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## PROPERTY TAXES

# Rising values keep North Port property tax rate flat

### Slight increase in road, fire fees proposed

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NORTH PORT — Property owners will see an increase in city taxes in the coming fiscal year, even though North Port's proposed budget calls for no increase in the property tax rate for a second year.

That's because property values are continuing to rise.

According to the city's \$127 million preliminary budget for the 2017 fiscal year, the estimated taxable value of property in North Port was \$3.25 billion as of Jan. 1, a 12.7 percent increase over 2015.

About one-third of the increase is attributable to new construction, said city Finance Director Pete Lear.

The city expects to collect an additional \$1.3 million in property tax revenue during the next fiscal year if the millage rate remains at \$3.5974 per \$1,000 of taxable property value. That means the owner of a home valued at \$150,000 would pay about \$540 in city property taxes.

Homeowners also will see slight increases in assessments for two of the city's three districts.

Currently, an average homeowner in North Port pays annual assessments of \$119 to the Road and Drainage District, \$182 to the Fire Rescue District and \$249 to the Solid Waste District.

The average homeowner is considered as someone who owns a home on a quarter-acre lot, Lear said.

If the preliminary budget is approved as-is, there will be no increase in the Solid Waste District's actual assessment rate for the ninth year in a row.

But the actual assessment rate of the Road and Drainage District would increase 4.5 percent, a \$5.35 increase in annual cost to the average homeowner, Lear said.

The Fire Rescue District actual assessment rate is also set to increase 1 percent, which translates to a \$1.85 increase in annual cost to the average home owner, Lear said.

That money will be used to hire more Fire Department employees and improve drainage in canals and ditches.

Highlights of the preliminary budget include adding 13 city government jobs and giving non-unionized city employees 3 percent raises for a third year in a row.

Unionized workers, whose pay increases are dictated by contracts, also are expected to see 3 percent raises, Lear said.

Altogether, the raises are expected to cost North Port about \$985,000.

### **Reserve budget**

One of the most notable facets of the preliminary budget is that for the second year in a row, North Port does not plan to spend any of its reserve funds on day-to-day, recurring expenditures, Lear said.

The city plans to spend \$63,000 of reserves on one-time expenditures next year, less than the \$350,000 in reserves budgeted for one-time costs last year.

The city saw its reserves dip during the Great Recession and the years that followed.

As property values plummeted, so did the city's savings account, from about \$26.3 million in 2008 to approximately \$10.6 million in 2011.

Since then, the city's reserves have fluctuated from near \$10 million to \$11 million. Lear said that's a healthy amount of reserves.

"We were lucky we had the \$26 million when we did. That was not by design," he said. "Property values had skyrocketed, and the city was making more money than it could spend."

### **General fund**

City commissioners will hold a workshop in Room 244 of City Hall at 9 a.m. Thursday to review the preliminary general fund budget, which is roughly \$33.8 million.

About one-third of the general fund comes from property tax revenue. It contains potential items and projects for which North Port's departments are seeking funding.

The funding requests also tell a story about North Port's potential future.

The City Manager's Office is asking to invest more money in the city's social media presence and remove funding from a dormant message board it previously used to gather feedback from residents.

Another \$6,200 is requested to archive the city's social media posts and the public's reactions, which are all considered public records. If the city doesn't spend that money, it would have to cut back on its social media usage, which the city manager's department has labeled an "overwhelming success."

For example, North Port created a Police Department Facebook page in 2015. Since then, posts about the department's Operation Santa Surprise gift giveaway and officers attending an 8-year-old's birthday party have gone viral.

Conversely, the city could save \$6,000 if it shuts down [YourNorthPort.com](http://YourNorthPort.com).

Launched in 2013, city staff used the website to create discussion forums to solicit ideas and feedback from residents about city programs and projects, but interest in YourNorthPort.com has waned.

The Police Department is also asking for about \$11,000 for officer training in leadership, communication and de-escalation techniques, and \$20,000 to send its commanders to the 10-week Southern Police Institute's Command Officers Development Course.

Another \$15,000 is requested to contract an outside expert to review the department's use-of-force policy and reports.

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