

Council approves cost of living adjustment for employees

By Anthony Welch

Manitou Springs City Council members agree City employees need somewhat of a raise.

The question discussed in length at Council's special meeting Tuesday was just who should receive increased compensation and how much.

Council unanimously approved first reading of the 2012 budget and the employee compensation amendment.

City Administrator Jack Benson suggested that Council approve a 3.5 percent cost of living adjustment (COLA) across the board for City employees. The City is five to 10 percent below entry-level standards and needs to start catching up, Benson said.

"I've said this over and over again, we're in a real hole," he said.

As a part of his 2012 budget presentation, Benson informed Council that the City could afford an estimated \$97,000 of the budget to increase salaries. Councilman Matt Carpenter didn't agree with the idea to give 3.5 percent increases across the board. He felt the money should be used to bolster the salaries of a few select employees who may not be making what they deserve. He suggested a merit system, which Benson felt was a great idea but the City might not be able to afford it or have time to put something like that together for the 2012 budget.

Following a review of the budget, Councilwoman Aimee Cox proposed a 3 percent COLA across the board. She also suggested taking the salary of the aquatics director plus the 3 percent increase and bringing the City clerk and librarian to the same salary. The idea was based on Benson's suggestion at previous meetings of setting up two classifications for City department heads. One classification would include the aquatics director, clerk and librarian, while the higher classification would include the finance director, police chief, planning director and public works director.

While the police chief and finance director positions would not receive the 3 percent increase because new employees will fill those positions next year, Cox suggested bringing the public works director's salary up to entry level and tacking on the 3 percent increase.

Cox also mentioned she'd like to see the City do something about increasing police officers' salaries. She suggested maybe a voter-approved mill levy could provide aid for that issue.

"I would like to see us take some action with this budget to compensate folks in a more fair way," she said.

Councilman Ed Klingman asked Benson if Cox's proposal worked with the amount in the budget he had mentioned earlier. Benson said the number was pretty close and suggested Council go with Cox's idea. He could then plug the numbers into the budget and present the amended budget to Council for a second reading.

Councilman Michael Gerbig also liked Cox's idea.

"It was a great proposal. I feel the folks receiving this compensation are very well-deserved," he said. Thank you Councilwoman Cox."

Before Council voted on an ordinance approving the first reading of the budget and the compensation amendment, Councilman-elect Gary Smith offered his input.

Smith felt Council was being a little too hasty with the proposal. He thought Council should take more time and look more closely at all the areas of the City. With there being 60-plus employees, compensating a certain few more than others could be an issue, Smith said.

Police Chief Mary Jo Smith also addressed Council. She said she had to speak for her officers and dispatchers in what is her last month as chief. Smith retires in January.

The police department has five dispatchers that make not even \$12 an hour, Smith said. Dispatchers work 12-hour shifts, often have to eat at their desks, and whereas other departments have a separate call taker and a dispatcher, Manitou Springs dispatchers have to handle it all on their own.

"They're our lifeline," she said. "When people call 911, they have to be calm and tell people how to handle the situation until the fire department or a police officer arrives."

Smith asked Council to consider doing something to increase dispatchers' and police officers' salaries. She said she's had a few officers qualify for food stamps, and that the department constantly has turnover because of officers leaving for better-paying jobs.

"I just wanted to have my piece before leaving office," Smith said.

Carpenter said he was leaning toward going with 2.5 percent COLA across the board. He said it always comes back to the police department and its high turnover rate. Klingman agreed that Council should put

something together to make salary increases in that one department. Gerbig understood where Smith was coming from but questioned why such emotional pleas were coming at the last minute when Council's been discussing the issue for weeks.

Mayor Marc Snyder agreed something needed to be done to increase compensation for dispatchers and officers, but it wasn't in the budget to handle such a task at this time. He cited how other cities similar to size of Manitou Springs have had to resort to such things as furloughs to keep their budgets in line. That's not an option with public safety, however, according to Snyder.

"Going to the voters for public safety increase has the best prospect of being successful," he said.

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