



Panel gets peek at LR tax revenue plans

Meerkats, hiring, new cars on list

CLAUDIA LAUER
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Little Rock department heads plan to use revenue from a sales-tax increase to build police stations, buy meerkats and hippos, hire dozens of employees and buy dozens of new cars.

The Little Rock Citizen Evaluation of the New Tax Committee got a look Wednesday at how about half of the city's departments plan to spend their portions of the voter-approved 1 percentage point sales-tax increase that the city started collecting in January.

The committee, created earlier this year, monitors how the city is spending the new sales-tax revenue and reports back to the community. It will hear a second presentation in June on the remaining departments' planned expenditures.

The sales tax was approved in two portions, five-eighths of a percent for operating expenses and three-eighths of a percent for capital improvement expenditures. The capital-improvement portion is to expire in 2021. The operating tax has no ending date.

On Wednesday, the committee looked at plans for several Police Department buildings. Included in them is a plan to tear down the aging headquarters at 700 W. Markham St. and build a new headquarters in its place. Construction is several years from completion, said Chief Stuart Thomas, and depends partially on completion of a West 12th Street substation that was approved earlier this year and is in the works.

"Instead of evacuating the Markham building, which is an unhealthy 60-year-old building that's reached the end of its life, we'd like to have the space at the 12th Street station and at the Kanis [Road] facility available to move the different functions on a temporary basis," he said.

"We've tried to make this [12th Street] building not look like a police station. We want it to be a community center point ... a place where people will feel comfortable coming inside breathing and relaxing," he added. "Once [the] Markham [building] is complete, we can move out and open the station for its permanent use." The Markham building also will be expanded to house the city's three municipal courts, Thomas said. Other Police Department sales-tax plans include: Replacing the antiquated communication system. Buying a building on Cantrell Road to house a substation for northwest Little Rock. Filling about 55 officer positions. Hiring 12 community patrol officers. Filling 24 vacant and 12 new 911 and 311 dispatchers and operators positions.

The department needs an operations center because of the number of police patrols and calls in the area north of Colonel Glenn Road and west of University Avenue, Thomas said. He said 45 percent to 50 percent of the department's calls are in that area, which encompasses most of wards 4, 5 and 6.

Also about \$500,000 in sales-tax revenue will go into the city's former police and firefighter pension funds, which was closed to new participants in 1983 after the state Legislature mandated that all new police and firefighters must join the Local Police and Fire Retirement System pension program.

State actuaries had warned that the pension fund would be insolvent in 10 years if no action was taken.

The projection of insolvency applied only to the pre-1983 pension fund, which is still being drawn down by more than 275 former employees.

Little Rock Finance Director Sara Lenehan said the insolvency warning has been lifted on the basis of the promised money.

Also, Lenehan said, the finance department plans to rehire several positions that had been cut during tight budget years in the past.

The finance department also will:

Upgrade software. Develop a financial dashboard program, a quick way for department heads to track their budgets. Increase operating funds by \$74,500 annually. Restore staff training funds to \$25,000. Restore the supplies budget to \$15,000. The Little Rock Zoo is expecting an influx of about \$1.33 million this year, which will be used to add several positions and make other positions full time, something zoo Director Mike Blakely said are critical to maintaining the zoo's accreditation. Overall the zoo will: Fill 17 vacant and new positions this year. Increase educational programs and outreach to schools. Spend \$411,000 on deferred maintenance such as upgrades to animal housing. Spend \$380,000 on supplies and contracts. The capital-improvement funds will be used in 2012 to update the bear and otter exhibits, improve the tiger exhibit for breeding and add a meerkat exhibit. Zoo officials plan to use future money for an Australian outback exhibit, a hippopotamus exhibit, a nocturnal exhibit and an Arkansas farm exhibit, as well as for new trains.

The Department of Neighborhood and Housing Programs oversees a multitude of city programs, from code enforcement to animal services.

Some projects planned in 2012 and 2013 include:

Hiring 20 new code-enforcement officers.

Hiring four new animal control officers.

Spending \$602,000 to upgrade and expand Animal Village, including adding an intake area for quarantining as well as a "communal cat area" where cats can play and where people can interact with them.

Spending \$100,000 on the Land Bank, which will help the Land Bank buy, appraise and research potential properties.

The Department of Community Programs, which administers the Prevention, Intervention and Treatment programs through contracts with vendors who apply to offer the services advertised by the city, is expected to get about \$3 million in additional funding annually. The Little Rock Board of Directors must first vote to release that funding and approve the department's mission.

Department Director Dorothy Nayles said the department will develop a scorecard system so the board and residents can see the effectiveness of the programs and contractors. She said the new money will allow for more programs that will assist prisoners and youthful offenders to re-enter society, and more programs that will target at-risk youth as they reach adulthood.

The Fleet Services Department will have about \$1.6 million to replace vehicles across 12 city departments in the first year of the tax. That amount will grow to about \$1.73 million annually through 2021.

The first cars purchased include Dodge Chargers for the Police Department. Some of the cars have arrived but have not been put into service.

Department director Wendell Jones said the city has not replaced any vehicles since 2008, making many of the vehicles in the more than 1,200-vehicle inventory well over the recommended replacement age.

The committee will hear from parks and recreation, fire and a few other departments at its June meeting.

Also, committee members asked for a breakdown of bidding policies and procedures as a primer in how the city awards money.





Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/RICK McFARLAND

Little Rock Police Chief Stuart Thomas (right) outlines Wednesday at the first meeting of a citizen evaluation committee how his department will spend its money from the city's sales-tax increase.



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Little Rock City Manager Bruce Moore (right) confers with Gary Smith, co-chairman of the Little Rock Citizen Evaluation of the New Tax committee, at the group's first meeting Wednesday.