

## **FWLNA City of Fort Worth Proposed Budget Review**

In order to better understand the City of Fort Worth 2010-2011 proposed budget and the projected \$73 million budget deficit, several members of the Fort Worth League of Neighborhoods' Board of Directors volunteered to read, analyze, and ask questions about the budget documents. These documents include a 208 page proposed budget and a 437 page decision package document as well as budget priorities and other documents posted on the City's budget webpage.

We noted that, unlike last year's proposed budget document, there is no detail of general fund revenue accounts in the proposed 2010-11 budget. We asked for departmental budget detail and were told we would have to submit an open records act request to get it.

We approached the budget review as regular citizens, albeit ones who because of our neighborhood involvement may be more knowledgeable than most about certain City programs, services and practices.

We have not claimed to be City of Fort Worth budget experts nor have we thought that should be necessary. It seemed to us that average citizens ought to be able to read, understand, and get a reasonably complete, detailed picture of the proposed budget from the City's website. We have watched many of the budget hearings and City Council workshops on the budget; however we are not privy to behind the scenes changes in the budget.

The public budget buzz since August 10 when the city manager released his proposed version has mostly been about 3 things: 1) the projected \$73 million budget deficit; 2) the proposed closure of the Ridglea, North Side, and Meadowbrook branch libraries; and 3) the merging of the Parks and Community Services Department under the Library Department.

One observer noted that no one has challenged the assumptions of the \$73 million budget deficit. Various news outlets have cited the real problems as cost issues surrounding City employee pensions and City commitments to already in place police and fire contracts. Those are the real issues they have said.

Other observers have noted the theory of the proposed budget -- that cutting services, maintenance and amenities in response to lower property valuations and tax revenue will balance the budget -- will also only further lower property values over the long-term, creating a cycle of lower tax revenue and higher deficits. They contend the proposed solution is illogical and averse to reversing the deficit issue, digging a deeper hole for future budget years.

While acknowledging the big picture items, we took another approach as well. Knowing that closing the 3 branch libraries (a service much demanded by neighborhood residents) will "save" the City between \$516,000. and \$1.2 million, we set about to find other

information which might illuminate the budget priorities and choices inherent in the proposed budget document.

Our review set up a whole list of priorities and choices which are proposed. If you read the document, you can find priorities which are funded, choices which are made. So the question is, what is most important to the citizens? What are they willing to live without and what are they not willing to live without? When compared to stated citizen priorities, where do business development, the Super Bowl, funding for programming for the homeless, gas drilling, etc. land? Are citizens aware of how much will be spent on big priority items such as these? How do they feel about that when they compare those expenditures to basic services such as libraries and parks?

We also discovered a cash excess in the general fund of over \$23 million, that according to the City's budget manager, will not be spent on general fund expenditures in FY 2010- 11. Why not? What is it being reserved for? If a community service such as libraries is so important to the citizens, would the citizens prefer that some of the \$23 million in excess general fund revenues be spent to keep the 3 branch libraries (and a host of other services) open?

In addition to reviewing the budget and asking questions of city staff (for the presentation at the League's general membership meeting on September 2), we also compiled an initial list of budget revenue generators suggested by a variety of sources. We did not include the idea of increasing the ad valorem tax although we are aware of at least one citizens group advocating that measure.

Our review of the City's proposed budget raised more questions than it answered. Budget priorities were approved by the City Council in January 2010. They set the stage for the drafting of the City Manager's proposed 2010-11 budget. What, exactly, are core City services? Do the elected officials see these the same way the citizens see them?

Fundamentally, our review raised the question – what kind of city can Fort Worth residents expect Fort Worth to be next year and in the near term? A city which can pay for fire and police (as valuable as they are) and nothing else? Is that the Fort Worth citizens – neighborhood residents -- want?

We hope our review encourages more citizens to review the City's proposed budget and make their priorities and choices known to the elected officials. A list of their names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses follows.

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