

City's charity decisions queried

United Way asks Donley to open funding process

By **STEPHEN HENN**
Journal staff writer

Alexandria's United Way is attempting to pry open the doors of City Hall and let the sun shine in.

Concerned that without light and air, the city's non-profit community is in danger of withering on the vine, the charity's chairman, Robert Leibach, has written a letter to Mayor Kerry Donley and the City Council asking Alexandria's elected leaders to ensure that city decisions about charitable funding are made well within public view.

"I think it is very important that everything be open and that everyone have a chance to apply for funds," Leibach said in an interview yesterday, "especially in today's world where resources are so limited."

The letter was prompted after Leibach learned four un-elected, high-ranking city officials met privately several months ago to decide how to dole out more than \$1.3 million in federal grant money to charitable non-profits and city agencies.

The officials recommended the money be given to four non-profits and two city agencies, and Tuesday the City Council passed the first set of recommendations with little comment.

But the fact the city looked to give away more than \$1 million was never advertised. No public request for applications was ever put together. And most members of Alexandria's diverse non-profit community had no idea anything was going on until it was all over.

"The first we heard about this was when we received a letter asking us to comment on a decision that for all practical purposes had already been made," Leibach said.

So far, Sheltered Homes of Alexandria received \$600,000 to buy five condominiums that will serve as temporary housing for recovering drug and alcohol abusers. The Community Youth Mapping project received \$22,650 to assist Alexandria teen-agers map youth resources in the city and the battered women's shelter will receive \$10,000 to remodel its kitchen.

On Saturday, the City Council will consider a recommendation to give \$100,000 to Hopkins House to pay for renovating the non-profit's Princess Street day-care center. The council also will vote on a proposal to give \$550,000 to the Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority to pay for renovations and \$20,000 to the city's own health department to pay for renovations in the Mount Vernon Avenue center.

Many local volunteers and activists have questioned the decision to give money to Hopkins House, which does not have state accreditation for its day care center, and some have questioned the decision to invest more money in the Community Youth mapping project.

Leibach believes if more groups had known money was available, the city would have found itself in the enviable position of choosing among a variety of well-qualified competing proposals, and ultimately,

citizens would have been better served.

"This is based on our experience at the United Way," Leibach said of one of the few charities that does not rely on money from the city. "Everyone knows we have an open process and everyone knows they can apply."

City officials said the decision to give away more than \$1.3 million in federal grant money was unusual. Plans to spend the money on several large projects fell through and the grants required the city to use the money quickly or risk losing it.

"We are taking the comments into consideration, and we are going to revamp the process somewhat," said Mildrilyn Davis, director of the city Office on Housing. "When we have a large amount of money we have to give away, we will advertise from now on."

Leibach also expressed concern about how money from the Community Partnership Fund is divided. For the past two years, a secretly empaneled committee of citizens has decided how to divvy up among charities roughly \$700,000 in city revenue.

The panel meets behind closed doors and chooses between different charitable organizations that serve the city's children, promote self-sufficiency or prevent violence and abuse.

The meetings are private and the members of the panel are not revealed until after their decisions are made. The membership of the first panel to serve has never been revealed.

"We are not at all comfortable with a blind process," Leibach said. "I think it is a cleaner process when everything is on the table from the beginning."
