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Case limits may increase city costs

Public defender loads limited by court

Nina Culver

Spokane Valley staff spent time during Tuesday's City Council meeting outlining ideas for reducing the effect on the city's budget of court-mandated changes to public defender case loads.

The state Supreme Court has ordered new limits on the number of misdemeanor cases public defenders can handle annually. The changes, which limit attorneys to 400 unweighted cases or the equivalent of 300 weighted cases, take effect Oct. 1. Weighting a case means that it can be counted as less than a whole case if it is something simple, said deputy city attorney Erik Lamb.

The city contracts with Spokane County for public defenders. The county may need to hire seven attorneys to comply with the new limits. Spokane Valley accounts for 38 percent of the misdemeanor cases, which would put its share for the new attorneys at \$288,000 for salaries and benefits, said senior administrative analyst Morgan Koudelka. Overhead costs would add to the price tag.

The city pays about \$900,000 a year for public defender services, Koudelka said. "That is an area that has seen double digit increases in the last few years," he said.

There are options for reducing the cost. The county is still working on its weighting system, which should reduce the number of attorneys it needs, Koudelka said. Staff is also looking at implementing a diversion program for people charged with third-degree driving with a suspended license. Those charges account for half the city's misdemeanor cases, Koudelka said.

A diversion program would remove the cases from the public defender office. The city of Spokane has a similar program and is seeing increased revenue and a decrease in the number of court cases, Koudelka said.

The city is looking at other programs as well, including alternatives to incarceration and other types of diversion. "This is just one piece of the puzzle," Koudelka said. "We're looking at everything that can be done."

Mayor Tom Towe asked where the money would come from in the city's budget.

Koudelka said there are still too many uncertainties to answer that. "Our goal, as much as possible, is to eliminate this budget impact," he said.

In other business, Public Works Director Eric Guth reported on the results of a study on adding landscaping along Appleway Boulevard from Interstate 90 to University Road. The area already

has a good stormwater system because the road is new, Guth said. Very little of the \$3 million project would qualify for stormwater grants, he said.

The city could encourage property owners along the route to make their own improvements. Some companies, such as Dishman Dodge and Enterprise, already have, he said.

“I like the idea of working with the property owners and working with the county,” Towey said. “I’m kind of hesitant about the funding of just the landscaping part of it.”

Councilman Dean Grafos suggested breaking the project into three parts, with the first being from Dora to Park roads. “Just because it’s not grant eligible is no reason not to do it,” Grafos said. “I wouldn’t want to see us do it all now. But we should get it started.”