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Miami approved to hire 100 more officers

Meanwhile, dozens of officers and their families called for the restoration of salary and benefits

By Charles Rabin
The Miami Herald

MIAMI, Fla. — City leaders gave initial approval Thursday night to one of the least controversial budgets in Miami in the past few years, but still struggled late into the night with an emotional crowd that demanded the hiring of 100 new police officers, and with cops requesting the restoration of benefits lost to prior budget cuts.

The \$524 million operating budget proposed by Miami Mayor Tomas Regalado for 2014 is the first since he took office in 2009 that doesn't cut services, freeze or slash salaries, or require the renegotiation of union contracts. It includes not-yet-received grant money to hire 25 new police officers, bumps the city reserves up to \$57 million and includes \$550,000 from the general fund to maintain social services that lost federal funding.

For the first time in many years, because of increases in taxable property values, commissioners wrestled with how to spend the money, instead of what to cut.

"This proposed budget is not an exciting budget, but it's a responsible budget. We're coming out of difficult times and rebounding," Regalado said.

The budget passed on a 3-2 vote, with Commissioners Frank Carollo, Michelle Spence-Jones and Wifredo "Willy" Gort in favor, and Commission Chairman Marc Sarnoff and Commissioner Francis Suarez voting against.

Before ending the meeting moments before 11 p.m., the commission asked the city manager to report back in two weeks at the final budget hearing whether there's a way to move \$9 million around in the budget to pay for additional officers, increases in police salaries or both.

A second, final vote is scheduled for Sept. 26.

The budget hearing attracted a large group of Coconut Grove homeowners who filled much of the historic Dinner Key chamber and sided with Commission Chair Marc Sarnoff's 18-month fight for more police to stave what they believe is escalating crime. They asked — and often demanded — that \$10 million in the proposed budget be redirected to the police department for the hires.

On the other side of the chamber, dozens of police officers and their families called for the restoration of salary and benefits — lost the past five years to budget cuts — before any new officers are hired. Among the benefits lost: Tuition reimbursement and extra pay for hazardous duty such as serving on the SWAT team.

Officers with years of experience in Miami, earning some of the lowest salaries in South Florida after years of cuts, were decked out in bright yellow T-shirts that read, "You Can't Hire 100 New MPD Cops If You Can't Take Care Of The Ones Already Here." Many said they were struggling with mortgages and were prepared to leave Miami for another force with higher pay.

"I'm tired of working off-duty to support my family. I want a better life for my family. If somebody offers me more money I'm going to go," said Miami police supervisor Nestor Garcia.

Pay for certified officers begins at \$48,765, considerably less than in Miami Beach and Miami Gardens, and less than any department in Broward County, said Miami Police Chief Manuel Orosa.

Miami residents at the meeting said they want the cops to stay — and they want more of them.

Coconut Grove's Fernand Amandi, a prominent pollster who has rallied neighbors to fight for more cops, cradled his young son in his arms while demanding the city hire 100 more officers.

"When people are breaking into my house and the homes of my neighbors, it's no longer something that can be tolerated," Amandi said.

Richard Steinberg, an attorney who lives in the Grove and also asked for more cops, put it bluntly: "I'd like to die here -- but not before my time."

Police and other city employees did make some headway Thursday.

With the city's finances finally stable after years of shortfalls, commissioners agreed to a one-time 3 percent bonus for all full and part-time employees. Cost to the city: \$6.8 million, from a \$15 million surplus in this year's budget. The move requires ratification by the city's union members and does not affect the city's 2014 budget, which begins Oct 1.

"This is a promise made, and a promise kept," said Commissioner Michelle Spence-Jones. "They have our backs every single day, and now we have to have their backs."

The vote passed 4-1 with Sarnoff voting against. The commission chairman said he preferred that the money go toward restoring police benefits. Commissioners Suarez, Carollo, Spence-Jones and Wifredo "Willy" Gort voted in favor.

"We have a crime wave in the city of Miami," Sarnoff said.

Crime numbers supplied by Orosa don't seem to back Sarnoff's claim of rising crime. Overall, according to the chief, crime is down 1 percent in Coconut Grove's five zones. That didn't mean much to the crowd that has seen crime rise in certain categories within zones. Larceny is up in some places, and burglaries are up in the South Grove, where Amandi lives.

Commissioners gave preliminary approval to the budget shortly after 10:30 p.m. The spending plan calls for a property tax rate of \$8.43 for every \$1,000 of taxable property — a small drop from this year's \$8.47. It would translate to a savings of \$8 for the owner of a \$200,000 home with no homestead exemption.

The plan also calls for city offices and department budgets to remain essentially flat.

The proposed budget plan would add millions to the city's reserves, to bring it up to \$57 million. It increases the police department's budget by \$9 million, to \$167.3 million, and keeps the fire department's budget relatively intact at \$99.6 million.

The 25 new officers would bring the police department to the 1,144 level the city believes puts it on sound footing. Sarnoff has argued that the ratio of officers to population significantly trails other major cities like Philadelphia and Atlanta.

City Budget Director Daniel Alfonso, the acting city manager who crafted the spending plan, noted the proposed budget was better than years past, though still flawed. There aren't enough reserves, and no money for raises, building repairs, new computers or to fix potholes, he said.

"There's just not enough in the pie to allocate all the reserves we'd like to have," Alfonso said.

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