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City of Charlotte eyes bond package

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2009 CHARLOTTE CITY BUDGET PROPOSAL | THREE HIGHLIGHTS City Manager Curt Walton's proposed budget calls for one of the biggest bond packages in more than a decade. It adds staff to the police department's crime lab and an overworked 911 center. And it increases employee pay by 3.5 percent on average.

But the recommended \$1.82 billion budget does not include a tax increase.

Walton said he changed the city's operating budget very little, a reflection of the relatively flat economic growth in the region.

Walton proposed that the City Council put a total of \$227.2 million in bonds before voters in November, the most the city has put on a ballot in at least 12 years.

About three-quarters of that would be for road improvements to relieve traffic congestion. The rest would go to affordable housing and neighborhood improvements -- including \$16 million for infrastructure work at the Eastland Mall property, which city leaders hope will be redeveloped.

The budget includes almost \$1 million in additions to public safety staff: five new employees in the police department's crime lab and eight in the 911 call center.

It's a small increase relative to the total the city spends on police and fire protection -- 62 percent of its \$436.7 million general fund. But the subject grabbed council members' attention Monday because of recent crime concerns in the community.

"I certainly know that it will be in the forefront of our

minds this week," said councilman Edwin Peacock.

The police department reported recently that both violent and property crime were up during the beginning of this year. Days later, Walton announced a series of crime-fighting initiatives. He said most of them could be funded within the current budget year, which ends June 30, or with the proceeds of a land sale.

The additions to the crime lab and 911 call center in the fiscal 2009 budget proposal were among those initiatives, but Walton said Monday they had been planned for more than a year. He said recent crime concerns had not prompted dramatic change in his budget.

He proposed an average salary increase of 3.5 percent for city workers outside of police and fire departments, which have a different pay system. That increase is lower than the 3.7 percent expected, because the market has softened, said Budget Director Ruffin Hall.

The budget also includes about \$619,000 to bring up wages for some of the city's lowest-paid workers. In general, the city has found that many of its blue-collar employees -- including utility workers, kennel attendants and garbage truck drivers -- are paid less than those in other cities or those who do similar work in the private sector.

In some good news for city staff, human resources leaders managed to negotiate a better health insurance premium than expected: Employees will see a 2.5 percent rate increase, as opposed to the predicted 8 percent increase, Hall said.

Other highlights:

- About \$562,000 added to the city's tree program. That would pay for an inventory of the city's tree canopy, three tree trimmer positions and more tree-removal contracts. The city wants to be prepared to deal with trees weakened by the record drought and canker worm infestation, officials said.
- About \$750,000 to help cover the cost of rising fuel, though Hall said that almost certainly would not be enough.

"The price has been moving faster than our ability to review that," he said.

The council members will debate the proposed budget in coming weeks. They are scheduled to put it before the public at a hearing May 12 and make any adjustments May 14 and 28. They would approve a final budget June 9.

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