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Council to up minimum wage for city employees

By Josh Baugh

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The lowest-paid municipal employees and council aides are poised to get a boost in the upcoming city budget.

The City Council met Wednesday to finalize the \$2.5 billion spending plan and deliberate how to spend an additional \$4.5 million in funds, the sum of a federal reimbursement for EMS transports and additional CPS Energy revenue.

City Council will vote on the budget Thursday.

Last-minute amendments include increasing the minimum wage for city employees from \$13 to \$13.75 an hour.

The COPS/Metro Alliance has been pushing for wage increases for years and began a more concerted effort last year, when the council agreed to move up to the \$13 mark. Organization leaders said then that they'd continue to push the city to the \$15 hourly wage mark — a goal in major cities across the U.S.

Mayor Ivy Taylor and others balked at going to \$14 an hour this year, but there was widespread agreement to increase to \$13.75.

“We wish to commend the mayor for listening to the campaign of COPS/Metro,” said Sister Gabriella Lohan, a leader with the organization. “This is an issue of quality of life for San Antonio residents.”

Taylor said during the meeting that she'd met with the COPS/Metro leaders and that they agreed to disagree on the best approach to increasing wages. The mayor favors a plan to switch from a step plan that gives wage increases based on tenure to one that incentivizes quality work with performance-based wage increases.

“But we are in agreement on our ultimate goal — for all San Antonians to have access to jobs that allow them to meet their obligations and take care of their families,” she said.

Councilman Rey Saldaña thanked Taylor for taking on the issue. He'd been a strong proponent of increasing wages.

“I'm really grateful that we've gone to the point where we can get to \$13.75,” he said.

Bexar County approved its annual budget this week and increased its base wage to \$13.75.

Council members also successfully fought for some changes for their aides, who are contract employees and don't receive the same benefits as their city-employee counterparts. They culled funds from some of the other proposed amendments before them to put together \$165,000 to help with mileage, phone allowances, health-savings accounts and retirement plans for the 41 full-time aides.

“I think we've got to look at any effort we can to try to retain these folks,” Councilman Mike Gallagher said.

There appeared to be widespread support to bolster the aides' benefits.

The proposed budget amendments also include \$1.1 million in additional spending, sought by the mayor and Councilman Ron Nirenberg, on the implementation of the SA Tomorrow plan, which would fund four more regional master plans, one community plan and four planning positions, among other things. Councilman Joe Krier said he supported the plan itself but was concerned about the attached spending for implementation and implored City Manager Sheryl Sculley to use existing staff to cover the future implementation.

It was a stark position for Krier, who usually backs initiatives led by Taylor.

Early in the meeting, Saldaña questioned why the council was just learning about the \$4.5 million in extra funds just the day before the council is slated to adopt the city's \$2.5 billion budget.

“We need to know about the adjustments as early as possible,” he said to Sculley. “Is this the earliest that we can know? That can't be the first time that we realize that the CPS adjustment was what it was.”

Sculley told the councilman that city staff was just notified about the most recent revenue numbers from CPS Energy as well as the additional funding the city would receive for EMS transports for Medicaid and uninsured patients.

“We're constantly looking at our revenue and our expenses to present you with the most current information,” she said.

Saldaña noted the “funny exercise” that the council goes through, traditionally the day before budget adoption, where officials tweak a relatively small amount of money to fund district projects.

He said the ordeal reminded him of a school yard where several children stand in a circle and fight over a football tossed in the middle.

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