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Update: Bus fares hot topic in testimony before City Council

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The Madison City Council on Tuesday heard three hours of public testimony on bus fares and other issues and spent another four hours working on a \$164.4 million capital budget for 2009.

The council will start debate at 5:30 p.m. today on 45 amendments to Mayor Dave Cieslewicz's proposed \$237.9 million operating budget for next year. One amendment would block a 50-cent bus fare increase to \$2.

In approving the capital budget, the council added a net \$811,300 in spending — including \$1.2 million more in borrowing — to the mayor's original proposal.

"It passed pretty much unscathed, with only minor changes," Cieslewicz said after the meeting ended at 12:30 a.m. today.

The mayor's original proposal includes \$1.7 million to start a new central library, \$3 million to redevelop a troubled area near West Badger Road and South Park Street, and \$28 million for major streets.

The council added funds to:

- Start phases II and III of the development of Door Creek Park on the Far East Side.
- Buy new equipment for city parking enforcement officers.
- Make improvements to the City-County Building.
- Fix side streets off University Avenue.
- Study alternative sites for a Madison Public Market.

Ald. Lauren Cnare, 3rd District, said the \$700,000 approved by the council is needed to "jump start" the further development of Door Creek Park, and that funds would be repaid with developer impact fees.

Many council members voiced concern about the mayor's proposal to budget \$1.2 million to pay for a 570-stall parking garage behind the Madison Municipal Building, saying it's unwise to do so now because Marcus Corp. remains interested in building a hotel there. But the council agreed to keep the money in the budget.

Cieslewicz said he was pleased to add the money to study the public market, which keeps the project alive, alongside more immediate efforts like a new Downtown library and the proposed Central Park on the Near East Side.

Also, the council preserved:

- A series of streets projects, including several connecting to Highway M on the Far West Side, but will require the city engineer to give an early presentation on proposed road projects next year for the 2010 budget.
- \$250,000 for Central Park.
- \$112,000 in funding for the Municipal Art Fund.
- \$100,000 for a renewable energy project.

The proposed street project delays, suggested by Aids. Marsha Rummel, 6th District, and Robbie Webber, 5th District, and defeated by a 15-5 vote, produced a tense debate.

All of the street projects are needed to address traffic congestion and to assist long-term growth, said Ald. Paul Skidmore, 9th District.

But Webber called the streets project process a "freight train," adding, "When exactly do we get to say no?"

Ald. Jed Sanborn, 1st District, sought to delete the Central Park funding, saying "you can't have everything" in tough economic times.

But others, led by Rummel, said the \$250,000 investment would leverage millions of dollars to develop a park that will help reinvigorate the East Rail Corridor.

About 40 people attended the meeting, many speaking in opposition to the mayor's proposed bus fare increase, which would add service, security at transfer stations, marketing and more, and in favor of delaying the road projects for a year on the outskirts of the city.

"Support transit. Scale back the roads," resident Mike Barrett said, calling the mayor's proposal "a dirty air budget."

Michael Jacob, vice president of the Marquette Neighborhood Association, said the fare increase would cost regular riders about \$260 a year while spreading the cost to improve the system would only cost the average taxpayer about \$2.70 annually.

No one from the public testified in favor of the bus fare increase.

Several residents spoke in favor of adding \$80,000 for homeless outreach and \$50,000 for an eviction prevention program, which will be considered by the council when it deliberates the operating budget tonight.

Joe Lindstrom of the Homeless Services Consortium of Dane County said funding for transit for jobs, homeless outreach and evicting prevention program are part of a broader effort to end homelessness that city, county and state government should support.

Some voiced opposition to a proposed cut for the proposed Central Park and the cut to the Municipal Art Fund

"I ask you to not stamp out the spirit of the arts in this community," resident Karen McGlaughlin said.

Several from the business community spoke against a proposal to register landlords and commercial property owners for the first time, saying they were not consulted about the proposal, which also will be considered tonight.

IF YOU GO

What: The Madison City Council continues debate on Mayor Dave Cieslewicz's proposed \$237.9 million operating budget for 2009.

When: 5:30 p.m. today (Wednesday)

Where: City-County Building, Room 201, 210 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.

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