

Largo commission votes against furloughs

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LARGO - Largo City Commissioners, after hearing strong opposition to their plans to require employee furloughs, decided unanimously Thursday against taking such action for the next the fiscal year.

Instead, after hearing a recommendation from Largo Commissioner Harriet Crozier, they agreed to use reserves to cover the costs of furloughs, but warned of deeper cuts in services and personnel next year.

Among the concerns expressed by police officers and other employees were that furloughs affect officers' ability to provide proactive law enforcement programs, create morale problems and pit city departments against each other

"Decision making by past and present Largo commissioners in regard to police staffing levels has created a situation in which it is more dangerous today to be a police officer than when the city had a smaller population," said Officer Michael Kirkpatrick.

The city has done all it can to avoid eliminating jobs, said City Manager Mac Craig.

"We have the figures to show that if we use this money and don't do the furloughs ... we will turn the system in the red in the general fund in about 2013."

City officials had been discussing furloughs in recent weeks because of some union contracts that prevented them from freezing wages.

Crozier said commissioners planned to "honor every contract from the get go."

"There was one union we gave you a deal - you obviously didn't like - but you didn't have any furloughs in it," Crozier said. "It was presented to your (union) rep."

She recommended taking the money out of reserves so staff "doesn't have to crunch any more" and look to 2012 to "catch up." The amount is an estimated \$1 million.

Commissioner Rodney Woods asked Chief Lester Aradi to explain what effect furloughs would have on the city.

The department can't afford to cut any more officers, Aradi said.



"We have the lowest officer ratio (to citizens) in the Tampa Bay Area," he said.

Taking more officers off the streets, whether it's through cuts or furloughs, has a "compounding effect on the stress level and ability of the department to maintain the safety of the community."

Commissioner Gigi Arntzen said "we're not being kept informed."

If commissioners had known about the severe lack of officers on the road, she would have expected the chief to say the department needs more officers during budget discussions.

Besides adopting the budget for the next fiscal year, commissioners also gave final approval to an increase in the tax rate to 4.31 mills, equal values, tax-cut measures and increasing health insurance costs are among the factors city officials have cited in making sharp budget cuts.

Raises will be around 4 percent for employees except for those represented by the firefighters' union. That contract is under negotiations.

Mayor Pat Gerard was ill and did not attend the meeting Thursday.

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