

Augusta council to consider joining lawsuit against drug companies

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By Keith Edwards

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AUGUSTA — Augusta city councilors on Thursday are expected to decide whether the city should join with other municipalities and counties in a lawsuit against pharmaceutical companies over claims that information was withheld information about how addictive their drugs could be.

Drug overdoses killed a record 418 Mainers last year, an 11 percent increase over the 376 overdose deaths in 2016. Opioids, including prescription painkillers as well as illicit drugs such as heroin, were responsible for 354 of those deaths.



Augusta City Manager William Bridgeo says a proposed agreement with law firms that filed a suit against drug companies specifies that Augusta would not have to pay unless the case is won. Staff file photo by Joe Phelan

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A lawsuit brought by Napoli Shkolnik PLLC, of New York, and Trafton, Matzen, Belleau & Frenette LLP, of Auburn, alleges drug companies suppressed knowledge of the [risks of addiction to opiates](#), and the public has suffered as a result.

Augusta City Manager William Bridgeo said if the numerous public entities that have joined the lawsuit and other suits filed nationwide prevail, Augusta, depending on the settlement or judgment reached, could be awarded money to help recoup the city's costs related to opiate drug use. That could include the cost of ambulance crews using Narcan to save the lives of overdose victims, as well as the cost of overtime for police and rescue workers responding to calls involving opiates. Proceeds of a settlement could be used to create addict treatment programs.

[Kennebec county commissioners](#) voted last month to join the lawsuit, as did [city councilors in Waterville](#) last December.

The lawsuit is similar to one filed by numerous U.S. states against tobacco companies, which eventually resulted in a settlement in which the companies agreed to provide money to states.

Bridgeo said the proposed agreement with the law firms that filed the suit specifies that Augusta would not have to pay anything to related to the case unless the case is won. In that instance, the companies could deduct fees for their services from any funds awarded in a settlement or judgment.

"The contract (between the city and law firms) makes it clear the city incurs no financial obligation, beyond a share of a settlement or judgment," Bridgeo said.

Bridgeo said the city's law firm, Preti Flaherty, has a potential conflict of interest in the case, so Stephen Langsdorf, the city attorney, couldn't review the contract proposal for the city. Instead, Bridgeo said, Marci Alexander and Mark O'Brien, both at-large councilors who are lawyers, reviewed the document.

The City Council meets at 7 p.m. Thursday in the council chamber at Augusta City Center.

Councilors also are scheduled to vote on whether to submit seven proposed changes to the city charter in a referendum question to voters June 12.

The proposed charter changes would make some minor administrative changes to city rules, including clarifying term limits to specify a school board member may serve three consecutive terms as chairperson of the board after his or her term as a regular board member has expired; require that nomination papers be made available 100 days prior to elections and returned 60 to 75 days before the election; and raise the limit on the amount of debt city councilors can approve without going to referendum, from the current \$750,000 to \$1 million.

Councilors are also scheduled to:

- hear a presentation on the Augusta Boys and Girls Club;
- consider accepting the donation of \$82,000 for restoration of the reading room at Lithgow Public Library from the Friends of Lithgow Library;
- consider authorizing the city manager to approve occasional service of beer and wine at some public events at Lithgow Public Library; and
- consider authorizing beer to be served at several events on city properties coming up this summer.

Keith Edwards — 621-5647

Twitter: @kedwardskj

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