

City budget includes raises, tax increase and new police district



BY TODD LUCK
THE CHRONICLE

A 2-cent tax increase, raises for city employees and a new central police district are all included in the City of Winston-Salem's proposed budget.

A public hearing on the budget will be held today, June 9, at 7 p.m. at the City Hall committee room. City Council will vote on it on June 20.

Assistant City Manager Ben Rowe presented the \$442 million 2016-2017 budget to the City Council during a meeting on Tuesday, June 7. The 2-cent tax increase would make the city tax rate 58.5 cents per \$100 of value.

The budget will raise the minimum wage from \$10.10 to \$10.40. Council Members Derwin Montgomery and Dan Besse said that the city should look into ways to eventually get it closer to a livable wage.

"It's an important topic we're making strides to address," said Besse.

Council Member Molly Leight asked about what it would take to eventually get the minimum wage to \$15, which she was

told would cost \$5.4 million. That figure did not include adjustments on the wages of those making more than that, which would be needed.

The budget continues the city's plan to raise police officer and firefighter salaries closer to market levels, which began with a 2 percent supplemental raise in January and 7.5 percent increase in starting salaries. The budget continues that, with another 2 percent supplemental raise next January and additional raises for police officers with five to 15 years of service to address attrition issues.

All other employees receive a 3 percent raise on top of being eligible for merit-pay raises of 1.5 percent to 3 percent. The city will also be initiating a 401(k) supplemental retirement plan with a 2 percent contribution by the city.

Finance Chair Robert Clark said they might need to give some positions more of a salary increase. Light equipment operator pay, for instance, is 10 percent below market and the position has a 45 percent voluntary turnover rate. Building Inspectors are 30 percent below market with 25 percent turnover rate, and con-

struction inspectors are 28 percent below market rate with an 18 percent turnover.

"Three percent may not cut it," said Clark about some positions.

Of the 40 new positions in the budget is \$310,000 for five positions that will be part of a new fourth police district in the central part of the city. The new district will include downtown and areas around it like UNC School of the Arts and Winston-Salem State University. This will

let police better respond to the growing population in the central part of the city and coordinate events in that area.

Other public safety additions include five positions, paid for by the county, that will be part of the combined city-county forensic services unit. The budget also allocates \$77,000 for the first of three fire safety inspectors to be hired over the next three years that will eliminate the need for firefighters to do fire code inspections.

Also in the budget:

*\$298,000 for the new Winston-Salem Transit Authority bus routes that go into effect next year. This covers 12 positions

needed for the new routes for the first half of 2017.

*\$378,000 for nine new Trans-AID positions to address increased demand for the WSTA handicap transportation service.

*\$196,000 for a new traffic signal system.

*\$992,000 for major maintenance needs at Parks and Recreation facilities. This includes basketball court resurfacing, picnic shelter renovations, recreation center renewal and work on soccer field irrigation systems.

*\$391,000 for an additional engineer, drainage maintenance crew and associated vehicles and equipment for the Stormwater Management Program. The program is expected to receive 1,350 drainage calls this year, up almost 47 percent from previous years. It's also dealing with other environmental issues like groundwater contamination around the former Hanes Lowrance middle schools and methane at Bowman Gray Stadium.

Urban Farm School holds ceremony for graduates

BY TEVIN STINSON
THE CHRONICLE

In light of recent concerns over access to healthy foods, the Forsyth County Cooperative Extension designed a course to help gardeners learn how urban farms can improve food security for Winston-Salem neighborhoods.

Collaboration with the Ministers' Conference of Winston-Salem and Vicinity (MCWSV), city officials, the Urban Farm School (UFS) is for individuals who want to learn more about urban food production and marketing. Last Thursday, June 2, UFS held its first graduation ceremony for those in the area who completed the course.

During the 12-week course, Taundra White,

Michael Banner, Milgo Floyd, and Victor "Vic" Jones, learned everything there is to know about growing and maintaining a successful garden in an urban setting. From soil preparation, crop selection and irrigation, to pest management, the students in the pilot course said after completing the course they learned that being a farmer requires you to wear many different hats, including being a carpenter, an electrician and even a plumber. Along with attending lecture and lab classes, students also spent additional time working the land provided by the city on the corner of 22nd Street and Cleveland Avenue, in the heart of the East Winston community.

White, a former make-

up artist, said although she was making good money helping women with their make-up, she decided to take the course because she felt the need to do more to help improve the quality of life of people in the community.

"I am a great artist, but that is not what they need," she continued. "They are hungry and suffering from malnutrition. I could look at their skin and listen to their conversations and tell that was the real issue."

"I was charged then to step away and do something different to help my people," White said.

After receiving his certificate of completion, city native Michael Banner said he got into agriculture when his wife was pregnant with his first daughter

more than seven years ago. He mentioned, "I am determined to provide healthy foods for my family and this entire community."

"We are defying the odds and it feels great," said Banner. "I'm built for it and my classmates are built for it."

Milgo Floyd said he is humbled by the fact that the city would help start a program that will help address concerns over access to food. Floyd also mentioned the job opportunities the program will bring to a community in dire need.

Victor "Vic" Jones encouraged everyone in the community to spread the word about UFS and the work they are doing to improve the lives of residents in Winston-Salem

and Forsyth County.

"I hope everyone in Winston-Salem visits the garden and helps spread the word because we are in need in this community," Jones said.

During his keynote address, MCWSV president Bishop Todd Fulton, who played a major role in acquiring the land used for farming, encouraged the graduating students to return to their past in order to move forward in the future.

"The first job ever created was farming. Our ancestors were brought here and enslaved to be farmers. We are the original farmers," said Fulton. "They did an excellent job, so I encourage you today to return to your past so that we can move our commu-

nity forward."

Before leaving the podium, Fulton said, "Get your phones out, take a picture of these Urban Farm School graduates."

"These are farmers that you should know. They are going to be ranked among the top 10 urban farmers in the country."

According to Forsyth County Cooperative Extension agent Mary Jac Brennan, future courses will include aquaponics-hydroponics, landscape gardening, and value-added product development. UFS will also offer a market gardening course in the fall.

For more information, contact Pastor Tembila Covington at 336-703-2859 or by email at covingt@forsyth.cc.com.

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