

# The Register-Guard

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## Proposed Eugene budget backs CAHOOTS, early literacy, wildfire danger reduction

By Christian Hill

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The proposed city of Eugene budget for the coming fiscal year launches a few small initiatives and doesn't contain any cuts or reductions to city services and programs.

The draft spending plan proposed by City Manager Jon Ruiz includes \$281,000 to increase operating hours for CAHOOTS, the city-funded mobile crisis intervention service, and \$100,000 each to help young children learn to read and to reduce wildfire risk on the wooded outskirts of Eugene. The city funding would expire after one year.

The total proposed budget is \$677.9 million, a 9.5% increase over the current fiscal year. The spending plan pays for municipal government's day-to-day operations as well as construction and repair projects and repayment of voter-approved debt. A large portion of the budget increase stems from increased construction due to voter approval of the \$39 million parks and recreation bond in May 2018 and an airport taxiway rehabilitation.

The city's operating budget is \$354.3 million, a 2.9% increase over the current year, largely due to higher wage, benefit and pension costs.

"In this year's proposed budget, you will see investments that respond to the needs of the community and fulfill the promises that have been made," Ruiz wrote in his budget message. "The (proposed budget) also maintains a responsible savings account while keeping increases in operating expenses to a minimum."

Ruiz will present his proposed spending plan to the budget committee — made up of the eight city councilors and equal number of citizen representatives — at 5:30 p.m. April 24 at the Eugene Public Library, 100 W.

10th Ave. The committee can recommend changes to the draft budget. The committee will meet four times before recommending a budget for adoption by the full council. The adopted budget takes effect July 1.

The proposed budget is available online at <https://www.eugene-or.gov/106/Budget>.

The budget would increase the operating hours of CAHOOTS, run by White Bird Clinic, by 11 hours a day, meaning two vans would be answering calls for longer periods during the day. The service responds to calls for assistance, including for people in crisis who are living on the streets. The extra funding is needed for higher demand; calls for service that CAHOOTS responded to increased 58% from 2014 to 2017, the city said.

The one-time early literacy funding would go to the Library, Recreation and Cultural Services Department. The specifics still need to be worked out but the money likely would be used to partner with school districts and other community organizations to help teach children to read, city spokeswoman Laura Hammond said. The budget noted more than half of schoolchildren in Lane county don't read at their grade level.

The wildfire money would allow crews to clear dead and dying vegetation on the city's fringes to prevent wildfire from spreading in the urban area. The city is seeking federal funding to reduce the fire danger beyond next year.

Other additions include \$500,000 to start upgrading the city's nearly 20-year old construction permitting system, \$215,000 for the ongoing work to provide more affordable housing in Eugene, and \$150,000 to improve security at the municipal court.

Bond-funded parks and recreation projects that will get underway in the coming fiscal year are renovations of the Campbell Community Center, Echo Hollow Pool, Tugman Park playground, the completion of the Delta Ponds loop trail and, possibly, the development of the Striker Park sports fields.

The proposed budget would add 16 full-time-equivalent employees to the municipal government's workforce for a total of 1,529 FTEs. The most expensive hire would be a fourth assistant city attorney costing \$170,000 a year. The city has an in-house city attorney, deputy city attorney and three assistant city attorneys, and the hire would reduce the amount of money the city spends on outside counsel, officials said.

The city projects it will receive \$106.1 million in property taxes, a 2.4% increase over the current budget year.

It's projected to pay \$32 million in health benefits, an increase of \$2.1 million, or 7%, over the current year.

The city projects it will pay \$38.3 million toward the public employee pension system, an increase of \$4.3 million, or 12.8% over the current year. The city received new employee contribution rates for the coming fiscal year. The rates, set by a state board, are revised every two years.

The proposed budget includes \$1.5 million in cost savings through internal changes without impacting city services and programs. The city forecasts its operating budget will remain in the black through 2021.

The city's chief savings account remains robust, aided by huge settlement payment made by Comcast in 2016.

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