

# Pandemic concerns make for static city budget

By ERIC A. HOWALD  
Of the Keizertimes

With so many unknowns in play for the city's financial future, one recurring refrain from budget talks this week was that nearly every city department expects to save money on travel.

Many of the regular conferences that city employees attend have either been postponed, canceled or will take place online as a result of precautions designed to limit the spread of COVID-19.

Despite the pandemic, and some questions regarding how it will affect city revenues, Keizer will be in a relatively stable position because of the limited scope of services it supplies to residents.

"When you hear about other cities making big cuts, it's to their discretionary areas, like libraries," said Keizer Finance Director Tim Wood. "We don't have those and it makes us very nimble."

If there are cuts to be made, they will likely occur in limiting the number of capital projects the city undertakes in the next fiscal year, which begins July 1.

The city anticipates an overall increase in wages of about 2 to 2.5 percent, an increase in insurance rates of 7 to 8 percent and an uptick in spending on its wellness programs intended to encourage greater participation by offering up to an additional \$500 a year in incentives per employee. The city's wellness program has proven to be a boon in both retaining employees and lowering insurance costs.

Major elements discussed at the teleconferenced meeting Monday, May 11, included:

- An uptick of about \$18,000 in planned legal services spending. City Attorney Shannon Johnson plans to enlist the help of outside agencies to help him catch up on projects that fell to the wayside in the recent years. Johnson spent several months of the past year deeply involved in a lawsuit to end the firing of high-powered firearms in a quarry across the Willamette River.

- The city is still not planning to purchase a human resources information system more than a year after the initial need was made known. The cost is about \$15,000 to set up and substantially less than that in continued maintenance.

- Keizer Public Works Director Bill Lawyer said he planned to report on how much a new civic center HVAC system was saving the city but, because the pandemic closed the center to public

traffic, the data simply isn't ready.

- Revenues for the city's street funds are in limbo at the moment. Money from a 3-cent gas tax goes into the account and gas sales are down. Repaving River Road North from St. Edward Catholic Church to Wheatland Road is the largest project in the works.

- Revenues for the water fund will also likely fall in the short term. The city is not turning off access water to residences, but some are falling behind on bills. Wood, the city's finance director, said there is currently about \$17,000 in utility bills that are 60 days behind payment and another \$42,000 that are behind 30 days.

"The city is reaching out to arrange payment plans and work with them. We hope to have them caught up by the November/December time period," Wood said.

Wood said that usage of online payment has ramped up since the civic center closed to walk-in and that has increased the fees it pays to the payment processor, but it may turn out to be a good thing in the long run.

"If more people stick with the online payment after the pandemic, we may be able to refocus the personnel time elsewhere," he said.

In a continuation of budget talks on Tuesday, May 12:

- Members of the committee discussed the city's general fund, the bulk of which goes to paying for police services and is also the fund the city has the least control over as far as revenues. Its solvency is tied mainly to property tax increases (roughly 3 percent a year) with licensing and fees making up another large component.

- COVID-19 will have some major impacts on this fund, some good, others less heartening. On the "positive" side, there's been no slowdown in marijuana sales – the city will collect an estimated \$230,000 from the sales made in Keizer, taxes on liquor sales are also trending upward to the tune of 13 percent more during the year to date. The pandemic may end up causing significantly more harm in terms of traffic court dates being delayed and the payments expected following suit, interruptions to minor league baseball and, potentially, the end of the Volcanoes will likely reduce what the city receives from the stadium lessee.

- Community Development Director Nate Brown urged the members of the committee to think long and hard about expanding the city's code enforcement program.

"The city should take a hard look at how we administer the code enforcement program."

— Nate Brown  
Community development director

City Councilor Marlene Parsons questioned why the duties of the code enforcement officer hadn't shifted to development

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— Tim Wood  
Keizer finance director

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*Brenda Donley, Victoria Kapurara, Heather Brown, Vera Carbaugh, Jerry Stewart, Jessica Lyons, Vicki Brauer*

Not pictured: Chrystal Espinosa, Heather Karpan, Stefan Sicard, and Donald Davis

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