

Austin residents face higher tax bills, utility fees

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The Austin City Council agreed to raise property taxes and utility bills under the 2011-12 budget it OK'd Monday. But it also spared some services that were slated to be cut, such as by keeping open two recreation centers.

The new property tax rate is 48.11 cents per \$100 of assessed property value. The owner of a median-value home of \$182,228 will pay \$877, an increase of \$34 from this year.

Water bills will rise by about \$8 a month for the average customer, and residents who use the largest of three garbage carts, 96 gallons, will pay \$3 more a month.

Electric bills will go up, but not until 2012 — and it's not clear by how much. Austin Energy has not increased its base rates in nearly two decades, and it is still crafting new rates.

Under the new budget, which will take effect Oct. 1, Balcones and Dick Nichols' pools will be closed during colder months, a supervised summer playground program will be offered at 10 sites instead of 27, and hours at John Henry Faulk Central Library will be scaled back.

Public safety employees will get 3 percent raises, and all other city workers will receive 2 percent pay increases.

The City Council spent most of Monday debating how to spend an extra few million dollars that has come into city coffers since July, when staffers proposed the budget. Most of it was extra revenue Austin Energy received this summer, as Austinites used more electricity than normal to keep air conditioners humming.

Council members bartered over a list of about 30 items, trying to convince colleagues that programs they care about and that were slated to be cut were worthy of funding. It was a more robust debate than prior years, when council members mostly ironed out details in advance.

The most tense discussion centered on whether to hire 49 more police officers to keep pace with the city's standard of 2 officers per 1,000 residents.

Council Member Bill Spelman said studies have shown that hiring more officers doesn't always make cities safer, and he suggested hiring 33 officers and 16 civilian Police Department staffers, including more 911 call-takers.

Mayor Lee Leffingwell said the recent wildfires showed how crucial it is to have enough first responders.

He said there are "experts who sit behind a desk and analyze things," but others have "done the job and been out in the field for years" and believe that 49 more officers are needed.

That comment was a not-so-subtle dig at Spelman, a University of Texas professor who has studied public safety policy issues for decades.

"I have trained thousand of police officers myself. I'm not just a desk jockey who doesn't know anything about police work," Spelman said in response. "We would still have plenty (of officers) to do the job we need."

Spelman's proposal didn't get enough support, but the council OK'd Spelman's idea of spending \$100,000 to study how the Police Department could use its resources the most effectively.

The council decided to keep open the Dottie Jordan Recreation Center and the Austin Recreation Center , which the parks department had proposed closing or turning over to private management.

In addition, the council agreed to spend money on: two more security guards for city libraries; a substance abuse treatment program; a paramedics program that helps link frequent 911 callers to other health care resources; new library materials; the Center for Child Protection; and a staffer to help community groups carry out projects to improve city parks.

Austin Water Utility had proposed adding a new, \$6 fee to Austinites' water bills, but council members scaled that back to \$4.40 for now and asked utility officials to spend the next few months developing a graduated scale that would impose a higher fee on those who use the most water.

Courtesy of JB Goodwin