

Staff, capital items among budget topics

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a balanced budget. DeGraffenried told the City Council that as of Monday, based on preliminary ideas for expenses and revenues, the general fund and water/wastewater fund had about a \$900,000 deficit.

Delaying some capital items until 2018 could help cut the deficit, the city manager said. DeGraffenried said officials can look at ways to increase city revenue and decrease expenses to balance the budget. There are no plans, however, to raise the property tax rate -- or water, sewer or electric rates.

"I don't feel terribly uncomfortable [about the budget]," deGraffenried told the council. "There [were] times in the past several years where we've come in several million dollars off of balance, and we've been able to get into balance."

In a follow-up email to the Dispatch Record on Wednesday afternoon, deGraffenried said the city staff has been "making cuts and looking at various options for Council to consider on Monday [July 25] related to capital projects, staffing and utility income."

Referring to the July 25 meeting, deGraffenried added, "I do believe we will have a balanced, or very close to balanced, budget on Monday."

In the council meeting earlier this week, DeGraffenried said budget planning has included the assumption that there will be no raises in the upcoming year. City employees received a 5 percent increase in pay during the 2016 fiscal year.

Although a salary increase is not in the budget plan for 2017, the council is considering possibilities for adding city staff members or paying existing workers to assume additional responsibilities.

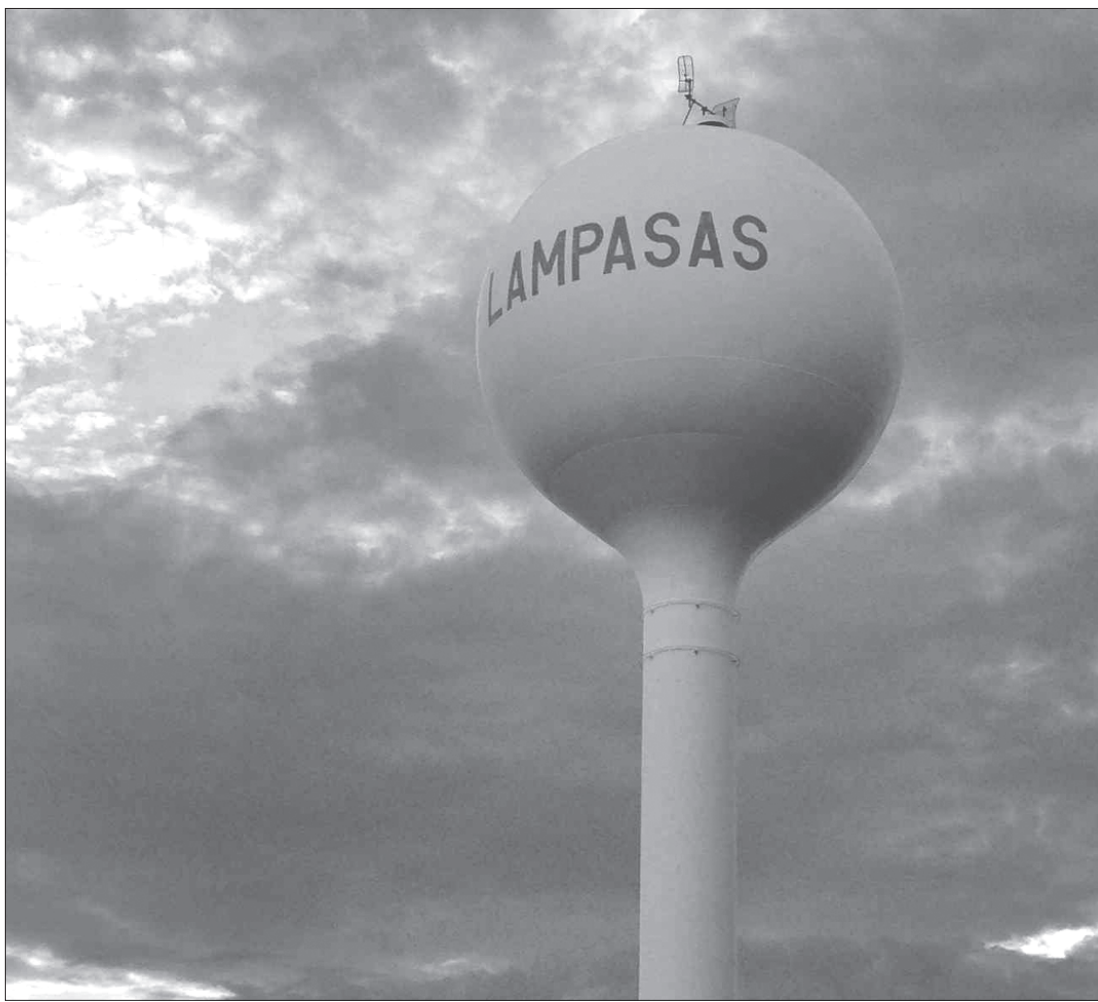
Extensive discussion at Monday's meeting related to Fire Chief Reece Oestreich's request to add three full-time firefighters. The total cost, with benefits included, would be about \$150,000, city officials said.

Oestreich said that addition would allow each shift to have four firefighters, which he said "changes the whole dynamics of the service that we offer the city." Oestreich said a study done by the International Association of City Managers has shown the addition of a fourth firefighter to a shift doubles the firefighting capability.

Also, Oestreich said according to state policy, for every two firefighters inside a structure fighting a fire there must be two outside ready to provide a rescue if needed. Oestreich said at times, the fire department may have only three people on an engine company.

"Now, if there's a life endangered, the RIT team deal [the two-in-two-out rule] goes out the window," Oestreich said. "We can go into a rescue mode and go in and rescue that person. But to go in and save somebody's structure -- the bedroom's on fire, kitchen fire, what have you -- to follow state guidelines and policy in place by the state legislation, we cannot allow these firemen to enter a structure unless there are two people outside capable of going in and rescuing them."

Oestreich said the addition of three full-time firefighters is a need, particularly because of the department's increase



FILE PHOTO

A 2017 city budget plan discussed Monday includes funds for rehabilitation of the water tower on Nix Road.

in calls. The fire chief said the department had about 800 calls last year, but it will exceed 1,200 this year.

"And it just gets busier and busier every day," Oestreich said. "The guys are on their fifth call for today."

Oestreich said his department has used part-time firefighters to add a fourth person to shifts, as well as to fill in for full-time firefighters who are out for vacation or other leave. DeGraffenried said that strategy has been fairly effective, although he said it still is difficult to ensure a four-person engine crew 24 hours a day.

Oestreich said if he is able to add full-time positions, he will try to fill the jobs with part-time firefighters who already have been helping the department. Oestreich said several of those firefighters have expressed interest in a full-time position.

"And that's one of the things that I do," the chief said. "As long as we have a selection pool within our part-time staff, we don't open it outside. And that's to tell them 'thank you.'"

Council member TJ Monroe asked if the fire department can use volunteers to fill in when a fourth person is needed on a shift.

Oestreich said volunteers -- several of whom are going through a fire training academy -- receive much more training now than they used to. Nevertheless, because volunteers have jobs away from the fire department, Oestreich said it is difficult to predict when they may be able to respond to a call.

In response to a question from Councilman Chuck Williamson about county funding, Oestreich said the county gives the city fire department about \$24,000 per year. That amount is a little less than half the total cost of employing a full-time firefighter, Oestreich said.

The chief said 80 percent of the Lampasas Fire Department's calls are within the city. On

the other hand, he said there have been times the city fire department was the only one to respond to incidents outside the city limits.

Williamson asked if the city could add the three full-time firefighters gradually over time. Oestreich said no, and Councilman Chris Harrison -- a Marble Falls firefighter -- said it would be impractical to phase in the staffing addition over an extended time.

Councilman Mike White said the request is different from other city projects, which can be done in phases.

"[If] he needs it, he needs it -- bottom line," White said.

Mayor Christian Toups said the additional full-time firefighters Oestreich has requested seem like a necessity.

On Monday, the council also discussed other potential staff additions or restructurings -- which were not included in the preliminary budget estimates. Ideas included the addition of one full-time cemetery crew member and one part-time animal control officer. In addition, the council discussed the idea of converting a part-time animal shelter position to a full-time role.

Harrison said the city has needed more cemetery help for years -- although he advocated adding a seasonal position rather than a full-time one.

Assistant Police Chief Sammy Bailey said a part-time animal control officer would be helpful for the late afternoons and weekends, when the animal control officer is not on duty. At the present time, police officers respond to animal-control calls, but the assistant chief said that poses logistical problems and requires patrol cars to be cleaned after they are used to transport animals.

Ms. Bailey said changing a part-time animal shelter worker's schedule to full time would help the shelter staff -- who she said spread their hours out over all seven days a week

so they can care for animals at the facility.

"So it would help take a little bit of that burden away so they could actually feel like they have some time off," the assistant police chief said, "because [with the current staffing] we have to stretch their 40 hours out for the full time and the 20 hours for the part time with that."

Finance Director Yvonne Moreno said it would cost the city about \$10,000 -- after a reimbursement from the county, which pays half of animal

shelter costs -- to convert a part-time shelter position to a full-time job.

Adding a part-time animal control officer would cost about \$12,000-\$15,000, and a full-time cemetery worker would cost about \$40,000, deGraffenried and Ms. Moreno said.

Toups, White and Mrs. Monroe said it can be more efficient to pay existing employees to work overtime rather than adding staff members. White said that has worked well in his business.

For the requests other than the one from the fire department, Toups said he would like to see the city restructure existing employees' work before considering adding staff members.

Mayor Pro Tem Misti Talbert said she would like to know if existing cemetery and animal control employees want to work overtime.

The topic of creating an assistant city manager position was addressed briefly at Monday's meeting, although council members did not offer indications of whether they would support such an action. DeGraffenried said with benefits included, the cost of an assistant city manager could be about \$100,000.

On another personnel-related matter, the council voted unanimously to renew employee health insurance coverage with Scott & White Health Plan for the upcoming budget year. The cost increase compared to the current year is 4 percent, which deGraffenried said a third-party broker told him is pretty good.

"It's downright amazing is what it is," said Mrs. Monroe, who works for a health care management company.

Capital items in the budget plan presented Monday include \$700,000 for the Spring Street pump station and Nix Road

water tank rehabilitation and funds for rehabilitating the old City Hall building. The city plans to use the building, which houses Municipal Court at the corner of South Main Street and East Third streets, for City Council Chambers as well as Municipal Court.

The 2017 budget plan presented Monday also included funds for work on West Avenue E.

"We have targeted West Avenue E as a road that we really want to improve top to bottom -- paving, drainage, as well as [water and sewer] pipe in the ground," deGraffenried said.

Harrison said water and wastewater facilities improvements are important and should be added to the budget.

White said he would like to see more brush clearing done along creeks. The city funded clearing along Sulphur Creek and Burleson Creek within the last year, although creek restoration was not in the preliminary plan for the 2017 budget.

In another matter at Monday's meeting, the council discussed the possibility of the city paying up to \$40,000 of the estimated \$93,000 cost of water and sewer extensions for a housing development near Sunset and Brown streets.

The city is considering a potential cost-sharing agreement with developer Harris & Bowman -- as the city has offered for other developments in the past -- because the line extensions arguably would have a public benefit that extends beyond the housing development.

Public Works Director Shane Brown said the main benefit of the utility extensions would be that they would allow lines to loop instead of reaching dead ends. Looping lines improves the water quality, Brown said.

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