

Reconsider Food Bank funding

First a little history and a few facts:

Twenty-nine years ago, Fred Fisher founded the York County Food Bank, the longtime distributor of canned food, fresh meat, vegetables and fruit to poor York countians through a network of food kitchens and pantries.

For 20 years, the York County Food Bank has been the primary recipient of state funding to provide food distribution services to needy York residents.

There are approximately 125 food kitchens and pantries located throughout York County that feed about 30,000 low-income residents a month. A great deal of the food they provide comes from the York County Food Bank.

The York County Food Bank feeds about 6,000 families a month from its York City location and distributes 2.5 million pounds of food throughout York County each year.

According to numbers provided by the state Department of Agriculture, the York County Food Bank, when compared against all 67 counties in the state, provides food to the needy at a cost of about 48-cents a pound, while the state average is 99-cents a pound.

For nearly 30 years, the mission of the York County Food Bank has never changed: Feed the poor.

"And we've done that year-in and year-out," said Jonathan Fisher, the executive director of the York County Food Bank, "with a lot of support from York countians."

But that could change in a hurry. A recent story in The York Dispatch said the York

County Commissioners could decide to award \$436,500 in state funding — it's state money channeled through the county commissioners office — to an out-of-county facility, the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank, located in Dauphin County, rather than contract with the York County Food Bank again.

In fact, Jonathan Fisher said Friday, the decision has already been made. "I was informed by the commissioners at a recent meeting that the Food Purchase Program contract, beginning July 1, is going to the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank."

The official decision will be announced by the commissioners within a few weeks, a county spokesman said.

Does that mean the York County Food Bank could be forced to shut down? "That's a good question. It could mean that," Fisher said. "At the very least, it would affect our purchasing power."

If it happens, it's a potentially devastating decision for the York County Food Bank. Already two employees have been laid off. And unless York County residents really dig deep to make contributions to the local food bank, there is every possibility it could be forced to close down altogether, Fisher said.

And that, I'm sorry to say, would be a serious kick in the

slats for needy York-area residents and the local programs that serve them.

The York County Food Bank would, it appears, keep federal emergency food assistance funding — that would amount to between \$40,000 and \$60,000 a year. But that's a drop in the bucket compared to the \$400,000 it stands to lose.

I don't get it. I mean if you have an organization with a reputation for serving the poor in York County, why in the world would you take those dollars — all tax dollars, by the way — and send them to Dauphin County for redistribution from there?

Is there some political game-playing going on here? It feels like it to me. Because you're not going to convince me — not easily anyway — that it makes sense to send money designed to meet the needs of York countians out of York County, instead of keeping it here where it's needed.

How much of that \$400,000 will be returned to York County, I wonder, to purchase food for needy Yorkers, and how much of it will be used to buy food for needy Dauphin County residents or anyone else in the 27 counties the CPFEB serves?

And at \$4 a gallon for gasoline, how does it make sense to anyone that food can be stored in Dauphin County and delivered by truck to York County pantries and food banks more cheaply than distributing the food directly from York?

Consider that 30,000 needy families living in York County depend on food distributed by the York County Food Bank.

Also consider, according to

Fisher, the growth in just one food program — the Senior Box program — where once a month elderly residents receive a care package (a box filled with a variety of food) from the food bank.

"In the beginning of 2010, we were distributing 350 senior boxes," Fisher said. "By early 2011, that increased to 696 senior boxes. In one year, we almost doubled the amount of food and the number of elderly families being served."

Plus, there is something to be said for doing business with a local agency that employs York-area workers, purchases from York-area vendors and contracts with York-area farmers when possible.

It's called stimulating the "local" economy. That's a good thing in these times.

Carl Lindquist, a spokesman for York County government, defended the commissioners' decision by suggesting there would be "more bang for the buck," by channeling the state grant to Central Pennsylvania Food Bank rather than keeping it here in York.

I'm not so sure that's true.

If there's any possibility this decision hasn't already been made by York County commissioners, it might be in everyone's best interest to take another look at the deal.

Just to make sure we're comparing apples to apples and oranges to oranges.

Columns by Larry A. Hicks, Dispatch columnist, run Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. E-mail: lhicks@yorkdispatch.com.



LARRY HICKS