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Minorities, low-income residents top budget amendment requests

With city budget season in full swing, dozens of Austinites took to the podium at City Hall during a public hearing Thursday to ask City Council to amend the proposed budget for the upcoming fiscal year to include more services that benefit minorities, children and low-income residents.

Common requests included increasing investments in health and human services, increasing funding for public parks, raising wages for all city employees, increasing funding for after-school programs, providing funding for the city's African American Cultural Heritage District and initiating a "healthy corner store" initiative to combat the presence of food deserts.

The proposed Fiscal Year 2015-16 budget consists of about \$3.5 billion in spending, a 1.1 percent increase over the current budget. It includes a 6 percent general homestead exemption, a \$70,000 homestead exemption for senior and disabled residents and a \$740,000 increase in tenant-based rental assistance.

Advocacy group Austin Interfaith had a strong presence at the meeting, with about a dozen members speaking. Many of them asked that Council add more support in the budget for city employees who will not be eligible for a proposed 3 percent wage increase.

City of Austin spokesperson Bryce Bencivengo told the *Austin Monitor* that the wage increase applies only to employees who receive benefits and does not cover those who do not, such as temporary employees.

Several members of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 1624 asked Council to pass the existing wage increase.

A few Council members have expressed interest in applying the full 3 percent wage increase only to employees on the lower end of the pay scale and dampening the wage increase incrementally for employees already making higher wages.

Several speakers were also critical of the fact that 40 percent of the proposed increase in General Fund revenue over the current adopted budget would go to the Austin Police Department (<http://www.austinmonitor.com/stories/2015/08/city-may-add-many-85-new-police-officers/>).

Austin Independent School District Board of Trustees President Gina Hinojosa joined Austin Interfaith in asking Council not to cut the existing \$400,000 in funding for the district's Prime Time after-school program.

Combatting racial disparities was a major theme in public comment.

Eric Tang is an assistant professor of African-American studies at the University of Texas and co-author of a May 2014 report stating that Austin was the only fast-growing city in the U.S. to have its African-American population decrease between 2000 and 2010 (http://www.utexas.edu/cola/insts/iupra/_files/pdf/Austin%20AA%20pop%20policy%20brief_FINAL.pdf).

Tang warned that Austin's African-American population is a "bellwether" for the rest of the city, "the first ones hit and the hardest ones hit." According to recent surveys, he said, close to 70 percent of longtime African-American East Austin residents feel that their quality of life has decreased as a result of gentrification.

"What they're saying is that they don't have the same cultural institutions that they once had," Tang said. "If we can restore some of that in our city budget, I think we can, as some people put it, reverse the trend."

James Nortey, vice chair of the African American Cultural Heritage District's Founding Board of Directors, reiterated this point. "Our city is struggling to attract African-Americans to our community and struggling to retain them," he said.

Nortey and several other speakers associated with the district expressed support for a proposal from Council Member Ora Houston to add \$300,000 in funding to the budget to support the district.

A group of speakers associated with the Austin chapter of the American Heart Association asked Council to provide \$250,000 to support an initiative that would incentivize corner stores to provide healthy food to customers in order to increase options for East Austin residents.

The proposed budget would increase the tax rate to 48.14 cents per \$100 of taxable property valuation, a 5 cent increase over the current budget. This translates into a \$39.84 increase in the property tax bill for a median-valued home, which currently stands at \$232,272.

Under the proposed budget, staff estimates that "typical" median-valued homeowners would see an \$11.30 monthly increase in their combined property taxes, utility bills and other fees.

Council will hold a second public hearing on the proposed budget, tax rate and utility rates on Thursday and will begin the budget adoption process on Sept. 8.

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