

Red ink, land swap lead LB's agenda

CITY COUNCIL: Sessions will look at closing \$38.3 million deficit and weigh value of the Los Cerritos Wetlands.

By Paul Eakins Staff Writer

LONG BEACH — Two seemingly unrelated issues that the City Council will be discussing Tuesday could have more in common than appears at first glance.

The bottom line, for both issues, is the bottom line.

As Long Beach grapples with a \$38.3 million general fund budget deficit, the council will have its first opportunity to weigh in on City Manager Pat West's proposed budget for the 2010 fiscal year, which starts Oct. 1.

The budget calls for citywide cuts amounting to the elimination of 312 jobs, including possibly laying off 38 police officers. Also on the table is a plan to close one fire station for part of the day and consolidate some operations, which fire officials fear could lead to a slower response time.

Cuts to Parks and Recreation programs, arts and other cultural programs, the library budget and other services all are proposed as well.

Following the 3 p.m. budget workshop, the council will discuss the next big money issue — the controversial Los Cerritos Wetlands deal — during the regular 5 p.m. meeting.

So, how are the budget and the wetlands related?

Critics of the wetlands deal, which would swap 37.7 acres of the wetlands in southeast Long Beach for the city's 13.4-acre Public Service Yard on the east bank of the Los Angeles River, say wetlands owner Tom Dean is getting too much, while the city isn't getting its money's worth.

They say the wetlands may become too tempting a resource for current or future councils as Long Beach confronts ongoing budget deficits, and that instead of restoring the wetlands, the property could get

COUNCIL

FROM PAGE A1

sold off.

The problem is, no one knows for sure just how much the wetlands are worth. Dean won't allow a delineation study of the property to determine how much of it is actually wetlands.

City officials say the initial 33.7-acre wetlands area that had first been on the table in the land swap could be worth between \$9.19 million and \$36.78 million, depending on how much is wetlands and how much can be developed. The

Public Service Yard is worth \$7.9 million, officials say.

But City Auditor Laura Doud has done a cost-benefit analysis that cites a 2003 appraisal of the Bixby Ranch portion of the wetlands, placing the wetlands value much lower. That appraisal prices the entire 175-acre property at \$14.25 million.

In her analysis, Doud says there are "serious risks" in the deal.

That's exactly what skeptical environmentalists say too.

They want assurances — in the form of a deed restriction — that the wetlands acres will not be developed to assuage their fears of a potential sell-off by

future cash-strapped councils.

Environmentalists are also worried that the Los Cerritos Wetlands Authority, which under the plan would buy the wetlands from the city and restore the property, will not make the purchase if the cost is too high.

Just like with the city budget, it's all about the bottom line.

The council meets at 5 p.m. at City Hall, 333 W. Ocean Blvd. The meeting can be viewed live on Charter Communications Channel 8, Verizon FiOS Channel 21 or online at www.longbeach.gov.

pauleakins@presstelegram.com,
562-499-1278