

Public digs into budget

BY DEENA WINTER / Lincoln Journal Star

A diverse group of Lincoln residents who are concerned about the amount of money the city spends to maintain its parks facilities made its public debut Monday during a public hearing on the city's proposed 2005-2006 budget.

Citizens for Quality Parks and Trails formed last winter out of a common concern over what it says is an increasingly underfunded Parks and Recreation system, from conservancy areas to trails. Its meetings have attracted as many as 75 people, and on Monday the group took its concerns public by asking the Lincoln City Council to form a task force to examine parks and trails funding.

The group includes representatives of the Lincoln Neighborhood Alliance, Great Plains Trails Network, Community Forestry Advisory Board, Lincoln Parks and Recreation Foundation and Lincoln Adult Baseball League.

While the city and its budget have grown steadily, parks and recreation funding has dropped, said one member of the group, former park board member and city councilman Curt Donaldson. They contend the city isn't spending enough on everything from baseball fields to trees, and said the city can't expect to rely on the private sector to bail it out.

Donaldson said he's spent more time analyzing the parks budget in the past six months than he did when he served on the park board and council, and he still can't explain "what is going on." He said while spending on capital parks projects has gradually declined, the parks department has done a good job of finding funds elsewhere, through grants and federal funding.

They estimate the city should be spending about \$3 million annually to maintain its \$132 million investment in parks and recreation facilities, but the city now spends about \$1 million, down from about \$2 million in the mid-1990s.

Some members of the group said they would consider a bond issue to bridge the funding gap.

Members of the parks and trails group made up the bulk of the turnout Monday for a public hearing on Mayor Coleen Seng's proposed \$131 million 2005-2006 spending plan. Lincoln residents apparently found little to get excited about, with the exception of about a half-dozen women who testified in opposition to the budget's elimination of a caseworker position in the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department.

The position was one of 2.25 Health Department positions — and 18 citywide — that were eliminated to balance the budget. The "Healthy Homes" community outreach worker, who helps African-American women, was reassigned to the Community Health Services' information and referral program, Health Department Director Bruce Dart said. He said he intended to try to find funds elsewhere to restore the position.

The elimination of the position was decried by representatives of the local chapter of the National Council of Negro Women and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Some called it discriminatory, saying the African-American community should have been consulted and that it's important that the city keep the position filled with an African-American who understands the low-income minority community being served.

The Healthy Homes program also has an Asian, Hispanic and Native outreach worker to serve those populations. Dart said the it wasn't an easy budget cut to make, but it was justified because the staffer's caseload was about half that of the other Healthy Homes workers. He said the clientele can still access the staffer through the new position, and home and community-based services are still helping the population.

"A rationale that, on paper, there are fewer people served in the African-American community versus the other three groups is not a rationale at all," said Annie Stokes, a member of the Lincoln NAACP branch. "It is an action that supports the history often taken in this country that this group of people is not important."

The City Council also held a public hearing on its proposed 2005-2011 Capital Improvement Program and one- and six-year street and highway program — much of which is directed toward Antelope Valley projects. Nobody from the public testified about the proposed plans.