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KC budget cuts Fire Department by \$7.6 million

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The Kansas City Council adopted a budget Thursday that slashes \$7.6 million from the Fire Department but does not spell out how those cuts will be made.

Council members voted 12-1 for the new \$1.3 billion budget, with the majority maintaining that the department can get by on less money without seriously jeopardizing public safety.

City and firefighters union officials must now negotiate how many jobs will be lost, and the stage appeared set for a showdown with Local 42, which represents most of the department's 1,300 employees.

Councilman John Sharp — the lone dissenting vote — predicted that cutbacks of this magnitude would “endanger the department's mission.” Firefighters union President Mike Cambiano called it “one of the sickest things I've seen in Kansas City politics.”

The vote affirmed City Manager Troy Schulte's recommendation from January for the first major reductions to the Fire Department after most other city departments have endured millions of dollars in cutbacks over four years of recession.

Schulte suggested the department could achieve its \$7.6 million in cuts by laying off 105 firefighters.

He said the overall impact to the department wasn't severe. With salary and benefit increases to the remaining firefighters, the actual Fire Department budget would drop from \$101.5 million to \$100.1 million, or 1.4 percent.

But Fire Chief Smokey Dyer, who was on medical leave and unavailable for comment, had strenuously objected to that budget analysis in earlier discussions and argued the layoffs and other cuts would damage one of the nation's best fire departments.

Councilwoman Cindy Circo, who has had relatives and many friends in the Fire Department, said that the budget vote was one of the most difficult decisions she'd made since she was elected in 2007, but that it was necessary and reasonable.

Councilman Scott Wagner predicted the city and the union could negotiate a fair way to reduce the budget without draconian layoffs. The union's current contract expires April 30, and the new budget takes effect May 1.

"There are ways to save money," Wagner said. "It requires everyone to have a little bit of sacrifice and be a little bit creative."

Yet Cambiano said it appeared the city was trying to pressure the union into a bad contract for its members. He said the union had been trying since August to reach an agreement with the city, but negotiations only began March 12, after the cuts to the department had been recommended.

Cambiano said the union offered reductions that totaled \$5.9 million, but the city rejected that offer Wednesday.

Councilwoman Jan Marcason, chairwoman of the council's Finance Committee, responded that the union's proposal wasn't feasible, although she declined to discuss in detail what are normally private negotiations.

Those talks between management and the firefighters union resume Monday, and Marcason said she still hoped for a good outcome, one that protects public safety, by May 1.

The City Council has indicated that it hopes many of the reductions can be achieved through retirements of older firefighters rather than through layoffs of younger workers.

"We fully intend to have fewer firefighters," Marcason said. "How many fewer, we'll let them make that determination."

Mayor Sly James, presiding over his first budget, said the council was willing to make difficult choices. But he acknowledged that no one was thrilled with the result, which also includes reductions in parks and public works spending.

"It's a tough budget. It hurts," James said. "We put doing the right thing above doing the easy thing."

However, the total city budget is now \$1.3 billion — actually up from \$1.24 billion for 2011-12. Nearly all the increases involved capital improvements for Aviation and Water Services, which are fee-supported departments whose monies are segregated from the general fund.

The city's general fund for basic services remained essentially flat at about \$513 million. Circo noted that this was the fifth straight year of cuts to the general fund and that the economy was not rebounding as hoped.

In fact, while budget analysts predict small increases next year in earnings taxes and business licenses, they don't see any jump in property tax or utility tax collections.

What made this year's budget discussions particularly difficult is that the council had promised city employees and police about \$10 million in pay raises after several years of salary freezes. They were hoping an economic rebound would provide the money for those raises, but that hasn't happened.

However, James did get some money for his priorities, and his office budget will actually increase by about \$675,000.

The mayor's budget was boosted to pay for a receptionist, another policy analyst, a grant writer and an "efficiency" consultant to improve city services.

The budget also provides \$50,000 for the mayor's initiative to ensure third-graders read at grade level and \$25,000 to support the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce's Big-5 urban core neighborhood program.

Sharp said he couldn't support an increase to the mayor's office when the city was cutting public safety. But mayoral spokesman Danny Rotert said that the budget just restored the mayor's spending from a previous cutback, and that the grant writer and efficiency consultant would benefit the entire city, not just the mayor's office.

The budget does not include a general tax increase. But for the fifth straight year, it calls for double-digit water and sewer rate increases.

The combined water and sewer bill for residential customers will go up 14 percent, or \$9 per month, from about \$65 to \$74 for the average user. The increases, effective May 1, are needed to pay for major upgrades to both the water and sewer systems.

Many basic services will get shortchanged in next year's budget, especially street repairs. Money for paving will drop from \$10 million to \$8 million, and funding for total street reconstruction will drop from \$2.5 million to zero.

“We are very light on infrastructure and public works,” said Councilman Jim Glover, adding that the council would soon have to have an “honest” conversation with residents about the city’s infrastructure needs and what it would take to pay for them.

Councilman Russ Johnson also lamented that the budget called for spending \$800,000 on bridge maintenance. He noted that bridge repairs might be a public safety issue as important as police and fire.

James has said that one way to address Kansas City’s infrastructure maintenance backlog would be to devote \$1 billion in general obligation bonds over the next 10 years to meeting that need. But the bond issue is not addressed in the current budget proposal. That level of bond authorization also would require voter approval.

Other key elements of the budget:

- Parks spending will drop by about \$5 million, from \$42.3 million to \$37.3 million. That includes \$4 million for maintenance, which will affect park mowing, tree trimming and repairs to boulevards, tennis courts, playgrounds and fountains. Park Director Mark McHenry said the public may see more weeds and trash in and around parks. However, the budget did add \$200,000 to extend weekend hours for some community centers.
- Eliminating the spring leaf and brush collection, saving \$100,000.
- Spending about \$350,000 to ensure public safety and other services during Major League Baseball’s All-Star events in Kansas City in July.
- Allocating \$5 million for police raises, if they agree to join the city’s health insurance program.
- Fighting crime by providing \$200,000 for a closed-circuit TV “pilot program” to try to identify criminals and serve as a deterrent in high-crime areas.

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