

News



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Wyoming gets budget update from Chisago County

Ice rink, park board also discussed

Amy Doeun
Wyoming Reporter

Chisago County Commissioner Ben Montzka attended the Wyoming City Council meeting to discuss the county's spending and levy.

"One of the issues I would like to comment on is the County Budget Committee suggested a [2019] levy increase of 8.5 percent, which is significantly higher than what we have done in the past," he said. "I and Mike Robinson immediately lowered it to 7.9 percent. This is a still a preliminary budget."

The preliminary levy could still be decreased before it's finalized in December, but the final levy cannot be higher than the preliminary figure.

"The increase is more than normal," Montzka told The Times. "Over the past nine years, we have had an average increase of 1 percent."

He said several significant things happened to drive up expenses this year.

"We have unreimbursed

welfare benefits. ... This is an expense that has accrued this year that remains unreimbursed by the state government ... of almost \$1 million," he noted.

Another expense is subsidizing data expenses for the Wyoming and North Branch police departments.

"It is an expense I am happy to do," Montzka said, adding that the departments back up the county sheriff and contribute to the overall safety of the county.

New construction in the county sits at about a 4 percent increase over last year's tax capacity — these are new taxpayers coming in. Montzka explained that with the new construction, the county can handle a levy increase of about 4 percent without individual taxpayers feeling an increase, "but we are above that now."

According to City Administrator Robb Linwood, the city of Wyoming has about a 7 percent increase over this year's tax capacity new construction.

"That is a good sign because if you can keep your net budget under 7 percent, then your actual tax amount is going down,"

Montzka said.

Mayor Lisa Iverson asked if Montzka thought the budget may go lower; he said that was possible.

"Cost share of the county towards the regional library is really going up," he said. "We are looking at ways to be more cost effective. The regional library system that we are in is actually the most cost effective."

He later added that the County Board is disappointed with the levy amount because it will be harder for people to vote for important school levies.

"When a student walks into a Forest Lake school, they are getting 25 to 30 percent less than a student in schools 30 miles away," he said, adding that other nearby school districts have the same problem. "I think that this is in violation of Article 13 [of the Minnesota constitution] which says that we should provide equal schooling. ... Forest Lake is not the lowest funded school district. Rush City, North Branch and Chisago Lakes are all at 30 to 40 percent [lower] per child. There is a significant funding difference, a difference of about

\$5,000 per child."

He added that the county is looking at ways to increase tax capacity closer to home.

"Many of our residents go somewhere else to work," he said. "We are building up the tax capacity in other areas, and our own is suffering."

Ice rink

John Peka will return this year as the Wyoming ice rink attendant at Swenson Park. Public Works Superintendent Marty Powers spoke highly of Peka, saying: "He did a stand-up job with minimal supervision. He would come in at 4:30 in the morning, when the temperatures were best for making ice, and clear the snow and flood the rink."

Powers added that the facility and warming house are well used. They are open 4 to 10 p.m. Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. on Saturday and noon to 10 a.m. on Sunday.

The city also voted to hire a second rink attendant at \$11 an hour.

"This is all based on weather," Iverson noted. "We don't have any idea what Mother Nature will do."

Water tower demolition

The demolition of Water Tower 1 has been completed by Iseler Demolition.

"It was a quick rapid project, one-day project," City Engineer Mark Erichson told the council. "They [Iseler] are from Michigan. They had other projects in Nebraska and North Dakota. They made quick work of it."

The total cost for demolition was \$28,400.

Park Board renamed

After much discussion, the City Council decided to rename the Park Board the Park Advisory Commission. This will bring it in line with state statutes.

"The park board wasn't established properly under Minnesota state statutes," City Attorney Tom Loonan told the council. "The name [change] just eliminates any confusion. There is no doubt that there is a body of citizens that have been appointed to serve on this park board. But they are not given the same statutory powers."

Development

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our land to buy all that land up there," Columbus Mayor Dave Povolny said.

The city approved a motion at the council meeting to accept the offer, but the deal is pending approval with the watershed district.

"[Hy-Vee] won't make an official announcement until the permits are issued," City Administrator Elizabeth Mursko said. She said the company has not picked the footprint of the store yet but that it was expected to be one of the larger ones.

Povolny said this will be a huge step for the city's finances and will help taxpayers out as well.

"It's huge. First, we're selling the land the city has been paying a lot of money in interest on for years. All that land we bought is costing taxpayers just about \$300,000 a year just to hold. The quicker we can get rid of it, the better," Povolny said.

While Povolny is hopeful the sale will go through, he said that others have considered purchasing the property, which has been for sale for roughly a decade, but have backed out for various reasons.

"Up until now, everything has fallen through," Povolny said.

Part of that reasoning, Povolny surmised, was because of the Highway 97 exit bridge and the condition and possible re-construction.

"Everyone's been very cautious about purchasing that property because nobody knew what was going to happen with the bridge. Nobody knew when the bridge was going in, and businesses don't typically like to weather the storm during construction, and not knowing where entrance or exits are going to be," Povolny said, also noting his hope that once the bridge's work is finished, other

businesses will come to town, as well.

"That bridge has been a big deal, and now that we're finally getting it, that whole area is going to explode," Povolny said.

Current timelines for the completion of the new bridge and a Columbus infrastructure project in that area (which will happen next year) would put the Hy-Vee in that location in 2020, after improvements are in place.

"They know what we're doing; they understand the timetable," Mursko said.

Respect

Also during the Oct. 10 meeting, Povolny left his designated seat and sat at the chair at the table in front of the council members to speak during the open forum portion of the meeting. Povolny said his mayoral opponent Jesse Preiner had indicated that Povolny had been disrespectful to the people of Columbus in The Forest Lake Times candidate questionnaire (in his questionnaire, Preiner wrote, "As a pro-business and life-long resident, I will start by listening to the community of Columbus, bringing respect back to the city hall, and by remembering that being elected doesn't make you smarter than everyone else in the room."). In response, Povolny said he "doesn't know of any instances" when he has been disrespectful. He encouraged anyone who felt he had been disrespectful over the last 7 1/2 years he's been in office to contact him directly or through the city. He said Mursko would give out his cellphone number and if anyone could show him a time when he was disrespectful, he'd "look at it open-minded."

The next Columbus City Council meeting will be held Oct. 24 at 7 p.m. at 16319 Kettle River Blvd.

- Ryan Howard contributed to this report.

Maroon and gold fever



The homecoming court threw candy into the stands at the Rangers homecoming football game Friday, Oct. 5.



The football team rushed out onto the field through the fog to the celebration of the school pep band and cheers from the crowd.

Local expo expertise



Photos by Leah Renter

Area residents browsed local services at the Forest Lake YMCA Oct. 13 at the local OurLife Expo, an expo for residents age 55 and older and for children of aging parents. The event is sponsored by Adams Publishing Group - ECM division, which includes The Forest Lake Times.

