

Main Library saved as budget adopted

\$3.1 billion plan also adds to prosecutor funding

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LONG BEACH - The City Council adopted a \$3.1 billion city budget Tuesday that keeps the once-threatened Main Library open and saves several other slated cuts.

The budget for the 2009 fiscal year, which begins Oct. 1, includes a general fund of \$404.2 million to cover services such as police, fire, libraries, parks and recreation and street repair. The city's non-general fund departments are mostly self-supporting, such as Harbor, Water, Gas & Oil and the Long Beach Airport.

To shore up an expected \$16.9 million budget deficit caused by revenue being lower than needed expenditures, city officials had recommended across-the-board cuts including the shuttering of the Main Library.

However, an alternate plan had been introduced last week that would keep the library open, but may require it to be closed two days a week and see cuts to hours, staff and resources to make up a needed \$1.8 million in savings. While the new proposal had called for the library to be closed Sunday and Monday, the council also voted to cushion the financial impact of the cuts by giving the library \$258,000 more to work with.

How that money will be used and whether it will mean restorations to staff or hours remains to be determined by library and city officials.

But Eleanore Schmidt, director of library services, said after the council vote that the library at least will be open 40 hours a week. Currently, it's open seven days a week for 55 hours.

"I think it's a great day for library patrons," Schmidt said.

City officials have said they still plan to close the Main Library eventually, opening a temporary site in the meantime and building a new library later. But community members and library supporters were outraged when this idea was abruptly proposed at the end of July for the coming fiscal year.

Dissent over council budgets

When the council approved the budget, there was a surprising single dissenting vote. Councilman Patrick O'Donnell voted against the budget over what he said he perceived as an unwarranted increase to the council office budgets.

To balance the budget, City Manager Pat West had called for up to 10 percent budget cuts across all city departments, including council and other elected offices. After most council members had cut about 10 percent from their budgets - some only grudgingly - Councilwoman Rae Gabelich proposed dividing up a council travel fund equally among all council offices because some council members travel far less than others.

This, she reasoned, and other council members agreed, would give council members more flexibility in their budgets. But ultimately, the transfer increased their budgets, despite the previous cuts.

Debate over prosecutor budget

One proposed cut that has spurred debate but hadn't drawn crowds of opposition as some other cuts had - until Tuesday night - was to the city prosecutor's budget.

City Prosecutor Thomas Reeves has fought proposed reductions to his budget, noting that his office's work is intertwined with that of the city's growing police force. A proposed cut of over \$400,000 would mean losing three of his 20 prosecutors, even as his office takes on about 40,000 misdemeanor cases a year, he said.

"Crimes, if there's no prosecutor to prosecute them, aren't crimes at all," Reeves said during the afternoon study session. "They're simply arrests and citations. They become crimes only when a prosecutor convicts them of those offenses."

Several other people spoke in support of the prosecutor, and a couple dozen family and staff members from WomenShelter of Long Beach showed up wearing maroon shelter shirts to oppose the cuts. While they didn't stay long enough to speak on the issue, Executive Director TuLynn Smylie said victims of crime depend on the prosecutor's office doing its job.

"We're not talking about losing services," Smylie said. "We're talking about returning batterers to their homes to wreak more havoc."

The council voted to reinstate \$87,000 to the prosecutor's budget, after much debate over which of several services they could potentially save were most worthwhile.

Other programs saved

The council also voted to restore eliminated funds to a few other programs, including \$50,000 to maintain some open gym hours for adults in three community centers and \$37,000 for Spanish interpreter services during council meetings.

To pay for the restored library, prosecutor, gym and interpreter expenses, the council voted to eliminate two vacant positions in the City Clerk's office; \$75,000 from printing expenses at the Department of Parks, Recreation and Marine; savings from a lease deferral of \$80,000; and reduce \$100,000 from the Police Department's materials and supply budget and a jail staff position.

City management's proposal initially had been to cut further from the LBPD community relations division, which already had been cut from about 23 to six civilian staff. Police Chief Anthony Batts said that would devastate many outreach programs, such as the volunteer program, apartment watch and business watch.

"Basically everything that deals with prevention in our city we'd have to reduce," Batts said.

But some council members said the Police Department should be willing to take on more cuts, although the city's 1,020 sworn police officers were left untouched in the budget.

"We all as a city have to contribute, and to be honest with you, I think everyone knows the police department has the largest budget in the city," Councilwoman Tonia Reyes Uranga said.

Other possible cuts, such as city funding for parades, faced blatant opposition.

"It's tough enough trying to get outside funds to be able to help us with this," Councilman Dee Andrews said.

Councilman Val Lerch was much more succinct in his response: "No, and hell no."

The mayor has five days in which to use his line-item veto power and return the budget to the council. By Sept. 30, the council must override any vetoes or approve the amended budget.

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