

Staff, museum, street cuts proposed in Manassas budget



Manassas Museum summer camps, such as this Civil War boot camp last year, are on the chopping block in the proposed budget. (Tracy A. Woodward/the Washington Post)

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Manassas City Manager Lawrence D. Hughes proposed a \$95.3 million general fund budget for fiscal 2011 last week that would eliminate the museum system's educational programs, curb street maintenance and reduce the size of the city staff by 20 positions.

Ten of those positions, Hughes said, were filled until Monday, when he laid off people to address a projected \$5.3 million general fund revenue shortfall. The other 10 positions are vacant.

The proposed budget is based on a real estate tax rate of \$1.33 per \$100 of assessed value, 2 cents lower than this year's. At that rate, the average residential tax bill would remain flat, and the average commercial bill would decline about \$2,000. The most recent property assessments show residential values in the city stabilizing but commercial values falling about 11 percent over the past year.

The Manassas Museum System would take one of the biggest hits under Hughes's proposal, losing about \$360,000. Hughes said that "high-quality" exhibits would remain in the museum but that educational programs, including the museum's summer camps and activities at other historic sites, would end. The historic resources director was also laid off. Hughes said the city will still focus on planning events for the sesquicentennial of the Civil War.

Under the proposed budget, street sweeping would be cut in half, street paving would be reduced to the lowest level in 10 years and customer service in city departments would decline, possibly resulting in longer lines, Hughes said.

"We're at a point where things people are used to seeing, they won't be seeing anymore," Hughes said, noting that customer service will decline in the offices of the commissioner of revenue, the treasurer and the registrar as positions are cut. In fiscal 2010, the city eliminated 69 positions. The new cuts would leave the city with 491 employees.

The budget would allow for the Stonewall Park Pool to open this summer. The budget also would transfer about \$47 million to the schools, \$400,000 of which is dedicated for science, math and technology initiatives. That is a 5 percent reduction in support to the schools, Hughes said.

"This is just the beginning of what will be a very difficult couple of months," said City Council member Jonathan L. Way (R). "There is no fat in this budget. . . . This [budget] is going to have a significant impact on the citizens . . . and city staff."

The general fund makes up almost half of the \$205 million total operating budget Hughes is proposing. It encompasses most of the city's departments and includes the schools.

Separate from the general fund is the city's Fire and Rescue Department. Hughes is proposing a fire levy of almost 16 cents, about 2 cents more than this year's, to support the department created two years ago. That rate, Hughes said, would support a 1.4 percent increase in the fire and rescue fund and cover items including leased storage space and the operating costs of a new computer-aided dispatch program.

The sewer, water and electric funds are also separate from the general fund. Manassas residents will see utility bills go up about \$5 a month as rates increase.

The City Council will host public work sessions and public hearings before it adopts a budget May 10. The next public work session will be at 5:30 p.m. Wednesday in the second-floor conference room at City Hall, 9027 Center St.