

City budget reflects downturn in the economy

MERCED – The City of Merced’s final budget for 2008-2009 reflects the downturn in the national and local economies.

The \$43.3 million General Fund budget is approximately \$400,000 lower than last year’s budget.

“This budget is still in a state of flux until the state finalizes its budget,” said Interim City Manager Jim Marshall. “We don’t know what the state will do, how it will impact us, or when they will have their budget complete.”

Expenditures in the General Fund budget are \$4.8 million higher than revenue, so the City will use some of its reserve. More than \$11 million in reserve funds remain in the General Fund budget.

Read the budget

The entire budget is posted online at www.cityofmerced.org. It also is available for review during normal business hours at the front counter of the Merced Civic Center, 678 W. 18th St.

There are no layoffs in the budget, but close to 20 vacant positions are frozen or eliminated. Departments throughout the City have cut their General Fund budgets by more than 5 percent.

The General Fund revenue of \$38.5 million is impacted by a 7 percent decrease in sales tax revenues, and an expected decrease in property tax revenue.

Property taxes are expected to drop because total assessed valuation for properties in

Merced County are expected to decline by a minimum of 5 percent.

The smaller budget has resulted in some changes in operations. Code Enforcement has been moved from the Parks and Community Services Department to Inspection Services, where it will join building and engineering inspections.

The City Engineer and Development Services Director have retired and their positions will be filled after a new City Manager is hired.

The Chief Building Official will oversee Development Services. The Assistant Chief Building Official will handle day-to-day Inspection Services operations.

The Deputy Director of Public Works will spend most of his time in his current duties, but because he is a registered engineer, he will spend 25 percent of his time fulfilling the duties of the City Engineer.

Ten positions in Development Services are frozen and a custodian position also is frozen. Two firefighters, three police officers and two police dispatcher positions funded by Community Facilities Districts (CFD) have been frozen because CFD revenues are not growing fast enough to fund the positions. All those positions are currently vacant.

The City has loaned the CFDs funds in the last several years to cover operations.

A vacant recreation coordinator position has been eliminated. The Parks and Community Services Department also has been instructed to focus on youth



Fees for summer swimming did not go up this year, although some other recreational fees did go up to cover the costs.

State budget is the unknown factor

The State of California faces a massive budget deficit this year, and it is unclear how it will solve the problem.

In past deficit years, local governments have had funds taken away or been charged

new fees to help make up the budget shortage. The City doesn’t expect to get several law enforcement grants and could have to pay jail booking fees. State budget talks could stretch through the summer.

programming, after school programs and Community Violence, Intervention and Prevention (ComVIP) anti-gang/anti-violence programming.

A number of recreation program fees were increased as part of a “pay for play” effort to reduce the amount of General Fund monies being spent.

No new capital improvement projects paid for by General Fund monies are in the budget.

All General Fund capital projects included in the budget are

carried over from previous years.

The budget does contain a new item, \$500,000 set aside to create a trust fund to help cover the costs of health benefits for retirees.

The trust fund came about as a result of new national accounting standards recommended by the Government Accounting Standards Board.

The City Council held a study session on the budget in early June before holding a public hearing to adopt the budget.

Merced City Council

Mayor Ellie Wooten
Mayor Pro Tem John Carlisle
Council members:
Joe Cortez
Michele Gabriault-Acosta
Noah Lor
Jim Sanders
Bill Spriggs

Contact the City Council by email at Citycouncil@cityofmerced.org, by calling 385-6834. You can write to Council members at the Civic Center address listed below.

Council meetings

The Council usually meets on the first and third Monday of the month at 7 p.m. in the Council Chambers in the Civic Center. The agenda is posted online at www.CityofMerced.org.

Holiday

City offices will be closed Friday, July 4 for Independence Day. Refuse pickup will not be affected.

Contacting us

The Web site, www.CityofMerced.org, contains City Council information, the Municipal Code and General Plan and other information. To contact the Newsletter, e-mail newsletter@CityofMerced.org, call the Public Information Office at 385-6232 or write:

Merced Civic Center
678 W. 18th St.
Merced CA 95340

The Civic Center is open Monday-Friday 8 a.m.-5 p.m., except holidays.

Call us

City Council	385-6834
City Manager	385-6834
City Attorney	385-6868
City Clerk	388-7100
Airport	385-6873
Code Enforcement	385-6855
Finance	385-4718
Inspection Services	385-6861
Personnel	388-7100
Planning Department	385-6858
Public Works (7:30-4:30) ...	385-6800
After hours	385-6905
Recreation/Parks	385-6855

IN AN EMERGENCY DIAL 911

Fire Department	385-6891
Police Department	385-6912

Ask the City: Refuse rates raise questions

Ask the City is a feature of the City newsletter where we answer questions that we have received via email, by phone, or mail. Use the addresses in the box to the left to submit your question.

Several people have questions regarding the refuse rate hikes that go into effect this month. Summarized, the questions are:

How come the rates are going up so high, especially compared to Waste Management (the disposal company in the county)?

I never fill my (green, blue, gray) can. Can I get a smaller can, or service every-other week?

How come the rate information packet came to my house in three languages and I only speak one?

The rates are going up because our costs are increasing. We are charged more for fuel, we are charged more to dispose of the materials and employee costs are up. Waste Management rates for disposal are higher

than the City disposal rates by a couple bucks. However, the utility City bill also includes Spring clean-up costs, storm drain charges and street-sweeping (which helps us comply with air quality guidelines).

State law requires weekly refuse collection. The fixed costs -- paying for a truck and driver and driving throughout the City are the same for big cans or little containers. However, you can share a gray can, or any other can, with a friend or neighbor. If you have a gardening service, you can opt out of the green container. Call the Public Works Department at 385-6800 to discuss the options.

In order to comply with federal and state laws, we must mail to our residents the proposed rate increases in English, Spanish and Hmong. Because we don't know what language the current resident is more proficient in, we must send out all three versions.

And, while diesel costs are through the roof, we are exploring alternative fuels for our heavy equipment, and we are always trying to improve efficiency and our operations.

Drivers: Keep your hands off that cell phone

Remember: As of July 1, drivers must use a hands-free device for cellphones while driving in California.

Motorists can face a \$20 fine, plus court fees, for the first offense and a \$50 fine plus court fees for additional offenses.

Drivers are allowed to use hands-free devices that don't interfere with driving. But remember, while you are driving you need to stay focused on the road.

Family members need to share loss

Merced ComVIP is assembling a group of parents and family members who have lost someone to the gang lifestyle, or because of gang violence.

Members could share their experiences with others in the community, in small or large group settings, depending on the comfort level of the speaker.

"We have found that people want to share their stories in the hope that it prevents another kid from getting killed or joining a gang," said Lt. Tom Trin-

dad. "Sometimes they are just talking to a handful of parents, other times it may be a classroom of kids."

Group members would help put a face and story to the gang statistics that plague the area. And members could help mentor youths who are headed in the wrong direction.

People interested in joining the group should contact Trinidad at 385-6233.

Merced ComVIP is a regional multi-agency group working to stop gang and youth violence.

There is help available during foreclosure crisis

Merced continues to have one of the highest foreclosures rates in the country.

There are some things you can do if you are having trouble making your house payment:

First, call your lender to see if they can adjust payments.

Don't abandon your home. You can lose eligibility for some assistance programs.

Other places to get help:

The Hope Hotline any time of the day or night for free help at 1-888-995-HOPE or go to 995hope.org.

The State of California has information at <http://www.yourhome.ca.gov/> or for help in Spanish go to <http://www.sucasa.ca.gov/>

The City website, www.cityofmerced.org, also has information available.