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Firm hired to review city's fire finances A consultant will seek savings in the department's budget.

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Date: February 24, 2010 **Section:** News

The City Council on Tuesday hired a consulting firm to study how the **Omaha Fire Department** can become more financially efficient. In a 4-2 vote, the council agreed to pay \$38,703 to Weidner Consulting Inc. of Austin, Texas. The firm will come up with a plan to improve **department** budgeting and spending policies.

After the meeting, the Suttle administration announced that it has agreed to a review of **Fire Department** finances by **State Auditor** Mike Foley.

It will be a "limited review" and not an audit of the **department**, Foley said in a letter to the city.

Fire Department finances have come under scrutiny in recent months as city officials continue to deal with a \$4.7 million shortfall in the **department's** budget.

The shortfall resulted mostly from unbudgeted payouts for comp time, sick leave and vacation time.

City Finance Director Pam Spaccarotella told council members that the Texas firm brings a level of expertise to **fire** budgeting that her **department** cannot match.

She said Weidner Consulting has dealt with budgeting matters in **fire departments** elsewhere in the United **States**, including California.

The company's review will identify what services the **Omaha Fire Department** currently provides and what services the public and city actually want.

The consultant's study also will examine **fire** management policies, she said, and identify possible savings in the budget.

"Instead of the costs driving the services," which is typical in city budgeting, "the services determine the costs," Spaccarotella said of the consultant's approach. "It's a different way of budgeting and managing the **department**."

Spaccarotella noted that because of the **department's** budget crunch, the city has already laid off civilian employees and stopped the practice of replacing firefighters who call in sick.

"We've done everything we can to reduce the **Fire Department** budget while still staying within the restraints of the (union) contract," she said.

The **Fire Department** is "on board" with hiring the consultant, said acting Assistant Chief Tim Book.

"We think it will move us forward," Book told the council.

But Dave Nability, one of the leaders of a group called **Omaha** Alliance for the Private Sector, opposed the hiring.

Nability said during a public hearing that his group has sent council members its own review of **Fire Department** finances and come up with \$7 million in savings. He called on Foley's office to audit all **Fire Department** activities.

Council President Garry Gernandt asked Nability where he lives. Nability replied that he doesn't live within the city limits but has a business in **Omaha**. Nability said spending more than \$38,000 on the consultant was "wasteful spending."

Councilman Chris Jerram said he understood the "sex appeal" of seeking a full **state** audit but said it was contradictory to point out problems with the **department's** finances and then oppose the consultant's hiring.

Councilman Ben Gray said money spent on the consultant would be made up in savings to the city after a **Fire Department** budgeting plan is done.

Council members Jean Stothert and Franklin Thompson opposed hiring the Texas firm.

Foley, meanwhile, in a letter to Mayor Jim Suttle, said his office would like to meet with city officials to conduct the review of **Fire Department** finances.

He said he proposed the review after he was contacted by "some **Omaha** citizens" who raised questions about the **department**. He did not name them.

"This review will not be an audit," Foley said in the letter, dated Feb. 19.

However, he said, his office would determine whether an audit is necessary based on its findings.

Ron Gerard, spokesman for Suttle, said the administration supported the review.

"We don't have anything to hide," Gerard said. "We welcome the opportunity to show that we are fully transparent in government."

Also Tuesday, the council:

Discussed a proposal to levy a \$20 late fee on unpaid parking tickets after 30 days.

Stothert said she planned to introduce an amendment that would allow at least one "amnesty day" a year to give people the chance to pay their tickets without late fees. The fine for unpaid parking tickets is \$16.

The council could vote on the parking measure at next Tuesday's meeting.

Agreed to spend \$62,300 in tourism revenue on a new system of street signs to point out major downtown attractions.

Unanimously adopted the Dundee Streetscape Master Plan, which includes improving sidewalks along Underwood Avenue with new brick décor, benches, landscaping and traditional lamp posts.

The plan also would increase parking, a long-standing problem for Dundee area businesses, and do away with the traffic signals at 50th Street and Underwood Avenue, installing a four-way stop in an effort to slow traffic.

Councilman Pete Festersen, who represents the area, said the plan would create jobs and maintain the character of Dundee.

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