

Miami Gardens budget plan maintains services, adds workers

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While surrounding cities are cutting back to make municipal ends meet, Miami Gardens plans to hire more workers and continue the same level of service for homeowners.

That's good news in a time where many property owners in other Miami-Dade cities are bracing to pay higher fees for fewer services.

"We're in pretty good shape," said City Manager Danny Crew. "Compared to some other cities, we've been spared."

Under the proposed budget, the city wants to hire 35 new employees -- including 20 staff members for the new recreation center set to open in late March 2010 and additional employees for the city attorney's office.

Miami Gardens' spending plan will not be released until Friday, but Crew said the budget, as proposed, would generate the same amount of money as last year. However, because property values have declined, the rate may be slightly higher for some homeowners.

"We don't expect a big increase," he said. "Most homeowners will see an increase to the tune of \$12 to \$15."

Many other cities are grappling with possible tax increases, cutting services and shelving projects in hopes of filling budget holes. Homestead has seen the sharpest decline in Miami-Dade in property values this year, with a 24.7 percent drop in its tax base. Miami Gardens Council set its tentative tax rate last month to the "roll back" rate. That means the rate remains at \$5.38 for every \$1,000 of a property's assessed value for the new budget year that begins Oct. 1.

For example, the average home assessed at \$95,500, taking the standard \$50,000 homestead exemption would pay \$244 in municipal taxes, a \$10 difference from last year. Under Florida law, the council can lower the tax rate between now and the final budget hearing -- but can't raise it. The council will hold two public hearings before taking a final vote before the tax rate becomes final.

The hearings will be at 6 p.m. Tuesday and Sept. 21 at Miami Gardens City Hall, 1515 NW 167th St.