Parks face reduction in services; City budget plan would trim about $4 million
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Theresa Quiroz of City Heights worries that her 12-year-old son's swim team will have no place to practice if San Diego makes proposed deep cuts in park and recreation spending to balance its budget.

"It's very unfair to the children," said Quiroz, who is the interim head of the City Heights Recreation Council.

Ball fields, a teen room and exercise classes at the City Heights Recreation Center also could be affected.

"They say they've kept all the police officers, which is great, but the minute they throw all those kids out on the street, they're going to need more" police, Quiroz said. "The recreation center is an incredible, incredible thing."

Fueling the concern of Quiroz and others is City Manager Michael Uberuaga's recommendation to reduce the Park and Recreation Department's share of the city general fund budget from about $100.2 million in the current fiscal year to $96 million in fiscal 2004, which begins July 1. The general fund covers the day-to-day operations of most city departments.

Uberuaga said all city departments, including police, have been hit as he must trim $30 million in city services to balance the books for next year because of lagging revenue from a variety of taxes. No sworn police officers would be laid off under Uberuaga's plan, but the job of 37 civilian workers would be eliminated.

But Park and Recreation Director Ellen Oppenheim said her department would take the biggest cuts.

"We're facing an extraordinarily difficult situation," Oppenheim said recently in reviewing the budget proposal before the Mission Bay Park Committee, a citizens-advisory group.

The City Council is scheduled to review the spending plan for the Park and Recreation Department tomorrow at a 2 p.m. public hearing on the 12th floor of the City Administration Building, 202 C St.

This is the first council meeting since FBI agents raided the offices of three council members last week in a corruption probe, and some wonder if the council will be too distracted to properly scrutinize the proposed park and recreation cuts.
"I hope the council can stay focused on public use of public land," said Mission Bay activist Scott Andrews, who is concerned that the city is allowing too much commercial development along the bay as a way to raise more money.

The cuts Uberuaga has proposed in park and recreation spending touch nearly every service the department offers, from tending graves at Mount Hope Cemetery to cleaning rest rooms at city beaches.

Some 19 full-time positions are being eliminated along with part-time slots for more than 200 seasonal workers, Oppenheim said.

The result is that:

[] Operating hours at community recreation centers will drop from the current 60 to 65 hours a week to 40 hours.

[] No maintenance work will be done on baseball infields, which means some fields could be taken out of use for safety reasons.

[] Beach and park rest rooms no longer will be cleaned in the afternoon and evenings.

[] Kelp removal at beaches will slip from once every six days to once every 11 days.

[] Pools will be closed from November through mid-March to all but those who rent them.

Irrigation of city parks will be reduced, and in the case of Mission Bay Park, eliminated in some areas that are less visible, Oppenheim said.

These are the kinds of cuts people will notice, she said.

Billie Little of Sera Mesa said she's already been told that the senior citizen exercise class she's attended for 12 years will be rescheduled. While that may not seem like much, Little said some people have been attending the class for more than 30 years, and a change in schedule would make it impossible for some to continue.

"It's just one of those things that we've done for so many years, and we really, really enjoy it," Little said. "It's really going to hurt us."

Members of the Mission Bay Park Committee were in an uproar when Oppenheim explained the cuts to them. Services in Mission Bay Park would be cut by about $25,000, including rest room cleaning, litter collection and kelp removal.

"It's shameful," Park Committee chairman Kevin Faulconer said at the committee meeting. "We have millions and millions of dollars flowing out of Mission Bay Park going elsewhere."
City officials estimate the city earns $20 million annually from land it leases to SeaWorld, hotels and other attractions in the park.

Faulconer said the city is $200 million behind in park improvements outlined in a park master plan. He said it is wrong for the city to take money generated within the park and use it elsewhere.

"It's not that we have to go find the money. It's that the city steals the money," Faulconer said. "We haven't done a good job of organizing our constituency."

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