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# Is Fort Worth cutting too much to close its budget gap?

Demand for services is up in Fort Worth as recession affects more residents

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FORT WORTH — On Tuesday afternoon, the city announced proposals to close libraries, swimming pools and make other budget cuts. By Tuesday evening, the debate had started about whether those cuts are justified.

Some residents worry that Fort Worth is cutting services at exactly the wrong time.

The city has recommended closing the Meadowbrook and Wedgwood branch libraries.

But more patrons are visiting libraries to polish their résumés and use the free computers despite a cut in library hours in last year's budget, said Dolores Owens, chairwoman of the Library Advisory Board.

"Citizens are turning to libraries as a source to retool their lives," she said.

The Meadowbrook library is more accessible to low-income neighborhoods because it's close to the Lancaster Avenue bus line, said Councilman Frank Moss, who represents Meadowbrook.

"In our community, specifically, the Meadowbrook library is where people go to search for jobs," he said.

Libraries aren't the only neighborhood amenity that could be cut. After-school programs and athletics are scheduled for reductions.

And six of the city's seven swimming pools would be closed. Also, funding for graffiti abatement would be reduced.

"I have a huge concern about the crime impact of eliminating our after-school services at our community centers," Councilman Joel Burns said.

### **Street funding**

Likewise, residents are worried about the long-term cost of a proposal to cut \$763,000 from street funding. Street medians would be mowed every three weeks instead of every two, and some alleys would go entirely unmowed.

"I think that we may save a buck this year, but when it gets around to being redone, it's going to cost them five," said Bob Bashein, president of the Ridglea Hills Neighborhood Association.

The city has been working for two years to get spending in line with its revenue. This year, that required cutting \$59 million from the general fund. General expenditures will actually shrink from \$538.9 million during the 2008-09 fiscal year to \$528.2 million in fiscal 2009-10. The budget does not include a tax increase.

But it calls for spending money from taxes on natural gas drilling, which the city had planned to put into a long-term trust fund.

"We made a commitment; we would utilize the one-time windfall of our gas revenue royalties for [capital] expenditures for future generations," Burns said. "I want to caution all of us to be careful about that."

### **Day Labor Center**

At the Fort Worth Day Labor Center, people looking for work Wednesday morning expressed surprise and disappointment that the center is on the list of proposed closures.

James Haley, 51, said the center is fulfilling its purpose of keeping the unemployed from gathering on street corners to look for employers, which is one reason the center was created seven years ago.

"Back then, people used to stand at the corner and swarm vans when they pulled up looking for workers," Haley said. "Coming here is a lot safer for us and for the people hiring. It's controlled here.

"If this closes, they'll just send us all back out onto the streets and bring back an old problem."

Miguel Parceró, 33, pointed out that a city ordinance makes it illegal to gather on corners and look for work in certain areas. People will start getting tickets and, because they cannot find work, they won't be able to pay their fines.

Currently, Parceró said he can make \$60 to \$80 a day doing day labor.

### **Job cuts**

The budget also calls for cutting 230 jobs — 114 through layoffs, 42 through retirement and 74 through the elimination of vacant positions.

Almost all the layoffs would be among general employees — the Police Department would be untouched, and the Fire Department would lose one or two civilian positions.

The only employees scheduled for raises in the new budget are police officers, who have a long-term contract that guarantees their pay.

Other employees wouldn't get raises under the proposal, and most employees outside the police and fire departments would have to take eight days of unpaid furlough. The furlough days are scheduled to coincide with major holidays, so City Hall will essentially be shut down for four days on some of those weekends.

City Manager Dale Fisseler also hinted that there might be more difficult choices in future years.

The city contributed only part of what it needs to cover long-term gaps in retiree health insurance, and Fisseler has said previously that the city might have to change its pension and retirement health systems.

And he said the city might have to look at eliminating some property tax exemptions, which he called "generous."

Staff writer Alex Branch contributed to this report.

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**Pools** Six of the seven municipal swimming pools would be closed. The pools are in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods, but they're old and maintenance is becoming a headache. The only pool left would be Forest Park.

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**Graffiti** Some of the money for graffiti removal would be cut. Reports of graffiti have been on the rise.

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**Grass mowing** Street medians would be mowed every three weeks instead of every two.

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**Potholes** Some street repair funding would be cut. Some residents worry that cutting maintenance could lead to more costs in the future if deteriorated roads have to be replaced.

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**Libraries** Two of the city's 14 branch libraries would be closed, a year after budget cuts forced reductions in library hours. The cuts come even as library use is rising.

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