

Council gets first look at proposed capital budget Public hearing on ideas for improvements postponed

By Jeanne Davant

If you haven't given much thought to capital improvements such as street, water/ sewer and drainage repairs needed in your neighborhood, you've got time.

A public hearing on suggestions for capital improvements over the next five years, scheduled for next Tuesday, has been postponed.

"We're not going to be ready," Finance Director Mike Leslie said. According to the city charter, a public hearing on the capital improvements budget must be held at least two weeks before an Oct. 13 deadline. A new date for the hearing has not been set.

Council reviewed the first draft of a five-year capital improvements plan at a work session Tuesday night, based on "wish lists" submitted by city department heads. The requests over five years totaled more than \$2.3 million. Equipment purchases alone would require increasing appropriations each year, from \$271,000 in 2012 to more than \$500,000 in 2015.

"I'm not sure this kind of increase is sustainable," Leslie said. "We've got some more work to do. I'm sure we can trim some out." Leslie said he would prefer to see the city build up its General Fund reserve, which is lower than recommended for a town Manitou's size.

In some good news for neighborhoods, however, Leslie said there is a significant amount of money available for street-related projects from a special revenue fund that contains an allocation from the Pikes Peak Rural Transportation Authority. With the addition of revenue from the Public Works Fund property tax and the single hauler fee paid by Bestway, the city would have money to finance a long list of paving projects and could also afford some road-related drainage improvements.

City issues won't be on ballot

Council also discussed a couple of possible ballot issues for the November election and agreed not to move forward with them.

Council members expressed interest in asking voters for an additional tax on medical marijuana centers.

"I'm all for a tax for education and public safety," Councilwoman Ingrid Richter said. "I would love to see the tax go to fund the police, even for drug enforcement and education. That's a very difficult topic to have kids understand."

Mayor Marc Snyder pointed out that Manitou collects a 3.9 percent sales tax, while Colorado Springs' tax is 2.8 percent.

"Right now people in Manitou Springs are at a little bit of a disadvantage," Snyder said. "This is a new industry for Manitou Springs. I would almost rather foster their success."

Council also considered a ballot question that would revise a charter limitation on borrowing money. The limitation, equal to 5 percent of total property valuation within the city, forced the city to scale down the federally funded water and sewer projects currently under way.

"We're maxed out right now," Leslie said, adding that the debt limitation prevents the city from applying for very low-interest loans through state revolving funds and FEMA.

Public Works Director Bruno Pothier suggested increasing the debt limit to 10 percent, and Leslie said the city would have to address the issue within the next few years.

But Council declined to consider the issue for the November election.

"It might be better to bring this up in a simple municipal election" so Council members could provide detailed information to voters about why the increase is needed, Council-woman Aimee Cox said.

Business owners speak out

Also Tuesday, Council heard from several business owners in the vicinity of Manitou and Ruxton avenues who were unhappy about the closing of two crosswalks at the intersection last weekend.

"It caused us not just distress but financial harm," said Chris Abrams of the Mountain Man. Business owners said pedestrians were confused by the closures, and a sign that suggested they walk up to Osage Avenue to cross the streets did not help.

"That's not pedestrian-friendly," said Sharman Treweeke of The Cotton Club. "They had to go to Soda Springs Park and walk all the way down to the Arcade."

Leslie explained that the closure of the crosswalks was an experiment to address downtown traffic congestion.

"We can't get a fire truck around downtown in any reasonable amount of time," Leslie said. The Police Department is having the same problem, Chief Mary Jo Smith said.

The business owners suggested that the city look elsewhere to solve the congestion problem. They said they believed the problem was due to confusion about how to use the roundabout, the removal of the traffic light at Manitou and Park avenues, reduction of traffic on the avenue to one lane each way, and the fact that people have been stopping in the center lane.

While Leslie termed the experiment "somewhat successful," Smith and Snyder apologized to the business owners for not notifying them in advance about the closures.

"That will never happen again," Snyder said.

Several other remedies are being considered, including a traffic light in the roundabout, Leslie said.

"There's just a whole heck of a lot of cars," Councilman Matt Carpenter said. "That's a good problem. We just need to find a community solution."

Fee waiver policy discussed

Council also discussed a policy on waiver of use fees for city facilities that would go into effect next year.

The policy, which has been under consideration for some time now, would limit waivers to a maximum of \$1,000. City staff would handle some requests, and other requests would come before Council.

Consideration would be given for benefits an event would bring to the city, and waivers would be granted only if money is available in the city budget.

Council discussed a few changes to the proposed policy, including extending the time frame for applying for fee waivers so event sponsors would have more time to plan.

Council members appeared to favor sponsoring "incubator" events that could grow to be self-sustaining within a few years.

They also discussed not granting fee waivers for events sponsored by organizations the city is already funding, such as the Chamber of Commerce.

Snyder said he hoped to have an approved policy in place for budget discussions this fall so organizations like the chamber could include event funding in their budget requests.

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