

Hokah's preliminary levy, which will be voted on officially in December, was essentially set by a unanimous vote at its Aug. 23 budget meeting, the second in a series of lengthy debates over the city's fiscal status.

That means, once it's voted near the end of the calendar year, the levy for residents will total \$295,583, with \$21,000 for the Hokah Public Library.

The decision didn't come easily for the council, which spent hours over the two-meeting process discussing the city's financial challenges. A good amount of time was spent correcting clerical errors by new city clerk Eric Leitzen, most notably, worksheet estimates and line item placement of employees' salaries.

Further discouraging news came from city administrator Rodney Blank, who said he'd had an update that day from the USDA informing him that Hokah is behind on submitted reports for its wastewater treatment plant.

The USDA also wanted the city's financial statement, as well as budget proceedings from this and last year, along with other key items of information.

"What I've tried to preach before," Blank said, "is that we signed, we agreed, that that fund is self-sufficient. Three different times over the last five years, I've come to the council and asked to increase the payments, the income on the individual accounts on both water and sewer. Last year was the first time that we made an increase, and then we took half of that. And, the statement then was that we were going to look at next year, and probably take the other half next year. That's now the time to talk about that, but the problem is now they've got the documents, or they have what they got from me, and the rest they'll get from Eric tomorrow."

With a shortfall this year of at least \$28,000, Blank said a rate increase won't be pretty, but it has to be scrutinized.

Hokah Police Chief Bob Schuldt's budget also came under scrutiny, most vocally by Councilor Don Bissen.

"I'm questioning whether we need the extra part-time employee working on the police department," Bissen said.

He said he'd like to see the part-time position cut. It would save \$5,000 that was added last year, he noted, and he thinks they spend too much money there.

Schuldt's answer was swift and clear.

"We increased it last year because we decreased it in the history when the city was looking at LGA cuts," Schuldt said, "local government aid. They were going to cut across the board throughout the cities. Hokah was worried that we were going to take huge financial hits."

Schuldt said his budget of \$10,000, eight or nine years ago, was cut to the bare minimum by him, an attempt to help the city with the expected LGA cuts. They never happened.

"During that time, when we cut that part-time, your crime rates were higher," he said. "You didn't have people out there making traffic stops, stopping locals, getting them excited, and whatnot, but you know what? Them red lights from them part-time people, that deters crime, that deters break-ins, that creates a police presence."

Schuldt said he addressed the board last year, explaining why the part-time position funds should be increased back to what they were prior to the cuts that never happened, and he said the ICR rates match his assertions.

"Hokah's a small community," he said. "Per capita, Hokah is the worst community in Houston County. Per capita, Hokah is probably one of the worst communities in the state, as far as crime statistic-wise. Do you need part-time police? You betcha."

The amount of call volume the department has, he said, is close to that of Houston and Spring Grove, but they have two full-time police officers. Hokah may not have the population numbers, he said, but it has low-income rentals and the call volume and numbers back the need. Some people don't like seeing part-time cops, he said, and some do.

"I think, if you cut your part-time," Schuldt said, "you're going to be cutting your services to your people, and you're going to be cutting your own throat."

Eventually, Bissen withdrew his desire to cut the part-time funds, but not before challenging when the part-time officers were out on duty and what they did.

"I've got log sheets for every one of them employees," Schuldt said.

The log sheets, Schuldt said, detail everything, and every place, the part-time officers work on, and at least one of his part-time officers puts in more time than he's paid for. The red lights work on both kids and bar patrons, he said.

"You know what," Schuldt said, "they behave a little bit better."

He invited anyone to come into his office to see the time card log sheets. The new camera, he also noted, records everything two minutes prior to its being formally engaged, so Schuldt is able to see everything his officers are doing. Parks are being checked, he said, and local businesses, including Bissen's, are being patrolled. Citizens and parents are also confirming the officers' activities.

"Hokah's a unique town that way," he said, "it really is. Come on up and I'll show you some of the ICRs, and some of the things going on in this town, and you might be amazed. It sure ain't the sleepy little town that I signed up for 10 years ago."

Councilor Rebecca Albrecht asked Schuldt what had changed since the increase last year, specifically activities for the police department. She wanted to know if getting the extra money got his department anything more.

There's more Friday and Saturday night coverage, Schuldt elaborated, as well as follow-ups on burglary interviews.

"You gain more patrol," he said. "You've got someone actually in the car versus nobody being there. If they're not there, they're not there."

He also said he's never been over budget, and as he keeps strict control over his records, he won't be.

"I think, you know, our department's got a pretty good track record," Schuldt said.

Despite a lengthy presentation by Hokah Public Library Director Shari Carlson, and a presence of the library's board members – one of whom, Albrecht, sits on the council – the council denied the library's request for an additional \$1,050, which would've gone for technological improvements, as well as other items. The last budget increase for the library was in 2013.

"I get asked all the time if we need a library in Hokah," said Councilor Matt Vetsch. "A lot."

"Is it by anybody who ever walks in there and sees how many kids are always in there, and stuff?" former Hokah librarian Barb Bissen countered.

Vetsch clarified it was libraries in general that were perhaps being questioned, and some in attendance agreed technology is changing. Bissen said many people are thinking of a library only as books.

"But, the library is so much more," she said.

Cindy Pfiffner, who was once on the council but was now speaking as a resident, said she was unconvinced.

"You haven't give me a good enough explanation to raise it \$1,000," Pfiffner said.

Prioritize the budget was her advice to the library.

Councilor Judy Lonkoski agreed.

"So you work within your budget that you have," she said.

Blank reminded Bissen that, last year, the library asked for an increase of \$1,000, but didn't get it. Did it falter, he wanted to know?

"No, but there's less books there," Bissen said.

Mayor Mike Walsh said everyone should be treated the same, but Albrecht pointed out that the police department got an extra \$5,000 last year. The library didn't get extra funds.

Walsh said when he arrived at the meeting, he intended to tell the police department, fire department, the library, and others to cut their budgets. Schuldt changed his mind, Walsh said, about taking away his part-time officer funds.

"I don't see anybody getting increases," Walsh said, "so I don't know why the library should get an increase. They're an unessential part of the city, where the services that the fire department and the police and (public works) give."

Albrecht wouldn't give her opinion, since she claimed the majority of the council was against the library's increase.

The council did, however, agree to a cost-of-living increase for its employees of 1.5 percent.

At one point, Pfiffner offered a word of caution.

"When I'm sitting and listening to all the different pieces," Pfiffner said, "and, you know, where you want to go, I can't see where you want to go. I don't see priorities; I don't see future. What is it going to look like five years from now?"

Her question remained unanswered.