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# Tax rate to fall more than \$2

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CLAREMONT - At Wednesday night's city council meeting, City Manager Guy Santagate announced the 2009 tax rate will decrease \$2.14 from last year.

"We've yet to receive approval from the Department of Revenue Administration," Santagate pointed out. "But we're confident we're in the right ballpark with these figures. The overall tax rate for Claremont in

2008 was \$32.59 [per thousand dollars assessed value], and this year's rate is projected to be \$30.45, a difference of \$2.14."

That is a reduction of almost \$260 in annual taxes on a \$120,000 home.

The city's portion of the new rate is \$11.86, versus \$12.93 a year ago, a difference of \$1.07 (8 percent). The county portion dropped slightly, from \$2.99 in '08 to \$2.93 this year. The school

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portion of the tax rate was \$14.09 in '08, versus \$13.22 this year, and the state school portion of the tax rate is down from \$2.58 to \$2.44.

"A lot of people ask me, 'Guy, how did you do it,'" Santagate said. "I tell them we did it by having 17 less full time employees on the payroll now than we did in 2001. We also have four fewer part time employees than we did in 2001. During good times, we reduced our staff and it's paid off."

Santagate said the key was continuing to make improvements to the infrastructure despite the difficult economic conditions.

"We've very pleased," he said. "Because although we've level-funded the amount to be raised by taxes in the budget the last three years, we haven't had to sacrifice investments in our infrastructure. I believe it's a major mistake to level fund or institute a [spending] cap, and not make investments in your infrastructure, and that's what we've been able to do."

It just goes to show, said Santagate, that sometimes you really can do more with less.

"I'm very proud of our finan-

cial record," he said. "We're not recession proof, but we're doing better than most. All the departments have stepped up to the plate and done a great job, even though many of them are understaffed. But they've never used that as an excuse... we've taken our hard medicine."

But the drop in the overall rate may not automatically mean lower tax bills for all residents, a point Councilor Robert "Bob" Picard (at-large) made.

"Just because the rate has gone down, doesn't mean people will necessarily see a lower tax bill, correct?"

Santagate answered in the affirmative.

"That's true," he said. "If someone was under-assessed or made improvements to their home and their assessment goes up, they'll get hit with the bill, even though the overall rate went down. But the revaluation alone didn't result in one additional penny, in terms of revenue for the city, than before."

Assessments on single-family homes went up an average of 8 percent in the most recent revaluation.

The other item from Wednesday night's meeting which generated a lot of discussion was the talk of what to do about the proposed community center for Claremont.

"We're going to be at the point soon where we have to make a decision," said Santagate. "We either decide to move forward with this project, or we give the \$3 million back [to Claremont Savings Bank]."

The bank donated the money with the condition the board raise the rest for a new center, estimated to cost \$9 million.

Former member of the New Community Center for Claremont board and Ward III Councilor Jeff Goff expressed concern at the city manager's proposal, but understood where it came from.

"It scares me a little to hear that kind of talk," he said. "But I guess that's the reality of the situation. Can we rebuild the [athletic and recreational] infrastructure we have, and if so that's an unknown variable in terms of cost... or do we stay the course? Personally, I'd like to hear how the people feel about it."

Goff proposed a public hearing on the issue for next month's meeting, but no motion was made on that proposal.

At-large Councilor Kyle Messier said she too would like to hear from the public on the issue.

"We're talking about a project based on a survey that was done, what, 10 years ago now?"

she asked. "It's such a big project, I'd like to see where we're at and where the people want us to go from here."

City Finance Director Mary Walters gave a presentation to the council in which she broke down expenditures related to the new community center. The city gave the community center board \$1 million.

"We spent \$480,678.33 on the land and building development and design," she said. "\$237,123.56 has been spent on the South Street property acquisition, \$82,098.57 has been spent on the fundraising firm, \$4,033.55 has been spent for registration and administrative costs, and \$2,255.45 has been spent for advertising, printing, and postage."

At-large Councilor Keith Raymond rekindled a previous suggestion.

"I seem to remember talk about doing this project in phases," he said. "Doing it that way would seemingly help ease some of the burden. Another thing we want to keep in mind is that during a recession, prices for materials and supplies are a lot cheaper. For all we know, during a booming economy, the total cost could go from \$10 million to \$12 million."

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