

By ROBERT PIERCE • Daily Leader The Liberal community will be seeing much in the way of new projects in the next year and a half. City manager Mark Hall reviewed some of the projects with commissioners in a special meeting Tuesday evening, and he said the board got the best possible look at what the city could see in projects in the next two years.

Hall said the ideas presented are subject to sales tax revenues from the city's 1-cent sales tax, and they are merely projections.

"It is looking at all the good in all the projects that they can do," he said. "The next two years will be full of projects to better the community."

Some of the projects discussed include the upgrade to Western Avenue, a new community building at Mahuron Park and a new park near the south fire station.

Estimates were given as to when and how these and other projects could be funded, and Hall said none of the figures are concrete. He said the city is currently in a strong financial position.

"We even lowered our mill levy debt for 2010," he said. "The financial security of the city is due to the hard work of Chris Ford and Joe Sealey. The city is in a very, very – especially during these economic times – strong position."

Hall also contributed the city's financial standing to the 1-cent sales tax, and he said 2008 was a pinnacle year for Liberal.

"It was comparative to 2006," he said. "Each year since the renewal in 2001 has progressed, increased the revenue collection."

Hall said the city is looking at Community Development Block Grants from the state, but he said due to the current economic times of the state and the financial situation of both the state and the federal government, those are limited.

"I know we have in the police department one soon to be announced that we received," he said. "We have some others that we're working on that are with the CDBG. It's an application process, and we're at the mercy of what the state decides. We're always applying for funding, but this last year, those funds seem to be drying up."

Hall said the city began making efforts to cut its expenses several years ago. He said control of overtime has played a part, but prioritizing the city's bidding procedure has also been a significant factor.

"We are taking advantage of the companies that are looking for work," he said. "We do a bid process on our CDs. We ladder those. We use the state municipal pool. We are involved in making the taxpayer dollars work for them."

The city is likewise getting far better pricing for purchasing vehicles and equipment. Hall said a combination of all these factors contribute to keeping the city's expenses at a minimum.

"We have a merit system or pay system," he said. "We do bid out our benefits, which help control the cost. It allows us to have cost savings across the board. We look for more than one provider."

Hall said he believes the biggest contribution the city's financial state is that department heads treat taxpayers' money as if it were their own.

"With that, they buy on a need instead of a want," he said. "Our 2010 budget, after going through the process, actually was lower than the previous year. We also paid off the Trailmobile (debt). We also retired the 4/10 sales tax. With all those in our projected, we ended up with a very, very slightly lower mill levy. I'm very proud of everybody involved with the city staff."

Hall said the goal of city staff is to operate more efficiently and save taxpayer dollars without sacrificing service.

"We're in a very, very good position, and it's due to staff," he said. "We're still doing a lot of projects, and it's the way we approach it. We've got a lot more projects to do, and we are appreciative of the 1-cent sales tax to making Liberal the community of choice."

Hall said improving quality of life is the goal of the city.

"We have a responsibility to the community to make this the best it can be," he said. "We need to always try to improve the quality of life."