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City leaders decide to give funds back to citizens

May 21, 2011



Biggest issue in city budget meetings: how to give back to citizens

The Budget Committee and City Council met to finalize budget figures for the upcoming fiscal year.

After three meetings and hours of discussions, the consensus was unanimous in approving Administrator Preston Polasek's recommendation to "give relief" to the residents.

The group agreed in its first session that the city's budget could sustain a refund or rate relief, based on the budget numbers provided by the Administrator.

The main issue came in deciding the proper way to give some of the city's water revenue back to the residents.

Three options were laid out by the Administrator: a 20% water rate decrease this year, with a strong recommendation to review rates for a potential rate increase in following years, a 10% water rate decrease sustainable for at least two years, or a one month "holiday" relief which would waive all water and sewer bills for nearly 1300 accounts in December 2011.

In explaining the utility bill "holiday," Administrator Polasek stated, "The idea is to give folks a meaningful kicker that they will notice. They may not notice an \$8 savings on a utility bill, but they will notice not having a utility bill in December."

Administrator Polasek explained, "We've accumulated adequate reserves to give some back."

He added, "The Budget Committee can evaluate this on an annual basis to decide if there should be a rate relief or a refund again." Polasek explained, "We've accumulated adequate reserves to give some back."

Administrator Polasek said that the city's next fiscal budget can sustain a reduction in revenue totaling approximately \$140,000. Polasek indicated that whichever way the "relief" is given, the dollar amount out of the city's revenue and to the residents would come out about the same.

Before the third discussion on the issue began again this week, Polasek explained to the Committee that their job was simply to approve the budget change to allow for a refund or rate reduction. He said, "The actual method that rate relief is done will be decided by the Council later on." He added, "What we need from you is just a number."

Lafayette residents will likely have their bills paid for them this December

After that, Councilor Leah Harper, as budget session Chair, went around the table giving each person a final opportunity to give their input on the issue. Each of the Committee and Council members stated their opinion, and most agreed that the best method was through a utility "holiday" in December.

Budget Committee member Tim Svenson said, however, "The budget will support less money, and us as a committee will be happy with whichever way it goes."

During the previous budget meeting, the consensus was to grant the relief by lowering water rates by 20%. However, when the holiday option was put on the table, it became the most popular choice.

The final decision was to extend a water and sewer bill holiday, which means the City of Lafayette, once it receives final approval of the Council, will pay utility bills for Lafayette households this December.

It was clear that the water and sewer rates, along with the water budget, will be evaluated annually to allow leaders to adjust up or down, accordingly.

Input from Budget Committee and Council members on best way to give relief:

Committee member Jennifer Simmons was absent, but an announcement was made that she said she stood behind her initial opinion to give 20% back in the form of a water rate reduction.

Mayor Heisler was also absent, but a statement from him was read at the meeting.

The Mayor's statement said, "While the one month holiday is intriguing, I personally prefer the process of having an annual review of rates and establishing cause for the rate structure, verses a one-time event that would not have to be reviewed annually and would simply be eliminated."

The Mayor's statement said to the Committee, "It's incumbent that we are good stewards of the resources we are entrusted with," and added, "These funds belong to the citizens of Lafayette. That being the case, any funds must be returned to the people whenever possible."

"This is a good faith effort. We're saying, we don't need it. Here you go." — Councilor

He said he would support the decision collectively made and brought to the Council.

Jean Mead said that since the 20% decrease would likely be followed with future rate increases, she was “inclined to do the holiday.” She added, “Our citizens are very frustrated with the water rates. The history of the whole thing goes back twenty years. Our citizens don’t have anything else they want to talk about, in my experience.” Since Mead didn’t like the idea of raising rates the following year, she said, “In lieu of that, I vote for the holiday.” Marv Bennett

Councilor Marv Bennett agreed with Mead and expressed concern about a 20% rate reduction if the city couldn’t maintain that rate in following years. He was concerned about the fluctuation of the rates back and forth. In lieu of that, he too agreed with the holiday. He added, “This is a good faith effort. We’re saying, ‘we don’t need it. Here you go.’”

Budget Committee member Becky Demmin said, “I like the holiday, and trusting we will definitely review year after year is good.”

Councilor Marie Sproul said, “I agree with the holiday. We’re being good stewards,” and indicated that the holiday move wouldn’t cause the city financial hardship. She added later about deciding on the options, “We’re not going to make everybody happy. Some will get a bigger relief, but they’ve paid more into the system. We just will make the most fair and equitable decision. The month off is the most equitable for everybody.”

Committee member Tim Svenson said, “I like the holiday. It seems indecisive to reduce rates and then increase again. Next year if we can afford it, we’ll do it again.”

Council President Chris Pagella was concerned that the city should explain the “why” of the refund. He said he was most in favor of a rate reduction.

Councilor Harper stated, “Personally I love having December off. It’s the most expensive month of the year. I love the holiday.”

Committee member Sandee Robinson Fickes said, “People I talked to didn’t see the sense in lowering and then raising rates next year. I like the idea of the holiday.”

Concerns came mostly because of discussion of fluctuating rates year to year

Councilor Harper stated that the biggest concern about reducing water rates by 20% was caused by comments made by Administrator Polasek that rates would likely have to be adjusted upward again in years to follow.

Polasek stated that the city budget could probably not sustain the full reduced water rate decrease in following budget years. He also had commented that the city still has some water issues that will need to be resolved and could be costly. He said, “Some projects lie ahead that still need to be looked at.”

Harper stated at the meeting that the perception of rate fluctuations caused concern among those involved in the budget process. She said, “If it had been laid out as a decrease stating that we’ll review rates next year, there would be no discussion.” She said, “We all would have voted in favor of the 20%.”

New budget process very different from previous years

In the past, some have complained that city improvements were being neglected and the city was allowed to deteriorate while leadership allowed nearly two million dollars to be withheld in the budget as “unappropriated funds.”

This was a continual point of contention for Mayor Heisler, who has been vocal over the past two years in his criticism of the city budget. He stated publicly that he believed the city was collecting too much in water bills and stockpiling funds.

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Administrator Polasek stated prior to the budget sessions that he disagreed with the city’s previous budget format and the large amount of unappropriated funds that was held, and commented that he would make changes. Polasek indicated that Lafayette’s previous administration and budgeting process restricted spending by marking the funds as “unappropriated.”

Some members of Council now concerned about overspending on projects

As this week’s meeting progressed and moved on from the rate relief issue, the Committee proceeded to discuss the overall budget numbers for other projects and expenses for the upcoming year.

Council President Pagella, in reviewing the new budget, stated, “This looks to me as a city that has built up a lot of money without spending it for some time, and someone new has come in to question that.” Pagella expressed his concern about now spending too much on things instead of waiting on some items.

He said, “There are still things that we don’t need to have right now, and I think we jumped too quickly at having to do all these things now.” Pagella said that he thinks that some things should wait.

Councilor Leah Harper expressed the same concern, stating that in previous years, the Council and the Budget Committee were restricted in spending even small dollar amounts to improve the city. “We weren’t allowed to spend anything,” she said, “and now, I’m concerned we’re spending too much.”

Polasek said, “The items in the budget are not fluff, because these things are all needed.”

Citizens can expect even more street improvements

One major expense in the new budget includes nearly an additional \$100,000 to go toward street and sidewalk improvements. That is in addition to the major street overlay project that is to be completed next month.

In reviewing the amount of funds that have accumulated in various “buckets,” Becky Demmin questioned why budget funds had been set aside, and in some cases spent, without any city plan in place.

Councilor Pagella responded to one item stating, “The previous leadership and city administrator elected to put \$60 — 70,000 per year into the civic center fund. Now, we need to go back to the citizens and ask what they want. We need input from the citizens.”

He added later, "It's time we stop putting funds away for projects until we ask citizens what they want."

Councilor Harper responded, stating, "What you're saying is exactly what the Mayor has been saying. The Mayor has been requesting a town meeting."

Councilor Sproul said about the budget and improvements proposed, "There are a lot of positive changes this year. A lot of changes. I'm impressed."

Long term resident, Sandee Robinson Fickes, said that overall, she is "thrilled" about the improvements she is now seeing in the city. She stated that it had been "a disappointment for years that there was no usable park" for her kids. She said she had gotten involved "to try and change things" and was told the money was there, but she said, "It took until now for things to finally start getting done."

In summarizing, Council President Pagella stated that he was impressed with the budget process this year. He said, "There's been more deliberation than in any other budget process I participated in." Pagella contributed the positive change to the way Polasek presented the budget.

Administrator Polasek concluded by thanking his staff members, and added, "Especially Jamie Rhodes for all her assistance in the process." He summarized by saying, "The City of Lafayette is moving in the right direction. We have a lot of projects, and we have an open door."

The budget was approved unanimously this week, with an 8 – 0 vote. The new fiscal budget year will begin on July 1, 2011.

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