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Santa Paula council OKs new city budget

By John Scheibe

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The Santa Paula City Council has approved a slimmed-down budget for the upcoming 2011-12 fiscal year, calling for \$661,000 less in general fund staffing spending.

The number represents a 7.7 percent decrease from staffing expenses this fiscal year, which ends Thursday. Santa Paula has cut staffing from 149 employees in 2009 to a projected 100 employees in 2011-12.

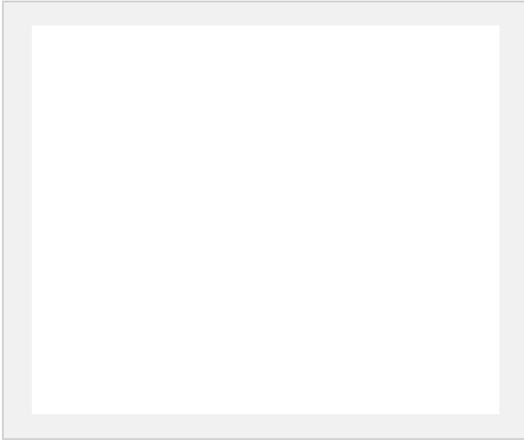
The cuts came as the city faced a \$1.8 million budget gap by June 30. To help close the gap, the city reduced the pay of employees by 5 percent. It also got an additional \$500,000 payment from the Limoneira Co. as part of a planned 500-acre development.

The City Council approved a \$32 million overall budget Monday night. The new budget projects expenditures of \$27.8 million in the upcoming fiscal year.

"When you've endured the kind of fiscal stress that Santa Paula has, you're not doing more with less," said Thomas Gardner, a former Ventura finance director and Santa Paula's current financial consultant. "You're doing less with less."

The message of a slimmed-down city government has yet to hit home with some Santa Paula residents, Gardner said. But it likely will become apparent over the months and years to come, he said.

The city recently cut other costs as well, including eliminating its solid waste department, outsourcing trash collection and collecting about \$300,000 in annual franchise fees. In all, officials estimate Santa Paula generated about \$980,000 for the general fund this coming fiscal year by privatizing garbage service.



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Santa Paula also was facing millions of dollars in environmental fines because of an outdated wastewater treatment plant. The city grappled with how to finance construction of a new plant.

Then it found a private company, PERC Water, to not only design and build the plant but also operate and finance it.

Gardner said the decisions to privatize likely saved the city from financial disaster. Now, instead of being \$1.8 million in the hole, officials are projecting a surplus of about \$623,580 in 2011-12. The money would be available for emergencies, City Manager Jaime Fontes wrote in a letter to the City Council.

The city will save \$381,317 in non-general fund staffing costs, much of it because of the outsourcing of refuse collection.

Officials also expect to collect an additional \$124,000 in property tax revenue in 2011-12 and \$104,000 more from sales taxes, plus an extra \$358,000 in franchise taxes, according to Fontes.

Gardner, however, cautioned the City Council against thinking there will be smooth financial sailing in the years ahead. He said the council probably will have to continue looking at ways to cut costs and increase revenues.

"The state of California continues to be incapable of resolving its structural budget imbalance," Gardner said, adding that the economy also continues to be on shaky ground.

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