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Friday, May 18, 2007

Group pitches new jobs, marketing efforts to strengthen Rochester's economic base

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ROCHESTER — A budget-driven effort to keep the local economy strong was pitched to the City Council on Tuesday.

Economic Development Manager Karen Pollard's proposal focused on downtown revitalization, small business development, commercial and retail attraction and a marketing effort by a national firm to match companies with the city.

Her address followed comments from local businessmen and Greater Rochester Chamber of Commerce members, including Waste Management's Alan Davis, chairman-elect of the chamber's board of directors,

"Based on the volume of economic activity in Rochester, we realize the city faces a critical growth stage where additional resources will be required to effectively service both prospective and existing business customers," he said.

The approach seemed to work — so far. The only action taken by councilors was to shift new and upgraded position requests from the nontax revenue economic development fund to the general fund.



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The position changes include making Samantha Rodgerson a full-time secretary to further enhance communications, funding a small business specialist, a new position, and continuing funding for a summer intern to be named later.

"We really are at the point where we need to increase the capacity of the Economic Development Department," said Economic Development Manager Karen Pollard, noting continuing efforts to attract and retain businesses. "Personnel is a limiting factor to getting these things done."

In all, the salaries and benefits for the new position totals \$84,861. City Manager John Scruton said the small business specialist request, meant to help Pollard focus on larger projects, is a direct result of goals set by councilors.

The proposed use of the fund, at \$402,936, represents a \$118,878 increase. That includes a \$105,530 transfer to the capital fund to finance design of the Route 11 loop and frontage roads around Wal-Mart, a business-generating effort that is taking shape with a map detailing occupied and available commercial parcels.

Pollard's salary and benefits were not affected by the council's decision because her earnings are already drawn from taxes. This year, her proposed budget, at \$110,296, represents a \$7,741 increase.

Joe Fackel of the Buxton Company explained a \$50,000 proposal to match the city with numerous retailers that could flourish locally. Buxton, using a gargantuan database holding marketing information on 119 million American households, will perform a customer-based study of the city's trade area, he said.

The economic development fund's marketing line, including Buxton, totals \$96,000, which also includes funds for printed materials, electronic media, regional and national advertising and a sign package at the Ten Rod Road industrial park. Marketing is part of technical and professional services, which is up \$51,080 to total \$119,075.

There's also the \$35,000 the council has agreed to provide for each of the next three years to Rochester Main Street. The organization's executive director, Chip Noon, outlined several goals, especially turning vacant storefronts into successful businesses.

The economic development budget took up half of the council's four-hour meeting Tuesday. No cuts were made to other requests that were on the table. They included:

— Assessing, which is up about \$7,000 to \$376,570, includes requests for portable devices to allow field workers to input data out of the office. Deputy Assessor Tom Mullin said it will increase productivity and avoid future staffing requests.

— Code Enforcement, seeking about \$20,000 more in the salary line, wants to increase hours of a secretary to handle increased paperwork related to rising building activity. The department's budget, at \$465,389, is up \$42,665, with other increases happening with benefits.

— The tax collector's office budget, at \$322,282, is up about \$12,800 due to rising salaries and benefits of existing employees.

— City Manager John Scruton's budget, at \$320,739, is up \$33,218. The rise is attributed to upgrading the finance director to deputy city manager, about \$2,200 for increased spending on

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special events and employee recognition, communications, funds for the Jaycees' Independence Day fireworks and salary and benefits increases.

Scruton promised to give councilors, including some who said they were getting anxious, tax rate projections at the public hearing on May 29.

The city-side budget is estimated to be around \$28 million, a nearly 5.8 percent increase.

Also discussed were a slew of capital requests for the water, at \$1.7 million, and sewer, at \$816,000, operations. The projects include Brock Street reconstruction, the Washington Street high water pressure zone, studying minimum flows along the Berry's River watershed as required by the state, developing a new water source for the Salmon Falls Road area and examining alternate locations to discharge treated effluent from the wastewater treatment plant.

At the insistence of Deputy Mayor Elaine Lauterborn, councilors moved to accelerate the more than \$1.5 million reconstruction of Catherine, Sheridan, Glen and Granite streets. She said the project should resume the schedule outlined last year, when design was scheduled to take place in 2008 and construction in 2009.

The total capital budget for this year was originally estimated to be nearly \$11 million for city, utility and school operations.