

Irrigation district grapples over budget

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MOSES LAKE - A proposal to cut the Moses Lake Irrigation and Rehabilitation District's (MLIRD) budget by 25 percent drew about 15 people to the last board meeting.

Before the \$1.6 million budget was approved, board director Norm Benson said some proposed reductions included reducing Moses Lake's aquatic weed treatment from \$200,000 to \$162,000 and eliminating \$381,000 worth of sediment removal at Parker Horn. After about an hour of discussion between the board and public, the district's 2011 budget was unanimously approved without the reductions.

Board member Glen Rathbone was absent from the meeting. The rate of \$1 per \$1,000 assessed valuation for taxes was also kept the same. Employee wages did not increase and more than \$200,000 was cut from throughout budget, the district's manager, Curt Carpenter, said after the meeting. Before the vote, former board director Richard Teals asked the district what its mission and vision was. Benson said their mission involves the maintenance of the lake and dredging of the lake. Teals said a 20 to 25 percent cut was major and meeting the needs of the organization would be drastically cut. Pete Harris, of Moses Lake, asked if the district has a large amount of assessed dollars. Curt Carpenter, the district's general manager, said they were \$300,000 short last year in assessed funds. Harris said the chemical treatment that's going on is a multi-year project. The city is using the lake as a big attraction, county property values have dropped in the last year by 10 to 20 percent and state Labor and Industries taxes are increasing next year, he said. "You're killing yourself," Harris said.

Board member Rich Archer said his feeling was, that in the last three or four years, incoming money increased four times. He admitted there were slight improvements with the lake, demonstrated by milfoil protection and gate repair. The biggest thing that hadn't changed was the mud, he said. "We should have got started with this mud and we haven't moved any of it," Archer said. Benson said the lake had improved since he moved to the area in 1949. The crew has done "a lot of good" for the lake, he said.

Harris said if they district has excess money, he can see reducing the budget. "If you're \$300,000 shy from last year, less money is coming in this year and expenses are increasing, what's the objective of reducing the tax rate?" he asked.

Archer claimed he was having a hard time getting budget information and wanted to take it home to review because he works during the day. Julie Smith, the district's administrative assistant, said the budget revisions had been completed that day. Carpenter, of the district, later said he met with board member separately before the October board meeting to review the proposed budget. He asked Archer to keep the draft budget documents at the irrigation district office, Carpenter said. He claimed Archer later received the documents at the October board meeting, but chose to keep it in his binder. At this week's meeting, he told Archer to quit lying about not having the information.

Irrigation board candidate Ron Covey, of Moses Lake, commented about how the district didn't do budget adjustments at the end of the year. He thought it was foolish to think they were going to move forward if the tax rate was cut. "If you want to reverse it and kill the lake off, then that's the way to go," Covey said. "If you want to see this progress like you've seen it progress the last four years, you'll have to maintain the millage at the rate that it is."

Clay Crook, a lakefront homeowner, showed new photos of mud near his home. "I've got mud like you can't believe," Crook said. "This has been the worst I've seen it." Benson said he had seen photos of the property before and wanted to know why Crook was showing them again. Crook said it was because we're just talking about eliminating the dredge. Benson said they might have to and moved to keep the millage rate the same. Archer later seconded his motion to approve keeping the existing rate and to pass the budget.

Marianne Bondi, executive director of the Moses Lake Business Association, said the lake has to be more important than that. She recommended they take care of the lake. Archer claimed they were being held hostage over the sledge. Carpenter said if the millage rate was lowered, the projects would go away.

Another irrigation board candidate, Mick Hansen, of Moses Lake, said tax rate changes must go to a vote of the people. Benson said when the rate was changed in past years, the board went to their attorney and asked that very question. Hansen said last year, the district had about \$1.8 million budgeted and ended up with \$1.5 million budgeted. They spent \$200,000 for weed spraying and the rest was supposed to go into dredging, he said. The district is currently working through the permitting process to start dredging Moses Lake, which would remove 60 years of sediment from the lake's bottom. For the last three years, more than \$1 million was budgeted for dredging and \$750,000 went into the lake, he claimed. Hansen said he doesn't think the dredging will ever happen and there are other ways of solving the problem.

Bob Russell, of Moses Lake, said as a boater, he had never seen the lake better. He said one can jump in the lake and swim in August. Ken Kernan, of Moses Lake, also commented about the improved condition of the lake. His evidence was seen when his son didn't break out after being in the lake. Larry Godden, of Moses Lake, said they needed to set their differences aside and be for the lake and the community.