

City Council talks financial priorities

By DEENA WINTER / Lincoln Journal Star

Mayor Coleen Seng took several pages of notes, without comment, as Lincoln City Council members told her their budget priorities for the upcoming year during a two-hour meeting Wednesday.

Seng asked for the council's thoughts to help city department heads mold their 2006-07 budget requests in the coming months. The budget-writing process culminates in council approval of a spending blueprint this summer.

Before listening to the council's opinions, Seng prefaced the conversation by saying she hopes to balance the budget without raising property taxes. Right now the city budget officer projects a \$6.8 million budget gap, largely due to lagging sales tax revenue, which accounts for about 43 percent of the tax-funded budget.

The three Republicans on the council had plenty of suggestions for Seng, while the four Democrats largely listened. Among them:

- * Councilman Jon Camp wants to set up a committee to look into ways to get the city's ambulance service out of the red. The ambulance service, which is operated by the Fire Department, lost \$500,000 last year and is seeking a \$250,000 subsidy from the city this year. Seng appeared open to the idea, but warned that it shouldn't devolve into a "politicized meeting."

- * Camp wants to repeal the city's living wage ordinance and try to "mend fences" with the Capital Humane Society, whose contract dispute with the city, in part over its obligation to comply with the city's new pay requirements, culminated in the shelter's decision to stop providing the service this year.

- * Camp suggested putting any new fire station construction on hold until a performance audit of the department is done.

- * Several council members agreed that the city should implement the 68 recommendations in the recently released Zucker report, which scrutinized the city's development processes.

- * Councilman Ken Svoboda suggested reviewing overtime policies in city departments.

- * Svoboda said eight police officers and nine firefighters should be added to the city's force annually. Several council members agreed with him. The mayor would like to add eight police officers and 15 firefighters with the help of a federal grant.

- * Svoboda proposed increasing the city's contribution to the Lincoln Partnership for Economic Development's job creation efforts by \$250,000.

- * Svoboda proposed maintaining the current property tax levy after a countywide reassessment of property this year, which Svoboda said he's heard could bring an extra \$5 million to \$15 million to Lincoln coffers. Most of the other council members expressed support for the concept, too, except Camp.

- * Several council members agreed they'd like to spend more money on street construction, but none had a plan for coming up with the money.

- * Councilwoman Robin Eschliman said the city can make cuts until it bleeds but at some point will have to bring in more revenue by being "less picky" about projects. She said the city is missing out on property and sales tax revenue and added payroll dollars by rejecting plans for a Wal-Mart Supercenter in northeast Lincoln, U-Stop and McDonald's near Lincoln High School and commercial development near the Lancaster Event Center.

- * Eschliman proposed hiring a fund-raiser/grant writer for city departments, prompting Councilwoman Annette McRoy to suggest the city sell naming rights for trails and parks.

- * Svoboda suggested city staffers, particularly in the planning department, not spend their limited time on personal pet projects and issues, such as a recent proposed zoning change that would require developers to plant more trees in parking lots. He said they should prioritize their time better and "do the things you're mandated to do" and put "personal, opinionated standards" on the back burner.

- * Svoboda suggested the mayor solicit proposals for a potential southeast Lincoln police station.

* Councilman Dan Marvin said he intends to monitor the city's growth in personnel costs and if they're out of line with the norm, "That's where I'm gonna ask questions."

Possible bond issues

Lincoln voters could be asked to approve up to 13 bond issues in the next five years. Among them are three new proposals:

* Joint recreation center projects with schools; secured greenway along South Beltway; swimming pool renovations and two new ones; upgrading section of Billy Wolff Trail. \$15.9 million

* Joint project with school district for stand-alone library at new Arnold Heights school. \$3.3 million

* Central Lincoln community center, recreation center space with schools, Jensen Park development. \$10.4 million

General obligation bonds are a tool cities use to finance projects that typically serve the whole community — such as schools, roads and parks — but don't generate revenue. The city would increase property taxes to repay the bonds.