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Hemet adopts 'difficult' $85 million budget

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The Press-Enterprise

HEMET - The City Council on Tuesday evening adopted an $85 million budget for the coming fiscal year that reflects the economic slowdown and plummeting revenue.

Nearly $8 million will be trimmed from police, fire, administration, parks and the library compared to last year's budget, said Len Wood, interim city manager.

Council members unanimously OK'd the budget, which includes a broad range of staff reductions and spending cuts. Many reductions were decided on late last year, followed by more in recent months, Wood said.

"This was probably the most difficult budget I've seen in the last 14 years," Councilwoman Robin Lowe said.

Like other cities, Hemet has experienced dramatic declines recently in development fees, sales and property taxes and other revenues. The situation was further complicated because so many significant cuts had to be made in two previous budget years, according to an analysis by Wood and Thomas Kanarr, interim finance director.

The Police Department's budget will plummet to $16.2 million, from $19 million last year. The Fire Department will decline to $9.3 million from $10.8 million. Together, public safety will have about 28 fewer employees than last year.

The fiscal 2009-10 budget includes $1.6 million in cuts to salary and benefits still being negotiated with employee unions, city officials said. They could come through possible cuts to benefits and salary, layoffs, furloughs or a combination of all three.

The city's $33.8 million general fund cuts include about $1.4 million from community development, $600,000 from administration and $500,000 from community services.

Hemet officials are hoping for about $770,000 in federal stimulus money and another $312,000 in state grants.

The number of city employees will drop to 332 in fiscal 2009-10, from 432 positions in fiscal year 2006-07. That's a 23 percent decline.

Council members have volunteered to cut 10 percent from their $807 monthly stipends; the city treasurer will take a 10 percent cut; and the city manager and department heads have all agreed to a 6.7 percent cut in benefits. City Attorney Eric Vail has reduced costs by $300,000.