't see why we can't ... at the end of the fiscal year, whatever is over, we just take it from the other monies that are left in the budget."

Monroe City Manager Larry Faison said during the year, it cannot be determined if or who will have a surplus of allowances. Then he suggested a cap on council members' traveling.

Anthony responded, "if it is a legitimate request made, to me it penalizes the person." She said that the council member would be unable to fulfill their duties if they were not allowed to travel to attend conferences.

In 2017 and 2018, Anthony traveled to Washington D.C., Raleigh and Charlotte, in addition to Los Angeles, all to attend NLC conferences. When traveling to Charlotte's conference, she used Uber from Monroe, which cost \$33 and was charged to the city's credit card. She did so because of a very busy schedule at the conference, per a social media post from Thursday, Dec. 13. She incurred \$5,819.77 in charges on the city's credit card.

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