

Hiawassee

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the red, and budget shortfalls in these departments will be covered using reserve funds.

The Sewer Department is a costly venture, Ordiales explained, with repairs, maintenance and supply costs always outstripping revenue collected from customers.

In terms of the Police Department, it is a service that is not meant to generate revenue for the services it provides, meaning it doesn't take in enough money in fines and fees to make up for the cost of protecting city residents and properties.

Another budget takeaway is the anticipated loss of about \$35,000 in Local Option Sales Tax revenues this year, which is a hit Ordiales believes the city will take due to COVID-19 and loss of tourism dollars.

Some \$92,000 remains in the city's SPLOST reserve fund, which will be spent this year to construct a crosswalk at Chatuge Regional Hospital on Main Street and to provide modifications at Lloyd's Landing to include improvements to parking and the entrance/exit on US 76 East.

"If (the current SPLOST referendum) passes at the (June 9) election, then we'll start seeing money again probably end of 2020 or beginning of 2021," Ordiales said. "So, that's basically a recap of the finances for the city. We're in good shape. We're not struggling – we're doing fine."

No one from the public posed any questions before or during the hearing, either via Facebook, email or phone call, and the adoption of the proposed budget was expected to occur in the June 2 regular city meeting that took place after press time.

People can view the hearing in its entirety on the "City Of Hiawassee" Facebook page, and they can find a copy of the proposed budget on the city website at hiawasseega.gov.

Following a short break at the end of the budget public hearing, the council reconvened for its monthly work session, which was also streamed over Facebook Live.

In new business, Ordiales touched on a local grassroots effort asking registered voters to sign a petition in support of an alcohol sales referendum to allow packaged liquor sales inside city limits.

The petition is an independent initiative that is being organized by a small group of residents who are not affiliated with City Hall.

All told, the petition requires signatures from 35 percent of registered city voters, or around 300, and petition organizers are aiming to complete the petition in time to make the Nov. 3 General Election ballot, which will require the petition to be certified by the local Board of Elections.

"My concern was, if it does pass, that we have whatever we determine is good," Ordiales said. "Like, one liquor store I think is more than enough, right? That's good – we don't need to be a liquor store haven."

Councilwoman Amy Barrett spoke on

some behind-the-scenes deliberations regarding how a liquor ordinance would be implemented by the city, including how the city would award licenses, how much money it would cost to apply for a license, and recourse for violations.

"Currently, North Carolina is receiving revenue that could be coming to the city of Hiawassee," petition organizers said in a recent advertisement. "This revenue helps support tourism, which lowers taxes for all residents."

"Because of the restrictions from COVID-19 pandemic, door-to-door solicitation will not occur. You are encouraged to join other city residents to sign the Alcohol Referendum Petition at the Hamilton Gardens (top level at Fairgrounds) parking lot on ... June 6, 2020, from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Social distancing and CDC guidelines will be adhered to."

Questions about the petition should be directed to referendum.hiawassee@gmail.com.

In her Mayor's Report, Ordiales said that the city would be reopening June 1 with altered procedures, including a simple questionnaire regarding potential COVID-19 contacts, temperature checks at the front door, a hand sanitizer station to be used by people entering the building, and a requirement that customers wear masks.

Masks will be supplied as needed, and people with medical issues preventing them from wearing masks will be exempt from the requirement.

"There's really no real reason to come into City Hall to pay a bill," Ordiales said. "We have (a drop box) right by the door, and that's a walkup. (And we have another one) on the eastside of the building, so you can drive by and just drop your bill there."

"But we'll be there, and we've been pretty good with seeing people as they needed with appointments – building permits, stuff like that."

She went on to say that the reason they're opening City Hall at this time is to accommodate Municipal Court.

"The first court date is June 8 and the second one is June 19," Ordiales said. "We've got a whole plethora of hurdles for you to get into the courtroom."

"So, you'll come in first, get checked, same story – thermometer, wash your hands, wear the mask, and then you'll go back to your car until it's your time to come in. And then, we'll have somebody in front of the judge, one person waiting in the courtroom, and one person waiting outside. We'll rotate them in and out."

The mayor announced that the sewer plant expansion was finally complete and that she and council members would be meeting soon to tour the facility.

Included in the expansion are equipment upgrades, an overhaul of the Beach Lift Station, a new force main installation under the bridge leading into the city and expanded wastewater treatment capacity.

In total, the expansion

cost about \$1.4 million, which was paid for using \$800,000 in low-interest loans through the Georgia Environmental Finance Authority and \$600,000 in grant monies from the Appalachian Regional Commission.

The city has also installed a new screw press at the sewer plant, replacing a 40-plus-year-old belt press. This was funded via a separate GEFA loan of \$475,000, though the mayor believes final project costs may end up coming in \$30,000 under budget.

Ordiales spoke on a couple of major water leaks the city discovered, one on Bugschuff Spur and another on Sneaking Creek Drive. The Sneaking Creek leak was likely generating "850,000 gallons a month for four months," Ordiales said in the meeting. Both leaks have been fixed.

Enchanted Music on the Square will be returning June 20 on the Hiawassee Town Square at 7 p.m. Ordiales shared that the event's co-organizer and musician Ron Schott sadly passed away May 4, and she also spoke briefly on the recent loss of Towns County native J.C. Berrong.

"We're going to miss both of these guys," Ordiales said. "They were very good to our community, and we're hoping that they rest in peace. Please keep their families in your prayers and in your thoughts."

Many people will have noticed all the digging on the square, which became necessary recently when the city realized that the underground wiring powering outlets and lights were buried too close to the surface – about 2 inches below – causing many of them to be cut over the years.

As such, the city is replacing all the old lines with new conduit and electric lines throughout the square, which will allow the city to incorporate a new speaker system as well, which will help with future events on the square.

Once again, Ordiales urged people to complete their 2020 census, pointing out that Hiawassee remains behind the region and the state in completion rates. She advised residents that they were more than welcome to call City Hall with census questions, and she or someone else would help.

"Folks don't realize, but that census, that's federal dollars," Councilman Jay Chastain Jr. said. "In the event of a disaster or something, we get more money if we get more of the census done, so I don't understand why (people wouldn't want to fill it out)."

In other new business, Ordiales reviewed an update to the city's state-mandated Georgia Mountains Regional Commission Comprehensive Plan. The update is to add broadband readiness as a part of the plan, and the council was expected to vote on the item June 2.

"The legislature put out some funding for cities that are 'Broadband Ready,'" Ordiales said. "We have all the ordinances in place, we have all the maps in place, we have everything in place except for this, because you have to build that into the Comprehensive Plan."

Ultimately, the

Comprehensive Plan is meant to draw a community together around how it sees itself in the future, and it plays an important role in acquiring state grant monies to help fund projects around the community while minimizing the impact to local taxpayers.

Police Chief Paul Smith reported that traffic is up lately, but that for the most part, things have remained quiet.

Economic Development Director Denise McKay said the Hiawassee Downtown Development Authority Board would be requesting the city's approval to appoint Rob Sollie, co-owner of Trailful Outdoor Co., as a board member in place of another member who resigned recently.

The city's new Municipal Court Clerk Jennifer Garner has been doing a great job collecting property taxes, Ordiales said, having received some \$6,000 in tax collections earlier the day of the meeting. Garner was able to collect \$30,000 in property taxes through the end of the week.

"She's also keeping up with all of the grease traps and all of the building permits, and she's just doing a phenomenal job. So, we're really very lucky to have her on board," Ordiales said.

Theaters

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recent executive orders.

VIP Fieldstone 6 is working to protect customers and keep its larger auditoriums sanitized as employees enforce social distancing during viewings.

"Every 10 people, or if there is a large group or family of six that comes in, we will wipe down the door handles immediately after," Manager Noah Calhoun said.

"After every transaction up at the front, if there is somebody with their hands on the counter, that counter gets wiped off."

"Of course, we are wearing masks and gloves, but we don't require that of our customers."

VIP Cinemas purchased Fieldstone in February, so the theater has undergone a number of changes under the new ownership.

"We bought the theater on Feb. 6, and on Feb. 8, there was that snow that closed everything a few days," Owner Mark McSparin said. "We were opened here for four weekends before we had to close due to COVID-19."

"When we bought it, we dropped our ticket prices, our concession prices – we enlarged our concession selection. Once things go back to normal, we will have all that stuff again. It is better to be open than to not be."

"We are not cash

flowing, we are losing money being open, but I would rather be open. Things go bad when you are closed, and people get out of sync with things, so we want to be open and offer people movies at a discount."

"Once things get back running and movies start coming out again, I think this will be better than ever, because people are wanting to see movies."

VIP Fieldstone's current selection is based on movies that premiered earlier in the year. For more information, visit Fieldstone6.com.

In Union County, the Blairsville Cinema is doing its part, too, to keep people entertained while also following the appropriate guidance from the state.

"They really are putting more restrictions on us than they are other businesses," Blairsville Cinema Owner Donald Lingerfelt said. "I know why, it is because you are sitting next to somebody for a longer period of time."

"Because of that, they gave us spacing requirements, and they have taken 75 percent of our seating. We are down to just about 25 seats for every showing, (though) they have eased the restrictions a little bit where a family could sit together."

"It is still every other row, though, and that really cuts down on how much

money we can make. The cost to show a movie and pay the bills hasn't changed, no matter how many people we are seating."

Blairsville Cinema is working to make the theater experience as safe as possible for moviegoers, implementing all the necessary requirements to safeguard against virus transmission.

"When people come into the theater, we have markings on the floor that are meant to keep people distant," Co-Owner Linda Lingerfelt said. "We also have signs telling people to use social distancing."

"All of our employees are wearing masks and using sanitizer. We make sure that nobody is sick when they come in. The rows are set up to where you have nobody directly behind you and nobody directly in front of you."

"We also have a map that we use to see where all the people are sitting, and those are the areas we sanitize after every movie."

With the delay in new movie releases, producers are offering special packages on classic movies every month that theaters can select from until new releases return, so Blairsville Cinema is polling people on Facebook to find out what people want to see next.

For more information, visit BlairsvilleCinema.com.