

City fees! On your utility bill?

Take a deep breath. Here’s what you need to know.

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Of the Keizertimes

For the better part of a year – and in the case of Keizer parks much longer – city officials and advisory boards have been discussing ways to make more money available for the Keizer Police Department and Keizer parks.

Both services are paid for out of the city’s general fund and changing the amounts allocated to each isn’t as easy as it might seem. The city operates on a tight budget and annual additional contributions to the state’s Public Employee Retirement System (PERS) have made it difficult to expand funding for either department.

The result is that Keizer Police Department is understaffed by most measures and Keizer parks face increasing challenges as limited staffing and budget have led to deferring maintenance on some park amenities.

From the start, Mayor Cathy Clark said she didn’t want to see the funding of the departments become an either/or discussion.

“This is not a debate of police vs. parks – both are livability issues, both are valid parts of our

community – and I don’t want to set this up as adversarial,” Clark said at a meeting of the Keizer City Council in August 2016.

To create more funding for both parks and police, the city council, city staff and advisory boards have been researching and discussing the possibility of creating fees that would funnel additional funding into dedicated funds. There is still a long road ahead, but here is a primer on what’s happened to this point and how to get involved.

What options were considered?

In the case of parks, both bonds and establishing a parks taxing district were considered. Both were rejected for different reasons. Bonds cannot pay for operational costs and those are the heart of the parks’ woes. A bond could pay for a new tennis court, but not the staff time needed to maintain it. The taxing district was rejected because of the additional overhead it would create that would add to the cost.

In regard to police, fees are really the only option because most of the money would pay

for salaries and benefits for new officers, which are operational costs.

Why doesn’t the city just raise taxes?

It can’t. Bond measures passed in the mid-1990s locked in property tax rates (in Keizer’s case \$2.08 per thousand dollars of assessed value) and the amounts at which property values can increase on an annual basis (3 percent). Recently, additional payments to PERS have eaten up the lion’s share of the annual property value increases that Keizer receives.

Wouldn’t residents get to vote on whether the city can charge fees?

Not necessarily. The city council has the power to enact fees within its jurisdiction. The council could choose to seek an advisory vote, but the results would not be binding. An advisory vote would also add to the city’s expenses.

How would the fees be collected?

That remains to be determined. Adding the fee to utility bills the city already issues for water would save processing, postage and printing costs.

Parks nearing crisis situation

What fee amounts are being discussed?

Amounts discussed so far range from no fee to \$8 per month.

Can I provide input?

Yes. The city has sent out a survey to residents in their bi-monthly utility bills in December and January. Fill it out and return it to city hall, or visit www.keizer.org and click on the scrolling banner at the top of the page to be taken to the survey and informational materials. Residents have until March 15 to complete the survey.

Why is additional funding needed?

Keizer parks are in something akin to a financial crisis. Many maintenance projects have been deferred for several years and the cost of completing them grows with each deferment. The cost of a recent restoration project in the parking lot on the south end of Claggett Creek Park doubled in the span of a year as deterioration accelerated. Parks are facing similar challenges throughout the city.

Who takes care of the parks?

Currently, Keizer has two full-time employees providing maintenance and oversight to 240 acres of parks.

An additional 3-4 seasonal employees are hired to help with the busiest parks seasons, spring to fall. Parks employees are also responsible for maintenance at the Keizer Civic Center.

What will happen without additional funding?

Without an infusion of new funding, city staff has said regular maintenance will decrease, including basics like regular mowing and debris removal. Additionally, play structures, courts and other amenities will be closed or removed as they reach the end of their life out of safety concerns.

KPD wants 5 officers

What fee amounts are being discussed?

The amount currently on the table would be \$3.67 per month. That works out to \$44 per year or about 12 cents per day.

Can I provide input?

The city hasn’t addressed this issue formally since August 2016, but there will likely be numerous opportunities for public comment as talks of the fee move forward.

Why is additional funding needed?

By most measures, Keizer Police Department is understaffed. The 37 officers the city budgets for averages about one officer per 1,000 residents. National averages are 2.35 officers per thousand residents, even Oregon averages 1.65 officers per thousand residents.

How would additional officers affect services?

First, don’t expect an immediate drop in crime. More officers would allow KPD to provide better customer service.

In practice, it would mean that a property crimes detective would show up at your door in the event of a burglary rather than a patrol officer.

What would the fee pay for?

The fee would cover the wages, health insurance, retirement benefits and payroll taxes of five new officers. Two officers would be added to night patrols, one would be added to the traffic safety unit, one would be assigned to the Community Response Unit, and one would be a property crime detective. (For a full account of the specific roles of those officers, see the Keizertimes story *12 cents a day = five new cops* at keizertimes.com)

How serious is the staffing problem?

Keizer Police Chief John Teague characterized the situation as grave, but not dire.

The result of the low staffing has increased workloads for the existing Keizer officers and staff.



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