

No tax increase for Clinton in “robust” City budget

By Randy Bell

City employees will see pay raises, but Clinton taxpayers won't have to dig any deeper into their pockets under a new \$20.5 million budget the Board of Aldermen approved September 15. The total millage rate for the City and school district ad valorem tax levies will remain at 109.43 mills.

“Your City budget is healthy and growing,” Mayor Phil Fisher said during a public hearing at the Board's regular meeting on September 6, “allowing us to meet both expected and unexpected budget opportunities.” Fisher called the City's spending plan “robust” but said he disagrees with the Board's decision to borrow money from the water and sewer budget to pay for a citywide drainage study.

The budget for the new fiscal year totals \$20,569,473, an increase of \$2,247,285 over the current year. It includes a three per cent pay raise for all employees, funding a study of a new 84-acre city park, purchasing five police cars, four pickup trucks and a fire truck, buying a new generator for Fire Station #1, hiring a private contractor to run the tennis program at Brighton Park, increasing building maintenance to \$60,000, moving more of the tourism tax revenue to the tourism budget in the general fund and funding the initial phase of expansion work at the Lovett sewage treatment plant.

Salaries for Clinton's police officers and firefighters will undergo a \$1.1 million realignment to make them more competitive with other law enforcement agencies in the Jackson area.

“It's helping us to retain our people,” said Fire Chief Jeff Blackledge, whose department has lost ten firefighters over the past twelve months.

“Unfortunately, the other departments in our area are doing the same thing [raising salaries], so I think they're going to wind up being ahead of us a little bit still.”

But Blackledge says he appreciates what the City is doing.

“We were at the bottom of the barrel, and we had to do something to try to get out of that situation. [The salary realignment] gets us closer and keeps us within range.” The pay for a certified firefighter in Clinton will go from \$33,500 to a range of \$40,880 to \$43,370, with other increases throughout the department. A deputy chief could make as much as \$73,000.

Police Chief Ford Hayman says he is excited about the extra money for his officers.

“Our supervisors are now going to be upped to the level that's equivalent throughout the metro,” Hayman said. “Brand new recruit officers coming in are going to be paid at a level that is competitive across the market. We've been the lowest of anybody, and now we're going to be right in line with everybody - and maybe a little ahead of some.”

Hayman has lost eleven officers during the past four months. Under the realignment, the starting salary for a police officer in Clinton will climb to \$42,000, and the City will pay patrol officers with less than four years of experience \$44,000. Sergeants will earn as much as \$58,000, with a lieutenant's pay ranging up to \$65,000 and a captain making as

Budget highlights:

Budget is \$20,569,473, an increase of \$2,247,285

Millage rate unchanged

3% pay raise for all employees

Police, fire, public works salaries to be realigned to be more competitive

5 police cars

4 pickup trucks

A fire truck

New generator for Fire Station #1

Private contractor to run Brighton Park tennis program

Park study for 84-acre park

Initial expansion work at Lovett sewage treatment facility

Removal of 4 unfilled police positions

Reduction of street paving by \$200,000

\$20,000 for the 4Cs

and reduce the City's street paving budget by \$200,000 but said Clinton is still spending more to maintain its streets than several other cities in the metro.

Public works employees will also get some extra money under the new budget. \$289,000 is being taken from the Water and Sewer Fund to increase those salaries. Public Works is facing the same pressure to offer competitive pay as the police and fire departments, having lost seven employees over the last ten months.

Board members say the budgeting process this year wasn't easy.

“It was a struggle,” said Alderman Chip Wilbanks during the public hearing. Alderman James Lott said there were some “tough decisions.”

But before the final vote, the Board reversed itself on cutting an allocation to Clinton's only social service agency in half. The Clinton Community Christian Corporation will continue to receive \$20,000 from the City. The organization, known as the 4Cs, provides emergency assistance, home-delivered meals, congregant meals, summer programs for youth, and family assistance at Thanksgiving and Christmas.

In the original budget, the 4Cs would have gotten only \$10,000, and Executive Director Dr. Laurie Lawson said that would have been devastating for Clinton's most vulnerable citizens.

“I was very pleased to know that the representatives of the City of Clinton looked back into the situation and decided to support the community,” Lawson said. “I'm so happy that they had a change of heart.”

The entire budget is posted on the City's website.

much as \$74,000.

In order to free up money for the public safety salaries, the Board had to make what the mayor called some “painful” reductions including elimination of four unfilled police officer job slots. “You hate giving up positions,” Hayman said, “but you've got to give these officers some more money.”

Fisher said he regretted having to cut the police positions

**CARD
MY
YARD**



601-573-3238

CARDMYYARD.COM