

Sirens

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er said he remembers the discussion in years prior but added that the council has no current plans to discuss installing any sirens due to their cost and the amount of sirens it would take to cover the rural area with its spread-out population density.

Linwood has three sirens in its 37 square miles. There's been no discussion about adding more sirens at this time.

"[Siren coverage] varies across the state, no doubt about that," said Todd Krause, a warning coordination meteorologist at the National Weather Service in Chanhassen. "It varies depending on how policy decisions are made, as sirens are costly. ... Some cities have plenty of sirens; others have chosen not to because of that cost."

He's heard of cities that purchased weather radios for its residents rather than installing sirens, but he said even that isn't fool-proof, as those visiting the area might not have a form of warning.

Many people rely on weather sirens to warn them of dangerous storms, but county officials stressed that sirens are only meant to warn those outside to seek shelter and more information.

"A lot of the time, you cannot hear them indoors, because they're not designed to penetrate buildings," Hinz said.

Technology, specifically smartphones,



File photo by Hannah Davis

When a tornado came through the Forest Lake and Scandia area in July, one of the Scandia tornado alarms did not go off. No one was hurt in that storm.

have added another layer of warning of an impending storm for people in the area, but officials warn that people cannot rely solely on their phones, either. Multiple people who spoke with The Times recommended purchasing a weather radio, a small device around the size of a cellphone that will warn the user of incoming

tornadoes, even outside cellphone coverage area. The radios can be programmed for specific and multiple counties. While Berglund stressed that it's not his position to indicate to a city whether or not to install sirens, he noted that the possession of multiple methods of warning the public is key.

"You want to be able to have three-deep. ... It's a principle we stick with all the time," he said. "The warning systems for impending weather is one of them. If one of those systems goes down, if we lose cell tower ability, we still have other ways of getting those warnings out to people."

Levy

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Currently, Washington County estimates are projecting an increase in Forest Lake's tax capacity (the amount of taxable market value in the city) in 2020. As such, even if the levy does increase by the recommended amount, the city's tax rate, which determines how much a property's tax capacity will be taxed, would be estimated to fall just a hair, from 40.342% to 40.332% — though Casey acknowledged that current numbers are only preliminary and subject to significant change.

If those numbers hold, that would mean that if a Forest Lake property saw its valuation stay flat from 2019 to 2020, it would experience a very small decrease in city taxes, though usually when a tax capacity increases it is due to existing property values rising. Casey told The Times that the city does not yet have information about what exactly is contributing

to the projected capacity increase.

Presentation

The presentation on the budget was high level, as the city does not have some of the finer details in hand yet. Councilwoman Kathy Bystrom asked for a more specific breakdown of spending increases, and Mayor Mara Bain wanted a breakdown of how much money various property values could expect to be taxed; Casey said the city would supply that information in coming weeks.

Though much of the presentation was straightforward about the coming year's costs, Casey spent significant time talking about future expenses and potential big price tags for various city needs coming down the road — particularly related to infrastructure, where Casey said the city had dug itself a hole. In the next few years, he said, the city is looking at more than \$16 million in projects from its water fund, and Public Works Supervisor Dave Adams

said if the city wanted to get serious about improving all of its roads rated in poor condition up to fair, it would need to spend about \$1.5 million annually for the next six years.

Casey faulted the city's current position at least in part on previous years' approaches to the levy, calling it a "year to year" focus rather than one looking at the long term. One example, he said, is the city's practice in previous budget years of not budgeting any general property tax revenues to replace streets, curbs and sidewalks, instead using only state aid and franchise fees.

"The whole pattern of practice here is that we're catching up, we're catching up, we're catching up," he said.

Casey said the city should consider bonding for some of its upcoming projects soon, as the current bonding market has "spectacular" interest rates. Staff also plans on recommending the creation of a 10-year infrastructure plan so the

city can keep better tabs on infrastructure needs before they arrive. The council was in favor of the idea.

"If you don't have the plan, you don't know what you're missing out on," Bain said.

Council thoughts

From a city perspective, the Aug. 22 meeting represented something of a historic shift. First, it was the first time the formal budget discussions have kicked off with Casey in the administrator position (he joined the city in October 2018 to replace Aaron Parrish, who left the position at the beginning of that year). Second, it marked the first time since 2014 that the budget and levy discussions will be led by a brand new council majority.

In 2014, a special election shifted the council majority in the middle of a levy discussion from a group that had championed larger spending projects like the City Center and bringing the YMCA to town to

a group that had campaigned on thrift and tight budgets — leading to a controversial and large reduction to the preliminary levy in an attempt to offset some of the debt service costs incurred by spending on the YMCA. Though that majority changed in membership and numbers over time, it remained in place until this year, anchored by former Mayor and Councilman Ben Winnick. During multiple years, that majority took a hard look at staff recommendations and even occasionally made significant cuts to what staff proposed, perhaps most notably when it cut funding for a police officer from its 2016 budget.

This year, however, a new class of council members more ideologically aligned to the former minority members of Bain and Councilman Sam Husnik — including what appears so far to be a tendency to more often trust staff expertise in budgetary recommendations — entered office. At the budget workshop, members expressed concern that a 7.55% increase might not be enough to help the city catch up on its infrastructure needs while acknowledging that a large percentage jump might induce sticker shock in taxpayers.

"If we were going slow and steady all along, it wouldn't have this great an impact on that bottom line and we'd be getting things done like we're supposed to be getting them done," Bystrom

said of past levy increases, which have fluctuated over the last five years from an increase as high as 7.3% in 2016 to as low as 2.6% in 2019.

Councilwoman Kelly Monson agreed, stating that when she and Bystrom attended a budgeting workshop put on by the League of Minnesota Cities, Forest Lake's shifting increase levels are "essentially ... what they showed of what not to do."

Beyond concerns of the council as a whole that infrastructure spending and taxation wasn't where it should be, a couple of members also focused in some department requests that didn't make the cut. Noting that the code enforcement officer was put into the budget for 2020, Bain asked if the council could get more information on the other two requested positions that were not included — an additional police captain position and a part-time parks and recreation employee — in order to determine which one is most needed. She added that all three positions would probably be needed over the next few years.

"I'd be interested in exploring the budget impact of those two decisions," Bystrom added.

The council is set to discuss the budget and levy again on Sept. 9 and 16 before setting a preliminary budget and levy on Sept. 23. After a preliminary budget and levy are set, they cannot go higher than that amount.

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