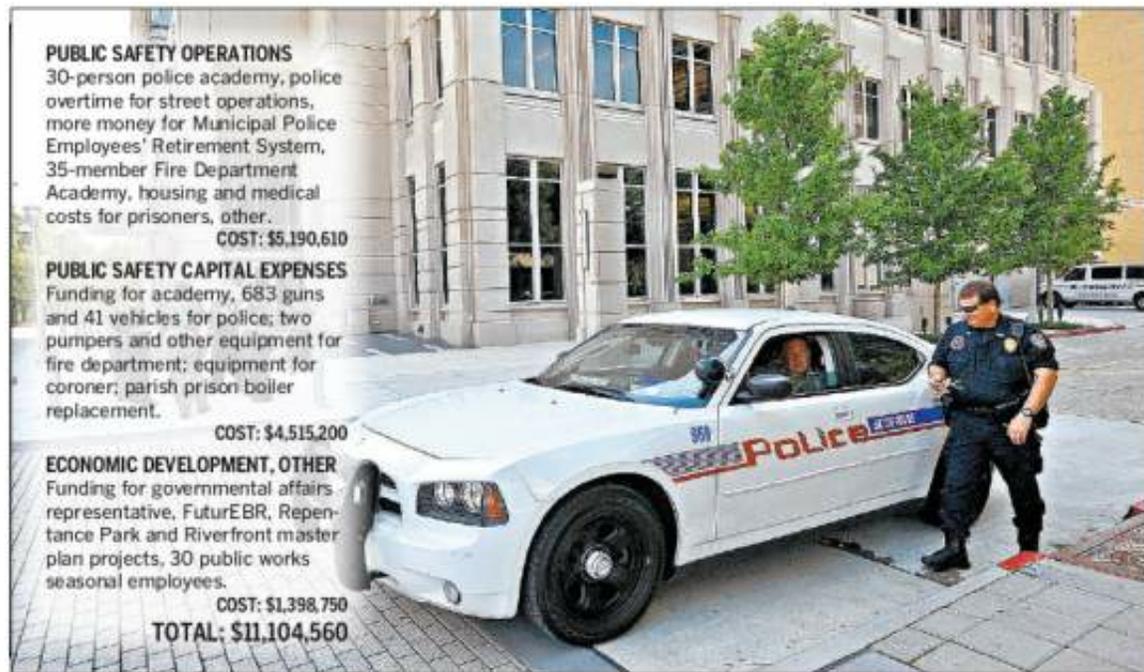


Holden proposes more funds for police, fire needs



Source: Mayor's Office

Advocate graphic

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By REBEKAH ALLEN

Advocate staff writer

Mayor-President Kip Holden on Thursday revealed an \$11.1 million city-parish budget supplement that, if approved, would finance a police academy, a fire academy and several other law-enforcement and public safety initiatives.

Public safety items total \$9.7 million of the midyear budget supplement, which will go before the Metro Council for approval later this month.

“People are seeing we are still committed to making public safety a priority in this administration, which is the same stance we’ve taken for the last eight years,” Holden said.

After the city-parish’s budget is approved for the year, additional funds can only be expended through budget supplements that come from the Mayor-President’s Office.

Holden’s public safety-heavy budget announcement comes on the heels of a recent ad by Councilman Mike Walker’s campaign for mayor-president attacking Holden’s

record on crime in the parish, and criticizing Holden for not funding a police academy to put more officers on the streets.

The proposed budget supplement was made possible because revenue from various city-parish sources, including a 2 percent sales tax, have been higher than anticipated, Holden said.

The mayor noted that the city-parish has had to operate frugally over the past two years to prevent major service cuts, employee furloughs and layoffs. Now that revenues are stronger, Holden said, there is an opportunity to fund overdue law enforcement needs.

The proposed budget supplement allocates \$4 million to the Baton Rouge Police Department for a 30-person police academy beginning July 30, overtime pay for “street operations” and the purchase of 683 guns and 41 new vehicles, according to a memo Holden’s office provided to the Metro Council.

The supplement also proposes \$860,000 to address an increase in the mandatory employer contribution to the police retirement fund.

The city-parish’s most recent police academy began in August. Before that, the last academy was in 2009.

City police employs 639 sworn personnel, said Sgt. Don Kelly, a Police Department spokesman.

A new academy would boost the officers to 669, but Kelly noted that the department will lose officers to scheduled retirements and attrition by the time the new class graduates.

“The Mayor-President’s budget supplement for police affirms to the citizens of Baton Rouge and to myself, that he stands true to his word that he will not stand idly by and allow crime to define our city,” Police Chief Dewayne White said in an emailed statement.

Walker, who in recent weeks has been attacking Holden’s record on crime control, said the mayor’s budget supplement doesn’t go far enough in beefing up police ranks. He said Holden should be holding an academy for 60 cadets instead of 30 to fill all the vacancies.

“My questions for the mayor are: Why did you wait so long, where have you been and why only 30 officers when we need 60 to break even?” he said.

Asked for a response to Walker’s criticism of his record on crime, Holden said, “Mike Walker has not presented one solution for anything in this government and

he's been in this government longer than me.”

Holden said Walker has had no involvement in any recent crime initiatives, including the decision to fund the academy, development of a Truancy Center and Operation BRAVE, which will dedicate law enforcement to the parish's most crime-ridden area.

“If he's comfortable taking credit for things he has not done and can rest at night, that's his business, but people in East Baton Rouge Parish are very, very intelligent,” Holden said.

Walker countered that he took action to secure funding for Operation BRAVE by placing it on the council agenda for action while Holden was “just talking about it.”

The revenue to pay for the items in the budget supplement comes from a combination of surplus money in the general fund, excess sales tax collections, interest earned on cash balances and designated tax collections, according to administration officials.

In addition to more money for police, Holden's proposed budget supplement would provide \$2.3 million to the Fire Department for a 35-person academy and equipment including “two pumpers, 50 self-contained breathing apparatus, heavy rescue equipment and two service vehicles.”

The funds will also help complete construction of fire stations on Sharp Road, Wooddale Boulevard and Choctaw Drive.

“We are very excited to see the academy included in the Mayor's supplemental budget,” Fire Chief Ed Smith said in an e-mail. “Staffing is a very important part of our Class 1 rating, which helps to keep insurance rates low for the citizens of Baton Rouge.”

The Fire Department's current staffing is 546, said Curt Monte, a Fire Department spokesman.

The department had its most recent fire academy beginning in November. Holden said the city-parish hopes to fund another fire academy next spring.

The budget supplement also proposes additional funds for the Sheriff's Office to offset the growing costs of the crowded parish prison. The supplement would also pay Metro Airport for rented space to house the sheriff's new headquarters.

The proposal provides for additional vehicles and equipment for the Coroner's Office, 30 temporary DPW workers to cut grass in the summer months, and for MOHSEP personnel costs that were previously covered by grants.

The East Baton Rouge Redevelopment Authority would receive \$200,000 for the Mid-City Urban Renewal District and the Smiley Heights Urban Village Development Project.

The proposal also includes \$705,000 worth of downtown improvements, including signage in the North Boulevard Town Square, lighting on the Galvez Plaza stage canopy, Lafayette Street sidewalk improvements and additional funds needed for the ongoing Repentance Park construction project. All downtown costs were funded from a dedicated state sales tax rebate on hotel and motel rooms restricted for Riverfront projects.

Councilwoman C. Denise Marcelle said she was “blown away” that Holden isn’t proposing to fund summer youth programs, which she says helps keep youngsters in low-income neighborhoods off the streets during the summer and gives them job training and life skills.

For weeks, some Metro Council members have attempted to fund separate summer programs and urged the mayor to support the programs.

“I’m just blown away, the public needs to know where his priorities are,” Marcelle said. “I’m not the mayor, but this may be what it takes to make me run (for mayor-president). This may be the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

The budget supplement is expected to be voted on by the council at the June 27 meeting. Council members can not amend the item on the floor, only vote it up or down, Parish Attorney Mary Roper said.

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