

Chico Enterprise-Record (<http://www.chicoer.com>)

## Roads, parks maintenance remain under-funded concern for Chico

*By Ashiah Scharaga, Enterprise-Record*

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Chico >> Chico is hurting when it comes to roadway and tree maintenance needs, according to city staff.

Tuesday, the City Council heard from the public works and community development departments about their budgetary needs.

The final budget meeting will be June 6, when the council will have to make some tough calls about funding.

### Public works

City infrastructure is receiving maintenance, but not enough compared to the city's needs, according to Erik Gustafson, public works director of operations and maintenance.

About \$6.6 million is budgeted each year for maintenance. This includes roads, bridges, storm drains, sewers, trees and parks, city buildings, sidewalks, bike paths and traffic signals.

A minimal budget should be about \$16.2 million, Gustafson said. The price tag for improvements would be around \$26.2 million per year.

“Low funding and deferred maintenance continue to be our bad and the ugly,” Gustafson said. “The longer we put things off, the more costly they become.”

The city does have the internal expertise, knowledge and most of the equipment to tackle its road condition needs, Gustafson said. It's funding that is lacking.

Out of that \$6.6 million, roads get about \$1 million a year, but the city's pavement management plan indicates ideal maintenance would require \$7 million a year. To actually improve the roads, that amount needs to be \$10 million a year.

When it comes to parks, Gustafson said the division really needs three more staff members to operate effectively. He plans to hire a maintenance worker using funds that used to be earmarked for contractual services. This would give Chico one fully-fledged tree crew, he said.

The division could also be adding two more landscape facilities workers in a similar fashion, using what used to be contractual dollars.

Tree maintenance is a “monstrous work load” that continues to grow, Gustafson said, and it's difficult to manage.

Councilor Ann Schwab asked if he could prepare an ideal staffing level plan with suggestions about how to get there, similar to those submitted by the fire and police departments.

Public Works is making as many improvements it can with the existing resources it has to cut costs, Gustafson said. Accomplishments include a recently completed LED retrofit project, building assessments and facility software upgrade.

There are also a lot of improvement projects underway across the city.

Public Works Engineering Director Brendan Ottoboni highlighted those upcoming projects that have received some funding, a long list that includes the [Bikeway 99 project](#), Highway 32 improvements, River Road [sewer pipeline](#) replacement, buffered bike lane on Ivy Street and road maintenance throughout the city.

Since May 2015, the department has secured \$34 million in state and federal funding for projects across the city.

Councilor Randall Stone said Ottoboni is to be commended for his “aggressive efforts to generate grant funds.”

The engineering division could also be gaining one employee this year, but it will not cost the city any additional funds, as the city manager’s office would be losing an employee.

Downsides are the division is struggling to meet state mandates for storm water management and has a limited capacity to review and approve projects.

### **Community development**

In community development, which is made up of the planning and building divisions, director Mark Wolfe is not requesting any new positions, though staffing is lean, using consultants and contractors when needed.

“Goods” he highlighted included more development activity occurring from a stronger economy, healthy main funds with revenue exceeding projections, increased efficiencies because of technology and updates, and improved customer service.

The not-so-goods are that staffing levels are “extremely low.”

“We see that manifested in lost opportunities,” he said. “That’s a concern I’ve had for years.”

The quantity of work produced is good, but the quality has suffered, he said.

The city’s permit tracking system is also 20 years old. Wolfe said it doesn’t meet city needs and is also causing security concerns.

### **Vandalism**

Fees were waived citywide for window and door replacements needed because of vandalism. The vote was 6-1, with Schwab against.

There is a caveat, however: Property owners will have to take on the liability for the replacement, otherwise the business will have to go through the city permit and inspection process and pay the fee.

Councilor Andrew Coolidge originally brought the topic to the council after hearing from disgruntled business owners.

“We have a firm policy of not charging people who are victims of crime, and I want to maintain that in the city,” he said.

Schwab expressed concern that businesses could shirk building code requirements or improperly install or conduct repairs.

“We’re not protecting the public unless we require an inspection or proof of insurance that would specifically assume that liability,” she said.

Schwab was in favor of investing \$15,000 to upgrade the city online permitting system, which would also reduce the permit fee for business owners. The Chico Chamber of Commerce offered business owners access to some funds, which she said could be utilized by them if needed.

Sorensen, who brought the approved idea forward, said he thinks most people involved “are going to do the right thing.”

Councilor Karl Ory clarified that the city can still do spot-check inspections, so business owners will have that in the back of their minds when they make replacements.

City Attorney Vince Ewing recommended the council maintain the permit system to ensure building code standards are followed throughout the city.

#### **Other topics**

- The council reversed its decision, and will not allow a Starbucks parklet project downtown at this time. Mayor Sean Morgan said it’s “maybe not the best time” because of what is happening with homelessness in the city and downtown. The vote was 5-1, with Ory against and Schwab recused.

*Contact reporter Ashiah Scharaga at 896-7768.*

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