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Powder Springs Facing \$375,000 Budget Shortfall

Officials discussed ways to prepare for declining revenues in the next fiscal year at Wednesday night's work session.

By [Michael Stone](#) | [Email the author](#) | April 14, 2011

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Powder Springs City Manager Rick Eckert outlined several possible methods to the [City Council](#) on Wednesday on how to overcome a general budget shortfall of roughly \$375,000, including staff eliminations and outsourcing the city's sanitation services.

"There's no real popular option," he said. "Some are less popular than others."

Before presenting any of the possibilities, Eckert noted that Powder Springs has no city sales tax and there is no large commercial or industrial base to draw taxes from. The city's general fund must then rely heavily on property taxes, which are used completely for the [Police Department](#), he added.

"Over time—many, many years—the police department has taken 100 percent of all property taxes to operate at the current levels, plus some funds from other sources," Eckert said.

Other departments, including [Public Works](#) and [Community Development](#), have money flowing in from things like fines and fees, thus helping offset their costs, Eckert said.

Economic woes forced cuts to the city last year, when five full-time and nine part-time employees were let go. Such problems could continue into at least next year, which Eckert said could see more property tax declines.

Eckert said the city is looking at a current budget of about \$6,696,000, with all departments requesting a total of \$7.3 million for the next fiscal year. That left a gap of \$604,000, so the requests were trimmed down; an example Eckert gave was budgeting for two new police cars, though the department requested three.

But a \$297,000 gap remained. An additional \$120,000 will be tacked on because of a rise in health insurance, \$78,000 of which comes from the general fund, Eckert said.

All these figures leave a \$375,000 general budget shortfall.

The "worst" option, Eckert said, would be to offset the entire deficit by raising the current 8.5 millage rate by 1.25, drawing quick disagreement from

Mayor Pat Vaughn.

The second option: across-the-board cuts of 10 percent, just as [Cobb County did on Tuesday](#) to adjust its latest budget shortfall.

“That is not feasible for us at all. ... It’d be disastrous. We could not function,” Eckert said.

Eckert’s final option had many components, the first of which was doing a one-time audit of how the city collects fees.

“We’ve been way too lenient in the way we handle our customers,” he said, noting late payments. “And so we need to bring that in line and make sure that our income is coming in.”

Also, Eckert said, sanitation services could be outsourced for a cheaper rate. This move wouldn’t bring extra costs to citizens, he added.

While acknowledging that all departments are “on the table” right now, Eckert specifically mentioned making cuts to the Police Department and Community Development.

Regarding the police force, he emphasized to the council that no patrol officers would be eliminated. He said he didn’t want to make specific suggestions for cuts unless it was in a closed executive session because it’s a personnel matter.

He did say he wanted to move one person from the Police Department to another department. Another change: reducing the station’s 24-hour front desk service hours to 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Vaughn added: “It will not be an empty police department. There will be a lieutenant or someone in that station.”

Eckert also said he would like to see the city’s bill collecting in one location.

“We have people here in [City Hall](#) collecting, over in Community Development collecting, courts collecting ... it needs to be centralized,” he said.

Also, the city manager said, the [Senior Center](#) and [Seven Springs Museum](#) need to move toward being self-supporting.

With the cost of gas escalating, Eckert and the council discussed the trips taken by members of the Senior Center.

While noting that the center is a “wonderful program,” Eckert said “they take a lot of trips, and that’s a lot of gas. And right now, they’re not paying their way.”

Some suggestions discussed: charging per trip, raising center dues and talking with Director Dee Chappel about other cost-savers.

The conversation transitioned into one about fine collections from court services. Some members expressed concerns that many cases were being dismissed without fines being paid.

“We’ve been addressing this for years as you know, and I don’t know that we’ve ever had a resolution of it,” Councilman Tom Bevirt said.

Vaughn said she looked over court records, which showed 51 percent of fines were paid in full, 31 percent were dismissed, and the rest were either reduced fines, suspended fines, court warnings or led to prison time.

City Clerk Dawn Davis said many of the dismissals were probably from people showing proof of insurance or that they registered their previously expired tags.

The mayor noted how police officers do a “dangerous job” and that they had submitted concerns about fine collection.

One person “was very rude and laughed at an officer and said, ‘See, I told you I’d get off,’” Vaughn said. “Now can you imagine how that officer felt?”

She said she expressed those concerns with [Chief Municipal Court Judge Stephen Yaklin](#).

Necessary Expenses

But some expenditures are necessary, council members said.

Eckert spoke of a motorcycle officer who had his uniform torn when a car pulled out in front of him and made him wreck.

“We found out this morning that he bought his own uniforms because he had been told there was no money for uniforms for motorcycle (officers),” Eckert said.

“I don’t like that,” Vaughn added, later saying, “I want a budget that is realistic. I don’t want a budget that is just making the numbers balance.”

As the city is [looking for a new police chief](#), the council expressed confidence that the interim chief, [Maj. Tom Arnold](#), will be able to come up with some other cost-savers for the Police Department.

After Eckert gave his presentation and a dinner break, Wayne Wright, a program director with the consulting group [CH2MHill](#), told the council his company could analyze the city’s departments for \$52,000 and offer recommendations for savings.

Wright said he could have those recommendations ready in four weeks or possibly sooner so they could be implemented by the next fiscal year, which begins July 1. He said the recommendations presented by his company would make up for the \$52,000 it charges.

Council members requested that Wright present them with an overview of roughly how much the city would save by contracting with CH2MHill before they made a decision.

The council is scheduled to meet Monday at 7 p.m., though no immediate action on the budget is expected or needed. The meeting will be at the [Community Development](#) office.

There is also a town hall meeting scheduled for next Thursday, where the budget will likely be discussed. The meeting is set to start at 7 p.m. at the Coach Ford Center’s [Reception Hall](#).

“I think that there are other options with a lot of these things here that we need to think on,” Bevirt said.

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