

City To Mull JMU Precinct

Council Also OKs 2016 Budget

By RYAN CORNELL

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HARRISONBURG — City Council has agreed to send the issue of whether to establish a James Madison University voting precinct back to the city's Electoral Board — with some directions in mind.

At its meeting Tuesday, council endorsed having the board examine the pros and cons and costs involved with creating a precinct for JMU students who live on campus, as well as asking board members to study universities with precincts on their campus.

City Council also approved a second reading of Harrisonburg's fiscal 2016 budget, which starts July 1, at the meeting.

In April, JMU junior Josh Humphries, chairman of the Student Government Association's Legislative Action Committee, asked the Electoral Board to consider a new voting precinct strictly for students living in university housing, with a polling location at the Convocation Center.

Another option proposed by board member Bill Ney is the creation of a precinct that would include JMU, housing near Purcell Park, the Edith J. Carrier Arboretum, as well as homes within the boundaries of Main Street and Port Republic Road. At the Electoral Board meeting Tuesday, Ney withdrew the proposal, which he made at its May 13 meeting. JMU students living on campus now vote at Spotswood Elementary School. Humphries and other proponents of the JMU precinct say it would help spur on higher turnout among those voters by making it more easily accessible. Only 163 JMU students voted in the Spotswood precinct during the 2014 general election, according to city Voter Registrar Deborah Logan.

The last time voting precincts were changed in Harrisonburg was after the 2008 presidential election, when two precincts were added to reduce long lines, bringing the total number to seven.

Councilman Ted Byrd said "a lot of time and research" was put into developing those precincts, and no issues have come up since they were added.

"The question I'm trying to ascertain is if there's a problem, or are we making a problem where one doesn't exist," he said.

Mayor Chris Jones said he doesn't see adding a precinct as being a problem.

"I'm looking at it as a way to pull more people into voting polls," he said.

Councilman Kai Degner said the city doesn't need another precinct, but a central location like the Convocation Center would make it easier to vote not only for JMU students, but also for others living nearby.

In other business, council approved a spending plan for the upcoming fiscal year. The budget, which includes a 4 ½ cent real estate tax hike agreed upon at a work session last week, was approved by a 3- to- 2 vote.

Councilman Abe Shearer and Byrd voted against the budget.

The \$ 220.9 million plan is \$ 6 million, or about 2.8 percent, more than this year's spending plan.

Real estate taxes will increase from 69 cents to 73 ½ cents per \$ 100 of assessed value. The new rate would result in the owner of a \$ 200,000 house paying \$ 90 more per year.

The 4 ½ cent hike is 1 ½ cents lower than the 6 cent increase originally proposed in the city's draft budget. The draft also proposed a \$ 3 increase in monthly solid waste management fees, which has been eliminated.

The budget includes a water rate increase of 10 cents per 1,000 gallons used.

Personal property taxes will remain unchanged at \$ 3.50 per \$ 100 of assessed value.

Shearer said the city is "on track yet again to end the fiscal year with a decent surplus," adding that council needs to find a way to balance the budget without higher taxes.

"I think we need to hold the line on taxes," he said, "because one year from now will include another sizable tax increase to cover school construction" of a proposed 750 capacity elementary school. Byrd said he also voted against the budget because of the tax hikes.

"These taxes are the most regressive we have, and they hurt the poor the hardest," he said.

Jones said Harrisonburg has some of the lowest taxes among cities in Virginia, and increases are necessary to maintain the city's growth and services.

"I think there's only one city growing faster than us, and that's Fredericksburg," he said. "And I don't think we're paying what they're paying."

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