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City Council tells Hein to suggest program cuts

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With an additional \$10 million budget shortfall looming, which City Manager Mike Hein said will require program cuts to fix, the City Council on Tuesday offered no suggestions.

Instead, the council told the manager to come back with a list of ideas in December.

The council did vote during its consent agenda, which is approved without discussion, to authorize Hein to cut \$2 million to outside agencies funded by the city. But that cut was scheduled as part of an earlier budget-cutting move.

That \$2 million cut was lowered from \$2.9 million originally proposed. That did not stop several community agencies from coming to the council to oppose the cuts to outside-agency funding.

The council discussion on possible cuts came after new projections showed city sales tax receipts dropping another \$10.2 million from an estimate done only a month ago.

New figures indicate the city will end the fiscal year June 30 with a \$51 million deficit unless corrective steps are taken.

The city has already identified how it will make up \$37.2 million of the shortfall. But it needs to find another \$13.6 million to balance the budget — \$2.7 million will come from not filling more vacancies — but the remaining \$10.9 million will need to come from program cuts or suspending non-personnel operating costs, Hein says.

The \$50.8 million shortfall represents 4 percent of the city's total \$1.257 billion budget and 10.3 percent of its \$492 million general fund, or discretionary, budget.

The council talked about the serious situation regarding the budget but gave little guidance to where the council would cut, other than a suggestion by Councilman Steve Leal to cut the number of take-home cars and take a hard look at the employees who are paid to be "on call" but are never called in.

Instead, the council deferred to the city manager to make suggestions.

Councilwoman Karin Uhlich called the city's situation "grave," and said the city should make decisions soon so the revenue shortfall does not get worse. She said a long public process could potentially hurt the city more.

"If we delay, the cuts may be deeper," Uhlich said. "These are exceptional times."

Uhlich also suggested the city might consider selling city assets to help bridge the budget gap.

To this point, the city has tried to trim the budget without direct service cuts, Hein said.

However, he added, "There's a point which that's no longer possible."

Still, Hein said Tucson is doing better than most communities in Arizona, despite the fact the local media don't portray that "success story."

He said people will be upset the city is no longer providing services, adding he and his staff don't expect to be the most popular people in town when they recommend to the council what to cut.

That point was obvious during the council's call-to-the-audience segment, when people spoke out against cuts the city has already made.

A half-dozen residents voiced concern over the proposed closure of Archer Pool on the West Side — one of the six year-round pools the city's Parks and Recreation Department has targeted for closure during the non-summer months, even before the latest budget bad news arrived.

Numerous officials from community organizations spoke out against the outside-agency cuts, including the Pima County Interfaith Council, School Plus Jobs and the Pima County/Tucson Women's Commission.

One of the most forceful was Andrea Robson, co-chair of the Pima County Interfaith Council. She pulled out an organizational chart of the city's formal management structure, which listed the citizens at the top, above the council, which was above the city manager. Then she pulled out a chart of what she said the "real" city structure was: It listed Hein, the city manager, at the top, and the citizens all the way at the bottom.

Robson said the city calls outside agencies "partners" but added that the Pima County Interfaith Council didn't feel like a partner by having to come to the call-to-the-audience segment to make its voice heard.

"Leadership from the council has not come forth," Robson said.

Where would you choose to cut the city budget? Join this discussion in the "Most Commented Stories" list at azstarnet.com

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