

Merry Christmas, Manitou! - December sales sparkle

By Jeanne Davant

Manitou Springs taxable sales rose 28.8 percent in December, compared with December 2008.

The holiday boom put the city's total taxable sales for the year in the black, although only slightly. For 2009, total sales subject to city taxes were 0.7 percent ahead of 2008.

That was good news in a year that saw sales and tax revenues fall in comparison with the previous year each month except January and September.

"With the economic problem we've had, it seems to me like the current is turning in the right direction," Finance Director Mike Leslie told City Council on Tuesday night. "I'm feeling pretty good about where we're at with sales taxes." In December, city sales tax collections increased \$33,239 over those of December 2008. For the full year, sales tax collections rose \$13,551 above 2008. Sales tax collections, however, were some \$32,000 below those of 2007, Leslie said.

The biggest boost to December's taxable sales came from the lodging sector, where taxable sales were up a whopping 183.5 percent. Restaurants also had a very good month, posting a 36.5 percent increase over December 2008. Retail shops' sales were up 6.7 percent. Sales at food and gas stores dropped nearly 13 percent, and amusements and bars were down 11 percent.

To put the figures in perspective, Leslie cited the economic downturn that followed the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

"It took five years before we collected more than we did in 2001," he said.

Special election discussed

Also Tuesday, Leslie told Council that the city is in line for additional stimulus money that might enable expansion of the water and sewer improvement projects currently under way.

Manitou had been approved for some \$12.5 million in grants and loans under federal and state programs. But the day before closing on the loans was scheduled, Leslie learned from the city's bond attorney that a charter provision limited the amount Manitou could borrow.

The charter provision restricts borrowing without voter approval to 5 percent of the assessed value of all property within the city—a little over \$3.1 million.

The city had to scale down the projects, eliminating a planned second potable water tank, a cross connection to Colorado Springs Utilities' water system and 1,000 feet of water line. A proposed ballast tank above the water treatment plant had already been cut because it wasn't "shovel ready."

Now there is a possibility of further funding through the federal stimulus program, because some states did not use all of their funding, Leslie said. Colorado anticipates receiving some of the leftover funds, and Manitou could get a share if voters approve. Projects that have already been approved and are "shovel ready"—the potable water tank, cross connection and water line—would be eligible.

Council members supported the idea of a special election in April to remove the charter limitation or get permission to exceed it.

The 1.5-million gallon potable water storage tank was the most controversial element of the original project. Residents in Mesa and Pine Ridge Road neighborhoods objected to a second tank being built behind the existing tank and said they had not had enough opportunity to weigh in on the proposal.

If the tank goes back into the plan, it would have to go through major development review and would require rezoning, Planning Director Dan Folke said.

"We should know by March 10 if our projects will be funded," Folke said. "We are going to start the process again for development review.... We are getting ready to send out a letter to property owners saying we are going to rezone." The process "will address the public input we got last time," and there will be further opportunities for citizens to speak about the project.

Councilman Matt Carpenter said he favored a ballot issue that would let citizens vote on specific components such as the water tank.

"I'm already getting e-mails and letters from the neighborhood up there," he said. "If we're going to do an election, I'd like to see us put an a la carte menu on there and let the voters decide."

Councilwoman Ingrid Richter said she favored a charter amendment.

"I think this one is kind of archaic," she said. "I'd like to be in a position to decide whether we want the funds."

Councilwoman Aimee Cox said she was inclined to favor an exception to the charter provision.

"The charter review committee did not take this up," Cox said. "Without their recommendation, I would be hard-pressed to revise our constitution."

Council will consider alternatives for ballot issue wording at its March 2 regular meeting.

In other business, Council...

- Raised their eyebrows about a statue the Manitou Springs Arts Commission proposes to place in the 1000 block of Manitou Avenue in front of Duryea Fine Art. The as-yet untitled, bronze statue by artist Bill Duryea would portray a partially undraped female in a classical style. MSAC member Jack Elder told Council members they could view a clay prototype at the gallery.

- Approved an extension of an agreement for services between the Colorado Springs Housing Authority and the Manitou Springs Housing Authority.

- Approved a \$ 190,135 contract with All State H2O Filter Rehab to clean, repair and rehabilitate three Trident filter units at the water treatment plant.

- Heard a presentation from Renee Moorefield of Wisdom Works Group, who suggested that the city consider a Healthy Manitou Initiative. "If we are a community that is demonstrating health and wellness and demonstrating sustainability, there may be ways to package and share that." Moorefield asked Council to think about the idea and will return to discuss it further in April.

- Heard a presentation from Bill Koerner of the Trails and Open Space Coalition (TOPS) regarding efforts to find regional solutions to parks maintenance. Maintenance has been considerably scaled back in Colorado Springs and El Paso County because of budget cuts. Koerner said several alternatives are being considered, including an elected Regional Service Authority, a legislative district and an expansion of the TOPS program. He asked Council

members to consider whether the city would participate in such a program, which likely would require tax funding.

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