

# Norfolk Insider

City of Norfolk, NE

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## “Proposed City Budget Preparing for City Growth”

A slight increase in the 2014-2015 City of Norfolk property tax rate would pay for additional police officers, park division staff and offset inflationary costs of providing city services.

“In the next few years with the addition of Tejas Tubular and other industry we’re going to see Norfolk grow. We need to keep up with that growth in providing city services so we’re not lagging behind,” said Norfolk Mayor Sue Fuchtman.



Weidner explained that two new police officers are needed to keep up with the requirements for more thorough reporting of police calls, better coverage of the City and the increased need for police presence at City events.

The increased property tax funds would also be used to help pay for park employees who had previously been paid through Keno dollars.

Randy Gates, City of Norfolk Finance Officer, explained that the Keno funds would still be used for recreation.

“Those Keno funds would be set aside for park and recreation capital. Keno can be used for a broader array of expenditures than tax dollars and this would give the Council the flexibility to defer future capital outlay, and use Keno for economic development projects if the right opportunity comes along,” Gates said.

Most of the LB840 economic development funds are currently earmarked to bring a natural gas pipeline to Norfolk.

The property tax levy rate for the City for fiscal year 2013/2014 was .22 cents per \$100 valuation. It will now be .24 cents per \$100 valuation. As in the past Norfolk has one of the lowest property tax rates in the state – this year it will have the fourth lowest property tax rate out of 30 Class 1 cities in Nebraska.

“This is a small tax increase in anticipation of great growth in our city. It’s an exciting time and we want to make sure we keep providing quality city services for our citizens in the long term,” Weidner said.

He noted that the majority of the City of Norfolk’s revenue is from a 1.5% sales tax and from lease payments paid by the Nebraska Public Power District. That revenue is not expected to grow significantly.

“An increase in assessed valuation also impacts the overall property tax amount collected by the City which increases from \$2,588,583 to \$2,930,617,” Weidner said.

That increase will fund other items in the budget including: a 2% cost of living increase for City employees; a communications director that was formerly on contract; and an assistant engineer.

All it takes is one fender bender and a disturbance in Norfolk and more than half of the police patrol on duty can be tied up for an hour or more. Norfolk Chief of Police Bill Mizner has been concerned how stretched the police force will be as the city grows. The addition of two new police officers is in this year’s proposed City of Norfolk budget.

“We have four shifts made up of five patrol officers, a corporal and a sergeant. When an officer has an injury or illness, the shift works short. If we happen to have more than two officers gone for any reason in one shift and fall below the minimum staffing level, then we have to bring in an off-duty replacement from another shift,” Mizner said.

There were 67 instances last year when an off-duty officer had to fill in for a fellow officer in order to maintain minimum staffing of five on a shift.

“It really starts to wear on our officers,” Mizner said.

Mizner said that over the last two years there have been five officers who have been out from one to nine months because of injuries or severe illness. It isn't a matter of hiring a quick replacement if an officer quits or retires either.

“When we replace an officer, from beginning to end, it's a one year process. We advertise for the position, interview candidates and test them. They then go through a six week city training program, four months at a law enforcement academy and then another three months of field training before they can be an active member of the police force,” Mizner said. “An additional two officers would greatly reduce the need to call in an off-duty officer to maintain minimum staffing.”

Officers who are on duty for their 12 hour shift are also finding that reports take a large portion of their time.

Until his promotion to Captain a year ago, Captain Don Miller was a patrol shift commander. Miller said that in-car videos and in-custody videos have added to the time that officers take to write out their reports.

“The officers play back the videos as they write their reports because they've found that their reports are more accurate when they can match them up to the video content rather than trying to remember all the details of each incident,” Miller said.

Besides handling calls for police service from citizens, police officers are more and more expected to be on hand for parades, runs, and other community events.

Officers are also assigned to do a monthly check on sex offenders residing in Norfolk to verify that they are in compliance with state laws and living at the address recorded at the police division. It all takes time and staffing.

Mizner said that not as much traffic enforcement can be done without adequate police coverage which can be a safety issue.

Mayor Sue Fuchtman said she agrees that it's time for Norfolk to add two police officers.

“Our community is growing and we need to keep up with that growth. The City works hard to provide citizens with quality public services and having a fully staffed police force is one of those important safety services,” Mayor Fuchtman said.