

Dickson agrees to install Safe Haven Baby Box

Following a fund-raising campaign by a local women's club, the City of Dickson has agreed to install a Safe Haven Baby Box for the anonymous surrender of infants at Dickson Fire Department Station #1 in downtown.

At its Dec. 1 meeting, the Dickson City Council unanimously approved Resolution #2025-86 authorizing Mayor Don L. Weiss Jr. to sign a contract with Safe Haven Baby Boxes, Inc. and memoranda of understanding regarding funding for the project with GFWC Dickson County Woman's Club and Dickson High Noon Rotary Club.

The proposal to install a Safe Haven Baby Box began as a project of the Dickson County Woman's Club, which has raised more than \$22,000 to fund the installation of the box at the fire station at 101 Church St. The Rotary Club has pledged to pay an annual maintenance fee to Safe Haven for the first four years.

Vangie Ethridge of the GFWC Dickson County Woman's Club addressed the council on the effort to make the baby box a reality.

"Two years ago, I was scrolling through social media and learned about Safe Haven Baby Boxes. My first thought was 'Dickson really needs this.' Every community, honestly, needs this," Mrs. Ethridge said. "My second thought was, 'I would like to get our club involved and make this happen for Dickson.'

"We are so close to accomplishing this now. We just need your help to approve this contract that the city officials and attorneys have worked very hard on and for that we are thankful," Mrs. Ethridge told the council. "The Baby Box is something that I personally pray is never used but is there as an option for a parent if they have to make this decision. We have all heard the horror stories of what parents have done when they are in a desperate situation. And we don't want anyone in our community or surrounding communities to do the unthinkable. So, tonight I just ask that you vote 'yes' to approve this contract and in a few short months Dickson will have a safe, anonymous option that could possibly prevent a crime and save a new life. Dickson County Woman's Club, along with our very supportive community, has raised over \$22,000 to see this happen. We just need your vote to proceed."

Under Tennessee's "Safe Haven Law" passed in 2001, mothers may surrender unharmed newborns at several locations confidentially and without fear of prosecution. Those locations include hospitals, birthing centers, health departments, walk-in clinics, fire and police stations that are manned 24 hours, emergency medical stations and 911 call centers that have opted to be a Safe Haven facility. In its latest session, the Tennessee General Assembly amended the law to increase the age at which newborns can be surrendered to 45 days.

Safe Haven Baby Boxes, Inc. is a non-profit organization in Indiana that provides devices for the anonymous surrender of infants. Its website lists almost 400 Baby Box locations in 20 states with at least 24 in Tennessee.

Assistant City Attorney Ross Smith explained that the Baby Box is accessed through the exterior of a building such as the fire department where a mother can place the newborn and upon closing it an alarm alerts the fire department and 911 that a baby has been surrendered. Under the contract with Safe Haven, a first responder is required to immediately respond to the Baby Box when the alarm is activated. Additionally, the personnel at the location of the Baby Box are required to manually check it at least twice a day and verify the alarm is functional. The Baby Box

is to be equipped with climate controls for heat and air. The contract specifies the facility cannot have video surveillance of the box exterior to allow for anonymity.

Smith said the Dickson County Woman's Club has deposited \$22,787 to date with Safe Haven for the manufacture and installation of the box at the fire station. The only expense to the city will be the maintenance of an internet line to the box to operate the alarm. Safe Haven requires a \$500 annual maintenance fee and the High Noon Rotary Club has committed to fund that for the first four years.

Smith said the initial contract with Safe Haven is for five years and if the woman's club or Rotary Club should decide to discontinue their support, the City Council can choose to continue the funding, but there is no obligation on the city to continue nor penalty for terminating the contract and closing the Baby Box.

Upon a motion by Councilperson Michael Outlaw (4th Ward) and second by Councilperson Stacey Levine (3rd Ward), the council unanimously approved the contract with Safe Haven Baby Boxes, Inc. and the funding MOUs with GFWC Dickson County Woman's Club and Dickson High Noon Rotary Club.

Smith said Safe Haven's contract requires the city to conduct an unveiling and blessing of the baby box when it is placed into service. No timeline was given on when the Baby Box will be installed.

The most recent surrender of an infant through a Safe Haven Baby Box in Tennessee was in August in a Baby Box that had been in service less than a year at a Hendersonville fire station.

For more information on Safe Haven Baby Boxes, visit shbb.org.