

# City expected to arrive at budget that holds property taxes steady, but increases fees

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It is the end of the road Tuesday night for the city's 2010 budget deliberations

No, there's no pot of gold awaiting those who have made the entire journey. Instead, commissioners are expected to arrive at a budget that holds the city's property tax rate steady, balances revenues with expenditures, largely avoids city layoffs, but increases a number of fines and fees that city residents pay.

All in all, city leaders said they'd take it, given the tough economy.

"It was a very challenging year," City Manager David Corliss said of putting together the budget. "But what we're seeing is that a number of our peer communities have been dealing with a number of the same, if not more severe, challenges."

The Unified Government of Wyandotte County, for example, reportedly will force employees to take 15 days of furloughs, freeze employee salaries, cut 10 percent of its operating expenses and put a halt to most capital projects to make up for a \$12 million budget shortfall.

It didn't come to that in Lawrence.

"It has been a long summer, but I've been very pleased with the process," said Mayor Rob Chestnut. "The credit really goes to our department heads and directors who saw that the challenges we're facing on the revenue side are pretty significant. We started the process without having a giant gap between what they were expecting and what we could do."

But the budget will ask a little more of city residents. The budget will increase water rates, trash rates, and various other fees. Monthly trash bills for residential service are expected to increase 69 cents per month — or

about 5 percent — from current levels. Monthly water and sewer bills are expected to increase by \$1 to \$3 per month — about 3 percent to 4 percent — for many typical residential users.

The bulk of the utility bill increase will come from higher rates charged for water. The city undertook about \$17 million worth of improvements at the Clinton Water Treatment Plant. That required the city to increase water rates by about 10 percent. Much of the plant expansion was geared to allow the city to serve a larger population base in the future, but now population growth has slowed as the economy has stumbled.

Commissioners also are set to increase a set of rates that are tied directly to new housing growth. Corliss is proposing significant increases in the city's water and sewer impact fees, which are charged to new homes and businesses that hook into the city's water and sewer system. Corliss is proposing a \$200 — or 12 percent increase — in the city's standard water impact fee. A \$270 — or 18 percent increase — is proposed for the sewer impact fee. With the new fees, builders or homeowners will have to pay \$3,500 in impact fees to hook up to the city's system.

Chestnut said he wants to review Lawrence's impact fees to see if they are comparable to other area communities.

"I think it is particularly important that we look at what they're doing in Johnson County, Leavenworth County, places where we know we're losing some population to," Chestnut said.

A pair of city jobs also will hang in the balance at Tuesday's commission meeting. Commissioners are set to decide whether to follow through on Corliss' recommendation to cut the two remaining positions in the city's Human Relations division. The employees are responsible for enforcing the city's local ordinance that prohibits discrimination in matters of employment and housing.

Corliss is proposing that the city's legal services staff take over those duties.

Commissioners meet at 6:35 p.m. Tuesday at City Hall, Sixth and Massachusetts streets.

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