La Mesa facing up to budget cuts
Expenses outpace city's modest gains in income
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Published: March 2, 1989
An era of austerity may be coming to La Mesa.
Faced with a projected financial crunch in the next fiscal year's budget, the City Council reluctantly made recommendations yesterday during a budget workshop on items that could be slashed.
Among economies that may be implemented are a 5 percent across-the-board decrease in departmental funding, except for police and fire, and a cut off of aid to non-profit organizations.
"This is what we have to do to stay in business," said Councilman Art Madrid.
Although one council member joked that the budget process was like playing "Lamesa-nopoly," the council knew it was no game when it got down to the task of deciding what to fund and what to cut. The council also set priorities for those items it would like to see funded to serve as a guideline for the preparation of the preliminary budget, which is scheduled to come before the council late in May.
Numbers have not been determined, but the council found out this much: Spending needs to be tightened since expenditures are outpacing the city's modest revenue increases.
"I don't want to be a doomsayer," said City Manager Ron Creagh during the nearly four-hour session held at the Community Center. "No one likes to cut budgets. It's reality and it may have to occur."
The council initially listed about 25 items that could be cut, whittling a final list down to 10 items.
At one point, Councilwoman Jerri Lopez called "Draconian" the measures the council members were proposing. They included reducing lighting by one-third by unscrewing every third light bulb; reducing the use of paper; and canceling magazine and newspaper subscriptions.
"I think we're getting ridiculous," she said.
Among the recommendations the council made to cut spending levels are: a freeze on new hires and promotions; cutting programs from the Department of Parks and Recreation that do not recover 60 percent of direct costs; deferment of new capital-equipment purchases; and increasing the use of volunteers.
The cuts parallel some of the measures taken to balance last year's $34.7 million budget. The city then decided to delay the purchase of major capital equipment and not to fund 13 positions, including five police-officer slots.
The council also came up with a 10-item wish list, which included implementing a financial plan to increase revenues; the hiring of additional police officers; the maintenance of streets and sewers; improving traffic signals; and implementing off-site improvements in the downtown redevelopment area.
The process of having the council take a more hands-on approach in developing the budget is a new one for the city. In the past, the council simply voted on a preliminary budget during Mayor June Creagh, who used a similar process in other cities before coming to La Mesa in October, said the workshop is particularly helpful during difficult budget years.
"The council is informed of the financial situation early on in the budget process," he said. "This way, the budget will reflect, as closely as possible, the kinds of policies and priorities they've developed."
Lopez called the new process an improvement. "We become more active as opposed to being presented with a document," she said.