
Oakland City Council cuts more than \$10 million after emotional session

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Concerned citizens packed into the City Council chambers Tuesday night to plead for jobs and programs that could be cut.

The Oakland City Council chopped \$10.45 million from the city budget Tuesday night to close a gap in this year's deficit after dozens of Oaklanders pleaded for their jobs and organizations to be spared in the coming months.

The Feb. 16 meeting, which had standing room only in the main gallery, was a special session to address a \$15.33 million budget shortfall for the current fiscal year, which lasts through June.

Hundreds of people crammed into council chambers for the meeting. More than 80 of them signed up to speak for a range of programs and positions, from IT technicians who maintain public library terminals and the city's computer network to money for the Chabot Space & Science Center.

Most of the speakers expressed dismay about cuts slated for the coming fiscal year. City Council President Jane Brunner said the council will address next year's cuts, when the city will have a projected \$32.7 million deficit, at a later meeting. (Read all about the city's budget here in PDF form .)

A parade of speakers begged the council for lenience and understanding.

One woman broke down as she related how a neighborhood services coordinator, a community liaison to the Police Department, helped her get her life on track to escape domestic violence. More than a dozen coordinator positions could be cut come July.

Many people spoke on behalf of Betty Marvin, the sole historic preservation planner for the Oakland Cultural Heritage Survey. Marvin is in charge of determining historic and architectural value for the city's buildings.

"These are some of the things that give Oakland a sense of place, a sense of value," Alison Finlay, of the Oakland Heritage Alliance, told the council. "To see Betty Marvin's years and years of service and knowledge being minimized is very sad."

Others asked the city not to forget Chabot Space & Science Center. The city's 2010-2011 budget proposes cutting the center's entire allocation of \$480,000.

Chabot Executive Director Alexander Zwissler said the center plays a vital role for Oakland youth with its community programs for children and teens. He called the elimination of city funding "completely untenable." More than a dozen audience members stood in support of Chabot, and several students said they would not have achieved as much in life without their science center experiences.

"Give the youth of Oakland a chance to have their interest sparked, and you'll ultimately improve the economy of California," added Professor Alex Filippenko, who teaches astronomy at the University of California, Berkeley.

Seniors and their supporters spoke out against decreased hours at centers where older folks eat, socialize and access other services.

Union representatives made their case for the need to avoid cuts to meter collectors, electrical repairmen and city planners, among other positions. The city's most experienced planners would be cut under next year's proposed budget.

Marge Stanzione told the council she is one of these planners scheduled to lose her job. She called the cuts "blatantly unfair." She said planners of her classification are the most "experienced" and "talented" in the city and handle the most complex projects.

"Why would you want to get rid of these dedicated employees?" she asked. "Cuts should be based on seniority at every level. There are other ways to do this in the department. There must be a fair and equitable approach that involves reductions throughout the department, not in just one classification."

Councilman Ignacio De La Fuente said he heard the equity message "loud and clear." He said political offices throughout the city needed to make cuts, pointing out the mayor's and city attorney's offices. Legislative analysts who work for City Council members also should go, he said, after Nancy Nadel reminded everyone that the analysts only were supposed to be hired for a year.

"Everybody's got to take a hit or we can't claim we're doing it in an equitable way," De La Fuente said. "I hope that we have the political will to make some of those decisions all of us know we need to make."

Much of this year's deficit, \$7.75 million, will be made up for through sales of city assets to the Oakland Redevelopment Agency and the Coliseum. The city will glean the rest of the money by cutting analyst positions in personnel and the Police Department, one finance position, police park rangers and a range of fire-related services, among other cuts.

The layoffs and other efforts take effect mid-March, said Cheryl Taylor, director of the city budget office.

Five positions in the City Attorney's office were spared, at least temporarily, after City Administrator Dan Lindheim pulled them off the motion toward the end of the nearly four-hour meeting when some council members argued that layoffs must be considered in the offices of all elected officials.

Council members Ignacio De La Fuente, Rebecca Kaplan and Nancy Nadel voted against the cuts, while Desley Brooks, Patricia Kernighan, Jean Quan, Larry Reid and Jane Brunner voted for them.

"Starting in July, we will be facing cuts to the city that are really tragic for anybody who loves Oakland, which is most of us here," said Kernighan. "The question now is how to get through the rest of this fiscal year. The city has kind of squeaked by up to this point with budgetary

fancy footwork. The buck is going to stop starting in our new fiscal year. The cuts we're talking about tonight just to get through the next four months are miniscule."

The city will have to consider cutting "sacred cows," she added, including police and fire salaries and pensions, as well as some library branches.

"That may be political suicide, but that is what we have to do," she said.

The sale of the Alta Bates Garage, appraised at some \$4.5 million after closing costs, was pushed off for consideration until later this year after some members of the council questioned whether it could be worth more.

The council also postponed the elimination of the Abandoned Auto Detail pending further analysis by the Public Safety Committee.

The city will look into selling the Henry J. Kaiser Convention Center for the next fiscal year. Proposed sales this year include unspecified city property, including "Coliseum tract" and "Grandview Lots," and the lease of Scotlan Convention Center.

Quan and Kaplan said the Council needed updates on income-generating and cost-cutting ideas members had suggested, such as cell phone towers, billboards, centralized financial services and consolidating office space.

"We keep doing hearings and some of us make suggestions that don't get implemented," Kaplan said. "Each time, it does feel like we're starting from nothing again."

Lindheim, the city administrator, said his office is responsible for providing details about the ideas' financial ramifications to the City Council.

Ultimately, he said, the dire budget situation will require tough decisions.

"It's interesting to hear everybody saying, 'This person's important' and 'That person's important,'" he said. "We're forced at this point to be making cuts in very critical people, very critical programs and very critical services."

With declining revenues and most of the city's General Fund budget going toward public safety and measures approved by voters, there just isn't much left over.

"If we're going to balance the budget," he continued, "very important people who serve very important programs are going to have to suffer."