Bakersfield – October 31

BizFed Central Valley members got a thorough understanding of why the City of Bakersfield was compelled to put a 1 percent sales tax increase – Measure N - on the ballot this November.

The numbers aren't pretty.

- Bakersfield's population has increased 57 percent since 2000.
- Street miles have increased 82 percent since 2000.
- Park acreage has increased 97 percent since 2000.
- Bakersfield now has 33 percent fewer law enforcement personnel than the largest 20 California cities (excluding megacities such as LA). Bakersfield also has the overall fewest employees to population compared to 107 other cities.
- There are 50 sworn staff on per shift to cover 150 square miles and 387,000 residents.
- Fire Department calls for service have increased 52 percent since 2008.
- Homelessness has increased 46 percent from 2017 to 2018.

Bakersfield is one of the last large Central Valley cities to consider adding a local increment to the state sales tax of 7.25 percent.

But costs have continued to increase, including the city's share of CalPERS pension costs, while other revenue streams haven't kept pace, according to Assistant City Manager Chris Huot, who went over Measure N with BizFed CV members.

If passed, Measure N is expected to bring an additional $50 million of revenue annually to the city.

This is a general tax measure so only needs 50 percent plus 1 to win and isn't subject to the kinds of constraints a 2/3 tax measure is. Still, Huott said, the ballot language includes requirements to establish a 9-member citizen oversight committee, publish an annual report of what the money is spent on, and be subject to annual audits and distinct accounting so residents can track the Measure N money.

This ballot language was the result of more than 30 meetings with residents, which Huot and Councilman Bob Smith, who was also at the roundtable, said was extremely beneficial.

"I look forward to more of these meetings," Smith said noting a lot of good ideas have come to the city through such community meetings.

And, yes, some of the Measure N money will go to pay CalPERS costs, but Huot said it's estimated to be less than 15 percent of the $50 million a year. He also noted that Bakersfield has led the way in reducing its CalPERS costs, replacing city-paid medical benefits for retirees in 2006 with a plan that requires more retiree participation and reducing pension benefits for all new employees hired after 2010.

Huot also noted the city could save $800,000 a year if it paid its CalPERS obligation in one lump sum at the beginning of the year but hasn't been able to do so. Measure N may help build the city's reserves enough to allow that kind of lump payment.

The bulk of Measure N money will be spent similar to the city's general budgeting trend, which is more than 60 percent to public safety.

Measure N money would also pay for an 8-person economic development team at the city, help with parks and roads upkeep and fund strategic programs aimed at reducing homelessness.

Meanwhile, the city intends to expand on innovative programs to reduce the cost of government, such as using smartphone apps for residents to report potholes, broken city sprinklers, broken streetlights and graffiti.

The city also hopes to add a grant supervisor to aid in finding and leveraging grants, such as one used recently to replace streetlights with LED bulbs that will eventually save the city $750,000 a year.

Bakersfield Police Chief Lyle Martin also attended the roundtable and answered questions about greater efficiencies his department is employing such as new, much cheaper computer for patrol cars.

"We're working with Motorola on a less ruggedized computer," he said. The difference will be along the lines of $4,000 each to $400 each.

"We are looking every day for those kinds of savings," Chief Martin said.

Even if Measure N passes, he said, his department is committed to improving efficiencies.