

https://www.gillettenewsrecord.com/news/local/article_9d20b22e-8198-5cb6-8dc0-71b34ed1cd19.html

TOP STORY

Land board eyes capital needs, preps for Camporee budget cycle

By JAKE GOODRICK NEWS RECORD WRITER jgoodrick@gillettenewsrecord.net

Feb 9, 2023



Rusty cattle chutes show wear and tear at Cam-plex East Pavilion in April 2022.

News Record File Photo

There's still a lot of work to do before Gillette and Cam-plex welcome 50,000 or so visitors in August 2024. Much of that work, including the costs and equipment to pull off the preparation for the International

Pathfinders Camporee, will fall within the upcoming 2023-24 budget cycle. Campbell County Public Land Board members looked at the breakdown of capital expenses for the upcoming budget at a workshop Tuesday night, where they went item-by-item through their tentative \$4.8 million capital budget request to the city of Gillette and Campbell County.

“Uniquely this year we have something I don’t know anywhere in Wyoming has ever experienced, where we’re going to be doubling the size of a community all within this budget cycle,” said Aaron Lyles, Cam-plex executive director.

“So there’s some interesting challenges of trying to solve that.”

In addition to the Camporee next summer, preparing for the National High School Finals Rodeo, and its associated costs, also falls within the 2023-24 capital and operational budgets being hashed out now through the spring.

The 65-item capital budget draft categorizes each item by priority. Many of the highest prioritized items are contract requirements Cam-plex has to deliver on ahead of the Camporee.

Lyles said it’s not a wishlist, and that “everything on the list could be a legitimate need.”

“I challenged the staff to not just give us a wishlist, but what do we really need?” he said, noting that “there’s not a lot of superfluous on this.”

Even though the Camporee takes place in the following budget cycle, the preparation will essentially all take place in the upcoming one.

“We really won’t have any set up happening after the conclusion of this budget cycle,” Lyles said. “If we’re not done, we have a problem.”

What’s in it?

During budget talks last year, land board members started with a \$10 million capital budget, which they reduced to about \$8.6 million. Ultimately, the city and county cut it down another \$6 million in the final budget.

The \$4.8 million ask this year has items as small as a few thousand dollars up to \$525,000 for a new scoreboard that could be rented out and potentially pay for itself over a 10-year lifespan.

Some of the costs associated with each item may be more accurate than others and none of those estimates are set in stone.

The capital asks include about \$2.4 million in construction-related items, such as WIFI infrastructure, expanding water lines to service Camporee sites, an expanded on-site paging system, new signage and more.

There are about \$900,000 in requests that include a mower to maintain the Camporee amphitheater site, backhoe, dump trailers and a water truck.

Just shy of \$1.5 million would go toward various equipment asks, including the \$525,000 scoreboard. The scoreboard, or LED video wall, is the mid-tier price point and would hopefully recoup its cost over its decade lifespan.

Land board members hope some of the funding for those items could come from a \$750,000 grant Cam-plex is waiting to hear back on.

Also, the \$1.5 million amphitheater project is expected to come in under budget, potentially at about \$1.1 million. They talked about asking the city and county for those remaining dollars to cover some of the additional capital asks related to the amphitheater site, including a \$90,000 mower that would be used to maintain the field.

What to do with East and Central pavilions?

Last year, the land board's \$8.6 million capital request included major renovations for East and Central pavilions, which were denied by the city and county. A master plan for the campus is in the works and could affect what becomes of those aging facilities.

Land board member Skyler Pownall asked why not include renovations to Central and East pavilions, which had been discussed and mostly postponed last year, in this year's request.

"At some point our funding agencies are going to have to have their feet held to the fire because here the last several years it's been on the land board of 'why'd we let things get so bad,'" Pownall said.

"Well at the end of the day, we need to start asking for this, then if our funding agencies don't allow us to improve these structures — the onus is on them. It ain't the land board anymore. We're trying. We know it's bad. Everybody knows it's bad."

Lyles said there have been conversations with city and county officials this year, who after being heavily involved last year, understand there are deferred maintenance needs and end-of-life facilities at Cam-plex.

"I think as long as what we propose is pragmatic and it has an answer for that question as we present it, I would imagine we're not actually going to see a lot of pushback," Lyles said. "The question is, is it timely and is it the best use?"

Laura Chapman, land board member, pushed back and noted that money was invested toward extending the lifespans of Central and East pavilions last year, including over \$100,000 spent to paint the inside of East Pavilion.

Pownall said he would like to at least ask for more substantial renovations and improvements for Central and East pavilions.

“Again, if we continue to be told no, at the end of the day, it’s not the land board that continues to perpetuate these problems, it’s our funding agencies won’t fix what’s out there.”

The capital budget came in below last year’s request, but the operating budget may be a different story.

“I know that when I bring the operations budget back to you, it is going to be a sea change of impact,” Lyles said.

The regular land board meeting is at 6:30 p.m. Thursday.

Jake Goodrick