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VENICE

North Port budget proceeds with minor tweaks

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NORTH PORT — Like the city it serves, the North Port Police Department is bursting at the seams.

North Port Police Chief Todd Garrison told the city commission about the need for more space — especially for evidence storage, which includes large vehicles — in October 2018, shortly after he was hired.

A feasibility study, commissioned then but never finalized, showed that those needs outstripped the additional space envisioned as part of an overall City Hall campus expansion.

Thursday, Garrison and Deputy Chief Chris Morales discussed options with the city commission as part of the 2020-21 capital improvement plan workshop.

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The department had proposed renting about 70,000 square feet of storage space in Woodlands Business Park, a light industrial park Benderson Development is building on the southeast corner of Toledo Blade and Plantation Boulevards.

Once built, crime scene investigations and evidence storage would move there and alleviate the space crunch at the existing police station, which opened in 2006.

Earlier in the week, Garrison and Morales discussed rental fees for the facility. Thursday, commissioners balked at the thought of spending \$1.3 million in one-cent sales tax money to reinforce and finish a facility that it would ultimately not own.

Commissioner Vanessa Carusone had reservations about that prospect.

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Mayor Debbie McDowell wondered whether the police could use the now vacant Al Goll Center at Dallas White Park on a temporary basis, but was convinced that wouldn't work both because of the amount of money it may take to upgrade the building and the fact that the city is also soliciting participants to form a public-private partnership to redevelop Dallas White Park.

Vice Mayor Jill Luke suggested the department may be better off installing a metal building on city-owned property that could meet the department's space needs, until a more permanent solution could be found.

The issue may be discussed again in July, when the commission meets at a special meeting at 5 p.m., July 22, to set the millage rate.

That deliberation — more fine-tuning than large-scale cost cutting — characterized much of the three workshop days.

The board was reviewing City Manager Peter Lear's proposed \$176.08 million budget.

The budget calls for maintaining a 3.875 millage rate, which would generate more than \$19.07 million in property taxes as part of a \$51.04 million in anticipated general fund revenues.

The city enjoyed a projected 10.32% increase in taxable property value, which is more than double the overall increase in Sarasota County as a whole.

The commission conducted the workshops in chambers at North Port City Hall because of COVID-19 social distancing protocols. Public comment was submitted via phone or email.

All three days, the commission received comments critical of the commission for not paring back on salary increases or taking any step to reduce the property tax rate, in light of the economic hardship suffered by many residents because of the economic shutdown.

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Because of the 10.32% increase in property values, the rolled back rate — which would allow the city to collect the same amount of property tax revenue as this year — is 3.7077.

The rolled back rate would have reduced taxes by .01673 mills in between or more than 1.67 cents per \$1,000 of taxable value.

“We are not raising the ad valorem taxes by 10 plus percent, we are keeping the ad valorem rates the same,” Mayor Debbie McDowell said Thursday, then added that the only proposed increase in any assessments is a 5% increase in the fire fee.

Lear noted that many of the salary increases are part of signed contracts.

“I’m not denying what’s happening in the world,” Lear said. “I am telling you we have union contracts we have to follow if we don’t follow them we will get sued and lose.”