

Prudent city can brag as it saves

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MIAMI GARDENS — Layoffs, pay cuts, park closures and fee increases have been common this budget season for most of Florida's local governments.

Not so in Miami Gardens, the state's largest predominantly black city.

There, the payroll will grow by 17 positions this year. Employees will get cost-of-living and merit raises as well as matching contributions to retirement plans.

And instead of dipping into reserves to balance its \$150 million budget like other cities, Miami Gardens leaders expect to stash \$300,000 into a rainy day fund.

How has Florida's 15th-largest city achieved near-miracle financial health in these dire economic times?

City leaders say it's because, as a new government carved out of Miami-Dade County six years ago, they've spent money on only the most vital functions.

"We were very cautious about how we built the city," said City Manager Danny Crew. "You tend to only hire those people you actually need."

That means Miami Gardens, where 96 percent of the 109,000 residents are minorities, doesn't have some luxuries like other cities. It has no poet laureate. It has no graphic designers. It has no city television station.

"We were not going to be a bloated government. We pride ourselves on the fact that we have necessary staff to get the job done," said Mayor Shirley Gibson, who was part of the eight-year push to create the city.

More with less

Miami Gardens benefited in its first four years from rapidly rising property values that boosted city revenue as much as 20 percent a year.

"During the good years, what most cities do is add people on," Crew said. "We didn't build in any continuing expenditures, only those bare ones that we had to have to operate."

Gibson and the six City Council members are paid \$12,000 a year and share three legislative aides. Crew shares an administrative system with two other managers.

"I do all my own typing," he said. "There are things you really don't need, but you think you do. We run a tight ship."

With only 600 employees, Crew said, people help each other out when necessary. He once worked as a crossing guard.

"We don't have this rigid type of thing," he said. "We're still small enough that you have that feeling."

Focus on parks, crime

City founders had two priorities: police and parks.

"People didn't like the way the county was providing police service. Some of it may be undeserved, but it doesn't matter," Crew said.

Miami Gardens had a reputation for violent crimes, ranking 17th in a list of the country's most dangerous cities in 2008, based on figures from 2007.

That's the same year the city started its own police force after increasing taxes by 64 percent. The property tax rate in Miami Gardens is 5.37 per \$1,000 of assessed value, compared to Clearwater's 5.15 and Tampa's 5.73.

Clearwater, which has a budget of \$374 million, and Miami Gardens have nearly the same number of residents.

"We didn't mess around. We wanted the best police department we could get," Crew said.

To attract top officers from around the country, Miami Gardens offers new recruits a \$12,000 signing bonus, \$5,000 in moving expenses, a \$2,000 yearly bonus if they live in the city and a \$58,000 starting salary. A Tampa patrol officer's starting salary is \$46,384.

In the department's first year, the city reported a 19 percent drop in violent crime.

Parks also got extra attention.

"We've always had lots of parks here. But they were never maintained. They were never renovated. They never had any programming," said Gibson, who has lived in Miami Gardens for 50 of her 65 years.

More than \$30 million in grant money has gone to upgrade four pools and 17 parks that offer everything from after-school care to line dancing. Construction of the city's first major recreation center, a 55,000-square-foot, \$12 million facility, will be done next year.

Boost from stadium

Gibson, who is running to replace Democrat Kendrick Meek in Congress, led the push to separate the area from Miami-Dade County, starting in 1995.

As a sheriff's deputy, she worked in tony neighborhoods such as Coral Gables and Bal Harbour.

"I could see how other folks lived," she said. "I could see the disparity." And it seemed to her, the "other folks" kept benefiting from grant and tax money generated for the county.

"Where they already had 10 beautiful parks, they got two more," she said. "I knew there were dollars that we could never actually be in control of unless we were a city."

Case in point: Land Shark Stadium — home of Super Bowl XLIV in 2010, the Hurricanes and Dolphins — generates about \$700,000 a year in property taxes for the city. About half of that money used to go to the county.

Fading skepticism

Carrie Williams, 23, who works as a cashier in Hallandale Beach, grew up in the city. She considered leaving three years ago, after her daughter was born.

But things are different now. She feels safer, she said. It looks better.

"Right here was nothing but a bunch of woods and trees," she said while at the checkout line in a new Office Depot across the street from a new Wal-Mart.

Bhemis Parks, 29, a Miami Gardens resident for six years, also sees a difference.

"There isn't as much graffiti as there used to be," he said. "It's a more pleasant place to be and look at."

Claudette Brinson, a Miami Gardens native who raised two children there, admits being skeptical about the push to incorporate Miami Gardens. She worried about her taxes going up and being misspent.

"A lot of people were concerned," she said. "We were angry in the beginning. If you would have called me when the city first formed itself, you would have heard that.

Now, though, she likes what she sees. She points to drainage improvements, cameras at intersections to keep drivers from running red lights, and more police presence.

"There was a time where the center median off the main street, I mean, it just looked dead. Now they've put in beautiful landscaping," she said of her hometown. "I can see where my tax money is going."

As the city moves forward, it remains to be seen if it will start packing on fat.

An annual jazz concert, launched four years ago, and the Miss Miami Gardens pageant, started two years ago, now cost the city money. The parks department produces some slick publications, and the city started contracting with a company to publish a community newspaper.

Crew says it's likely Miami Gardens will end up with expenses that some might consider discretionary. But for now, restraint is a guiding principle.

"A city can't be everything to everybody," he said.

"You have to have a council that knows how to say no to their constituents sometimes. And that's very difficult to do."

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