

Town rejects proposal for veterans' meals

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By Alex Kuffner

Journal Staff Writer

BRISTOL — The Town Council last night took a stand against a controversial proposal to reduce costs at the Rhode Island Veterans Home by privatizing food services.

The council voted unanimously in opposition to Governor Carcieri's plan to bring in a private contractor to provide meals to the approximately 250 residents at the veterans home, located off Metacom Avenue. The governor's budget for the next fiscal year proposes cutting 35 jobs at the home and estimates savings of up to \$800,000 through the move.

However, David Enos, president of the Bristol Veterans Council, urged the council to oppose the plan, saying that the projected savings don't justify the proposal.

"Basically, this is just to make cuts," he told the council. "We think this is not the way to go."

The vote follows a State House budget hearing this week in which workers at the home testified against the proposal. They said the quality of meals would suffer by bringing in an outside company. Some drew a connection to the scandal at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, where deplorable living conditions have been blamed in part on privatization.

The actual cost of the food service contract and the amount saved at the state Veterans Home won't be known until private companies submit bids — due next month — and the state awards a contract.

The budgeted savings assumes that privatization will bring the per-meal cost down from \$9.52 to the industry benchmark of \$5.23 for the 285,000 meals the home serves each year.

Those who testified said they doubted a private company could provide food of comparable quality, or equivalent variety in menus, to what the veterans' home provides, for such a low price.

As part of the council's action last night, it also voted against a similar privatization plan at Eleanor Slater Hospital, in Burrillville. The Town of Burrillville requested support against that proposal.

The governor's office has said the cost-saving measures are necessary because the state is facing a \$360-million deficit.

The council's vote will be forwarded to local legislators. Sen. Walter S. Felag, D-Warren, Bristol, was at the meeting for another matter and told councilors to also alert the House and Senate finance committees of their position.

"I'm fully aware of this situation," Felag, a member of the Senate Finance Committee, said of the proposal. "It's important that they get your response."

akuffner@projo.com