

What to Expect from this Year's City Budget

By Scott Laird

Vernonia is about to enter a new fiscal year, and with that comes the presentation and acceptance of a new budget. As many of us have heard, either directly or through the grapevine, Vernonia finds itself in a difficult position as it begins the budget process—namely a shortage of funds.

The community was told last year that things were tight and to expect them to stay that way for the next few years. So city council passed a budget that relied on inter fund loans and transfers, and some belt tightening to balance. This year, on the heels of a devastating flood, the city finds itself in worse shape than last year.

It might be useful for people to know more about what things cost when it comes to operating a city. The following are just an example of some of the expenses through the end of March 2008, or 75% of the fiscal year:

Budget Item	Cost	% of Appropriation
Office supplies	\$2,106.19	35.1
City Hall electricity	\$4,558.98	48.3
Legal services	\$15,381.43	52.6
Building inspection salaries	\$8,876.22	68.7
Library electricity	\$2,752.31	76.5
Police salaries	\$191,843.80	77.6
Police uniforms and gear	\$3,506.53	70.1
Airport insurance	\$2,215.00	88.6
Cemetery equip., oper., and maint.	\$1,731.82	20.5
VCLC Electricity	\$1,387.72	77.1
VCLC Directors Compensation	\$28,858.33	75.2
Parks and Recreation Salaries	\$23,643.65	56.9
Parks Electricity	\$9,905.03	87.8
Water Fund Salaries	\$91,435.98	102.1
Sewer Fund Salaries	\$58,793.13	59.1
Street Fund Salaries	\$29,296.12	97.9

The chart of accounts, and actual line items were changed over the last year, creating more detail as to where the city is really spending it's money. The city has been capturing expenses more accurately this year, so the next budget should better reflect expenses in the line items where they are being spent.

At the recent presentation of the audited budget from 2006-07, the auditor told city council, with the current shortfall of funds, there are really only two things you can do— increase revenues or cut services. Many members of the community are still trying to recover from the flood, there is a rising cost of living, and there are already high utility rates here. Increasing revenues in the form of higher property taxes will prove to be a hard sell. There are few other places that the city earns revenue— from business license fees, utility franchise fees, fines and forfeitures, building and electrical permits, and from parks use fees. Of those revenues, the only fees that aren't paid almost entirely by residents, either directly or indirectly, are the parks fees. The parks committee raised some of those fees last year, and have recommended raising more this year, but this will have little impact on 5+ million dollar budget.

That leaves us with cutting services. No one wants to be told they are going to have less than what they had before, but the reality is, that is exactly what Vernonians should expect for the next few years. Services cost money, and every citizen has services that they value more than others. Every department and service will be looked at to see if there are ways to cut costs and save. Currently the Police Department and the Public Works Department are operating short one person. It is doubtful those positions can be filled this year. The Community Learning Center is in the first year of a five year plan to grow it's programs and operated at a loss this past year. It will need to be looked at. The parks are holding their own, but Vernonia has more park lands than most small towns our size. There could be an opportunity to find some funds there. The Library is open about forty hours per week, and has purchased almost \$5,000 in books.

The current budget tried to rein in Administrative costs. The city has been working without a Public Works Director. Two city employees have shared the duties of City Administrator, City Planner and Finance Director. Office staff is at a bare minimum. A cut in hours of operation at city hall and part time employees will be considered.

Some creative ideas will be needed when the Budget Committee and City Council meet to begin discussions for the 2008-09 budget.

The proposed budget was presented to City Council and the Budget Committee on May 5th. The Budget Committee will meet to discuss and formalize a recommended budget beginning on May 13th and again on May 15th. The public is invited to attend and offer suggestions. Council will have to approve a budget before June 30.

City Council

By Brett Costley

First I'd like to introduce myself to those who don't know me. My wife and I moved to Vernonia in 1998 from Houston, Texas. I work at Intel and my wife is the "Jazzercise Lady." We have two young children who are native Vernonians. I've been on the city council since 2002. I previously served on the Planning Commission.

I am the council liaison to the Public Works Committee which is chartered with oversight of streets, water, sewer, and storm water. As most of you are well aware, Vernonia's needs in these areas are tremendous and our resources few. With much help from city staff we are looking at options to plan for and make improvements in these areas while being sensitive to the citizen's wallet. This is a tough task, especially after the flood, but I am optimistic that with hard work we can get things done.

One thing that has become clear to me through my years on council is that it is imperative to balance short term desires with the long time good of the community. I believe that many of Vernonia's problems stem from focusing on the short term. Particularly now, as we deal with the flood recovery, we are faced with this balancing act. I firmly believe that making tough decisions today will pay off in the future. Another balancing act we've been faced with due to the flood is balancing gathering input versus making decisions so that recovery can begin. Meetings earlier this year regarding implementing ordinances regarding the flood plain certainly must have seemed rushed, but quick decisions allowed recovery to begin and, I believe, will increase the opportunity to receive funding. Not enough thanks can be given to the volunteers on the Planning Commission and on the recovery committee for all the work they've done to facilitate council's work.

I have heard recently some comments that city council does not listen to the citizens. I'd like to note that city council is not required to allow citizen comments in our regular meetings. We are only required by law to take public input on certain items that require public hearings. However, even in our regular meetings we try to accommodate citizens and take input. I understand the difficulty of attending meetings — with a wife who works at night and with two young children I have trouble attending myself — but citizen input is critical, and if you don't talk to us, we can't listen. Reach me outside the meetings if necessary. I cannot promise to vote the way you'd prefer, but I do promise to listen.

Vernonia will be facing tough times over the next few years. Please work with council, committees, the school district, and others to do what is best for Vernonia. Challenge us when you think we are doing something wrong — we aren't perfect — but please do so in a constructive manner. A number of citizens do this already, and I very much appreciate it.

City Accepts New Waste Management Rates

The Vernonia City Council approved new rates for waste collection by Waste Management and a plan to begin mandatory curbside recycling for all customers. This is the first rate increase in five years. Waste Management will provide sixty-four gallon carts for each customer for recycling. Customers will be able to co-mingle the following items, except glass, in this single container: newspaper, magazines and scrap paper; flattened cardboard and wax cartons; plastic bottles and jugs, nursery pots 4" and larger, and five gallon buckets; and metal cans including aluminum, tin, aerosol cans, and scrap metal. Recycling will be picked up every other week. Garbage pick up is being offered either once per week or once per month. It is anticipated that some residents, by participating in the recycling portion of the plan, will be able to reduce their volume of garbage and reduce the number of cans or the number of pickups thereby mitigating the increased cost in rates.



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