

Some on council question more money for Sun Dawgs

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Is Omaha's Sun Dawgs program an important summer recreation resource for children or a city-funded baby-sitting service?

That's the question some City Council members are asking as they consider Mayor Mike Fahey's proposed 2009 budget. That budget, which would keep

Public safety bargain or city-funded baby sitter? Opinions are shared on the summer program, whose funding would grow \$24,000 under the proposed budget.

the city's property tax rate the same as the past eight years, includes a \$24,000 increase in funding for the Sun Dawgs, a free summer program for Omaha youths ages 6 to 15.

Members of the Omaha Together One Community group told the council at a public hearing on the budget Tuesday that the cost of running Sun Dawgs is money well spent. Nearly 100

OTOC members and others in the religious community attended the hearing with bright yellow "Yes to Youth" stickers on their shirts to show support for Sun Dawgs.

Several speakers told the council that children who participate in organized programs such as Sun Dawgs are less likely to be victims or perpetrators of crime.

"What would we rather see in

the hands of Omaha youth?" asked the Rev. Michael Williams of Risen Sun Baptist Church. "Basketballs or guns?"

In the Sun Dawgs program, city parks employees lead activities such as arts and crafts, sports, games and field trips. The proposed increase would bring next year's Sun Dawgs budget to

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A bar's plan for a beer garden at Leavenworth Street and Saddle Creek Road raises neighbors' opposition. Midlands, Page 1B

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\$418,000, in hopes that 45,500 kids would participate. About \$100,000 of the Sun Dawgs budget comes from private donations and grants.

"The \$24,000 is a public safety investment that is fiscally sound and shows moral leadership on your part," said the Rev. Jason Emerson of All Saints Episcopal Church.

Not every councilman is convinced that Sun Dawgs is the best use of city funds, however.

"You can make the case that this isn't something taxpayer money should be going for," said Councilman Chuck Sigerson, who noted that in the past some people have referred to Sun Dawgs as a glorified baby-sitting program. "That's money that could be used for something else, like lowering the property tax rate."

Sigerson said he isn't necessarily opposed to the Sun Dawgs program, but he has questions about how the program is being expanded.

"I'm looking at it very carefully. I just want to find out where (the additional funding) is being spent," Sigerson said.

Council President Dan Welch said Sun Dawgs is a good program, but he would like to see more of the funding come from private donations instead of the city.

The additional \$24,000 is slated to fund a pilot program that would extend hours next summer at two of the 34 Sun Dawgs locations: Holy Name Parish and School, and Adams

"What would we rather see in the hands of Omaha youth, basketballs or guns?"

Rev. Michael Williams of Risen Sun Baptist Church

Park. Those locations would also add anti-violence education.

OTOC, a coalition of religious congregations and other groups that has a history of involvement in summer youth programs, approached the city about incorporating anti-violence lessons into Sun Dawgs. The initial idea was that OTOC would administer the anti-violence aspect of the program, said City Parks Director Steve Scarpello. But the city and OTOC have since decided that the parks department, which runs Sun Dawgs, should handle the anti-violence programming.

Councilman Jim Vokal said he is more comfortable with the proposed increase in Sun Dawgs spending now that it would not be used for an OTOC-run teaching program. He said he does not want to see education overshadow recreation, which is what Sun Dawgs is intended to be.

"It's supposed to be fun and games," Vokal said.

Although much of the discussion at the public hearing centered on Sun Dawgs, the biggest budget issue the council will tackle probably will be the public safety auditor. Seven people

spoke at the hearing to urge the council to fund the auditor position next year.

Fahey has included \$125,000 in the budget to hire a public safety auditor, a position that has been vacant since 2006 when the mayor fired then-auditor Tristan Bonn for releasing a report that was critical of Omaha police without Fahey's permission.

The City Council stripped city funding for the job, and a majority of council members have said they won't approve spending money to fill the position unless some changes are made in how the auditor operates. Council members have said that Bonn became more of a community advocate than an independent auditor of police.

"No one in the city is above the law," said Ben Salazar after stating that police must be held accountable for their actions.

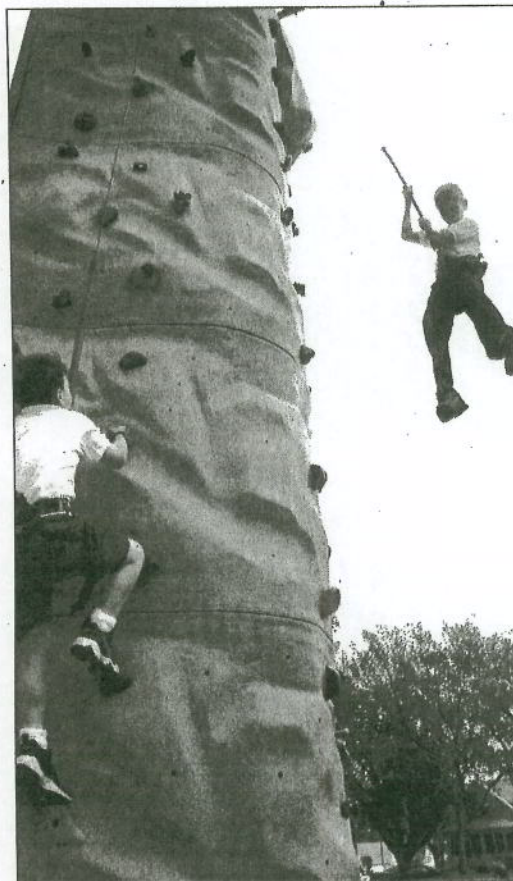
Sam Walker, professor emeritus of criminology at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, said the police auditor works in other cities and can work in Omaha.

Vokal and Sigerson are working on a new ordinance that would replace the existing public safety auditor position.

"We're trying to look for creative ways to have some sort of oversight without it being heavy handed," said Sigerson, who declined to provide more details about the ordinance that he and Vokal are developing.

The council is scheduled to vote on the budget Aug. 26.

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The Sun Dawgs program offers lots of organized activities led by city parks employees to keep Omaha kids busy during the summer.