

Hahn Launches Drive for \$5.4-Billion Budget

The mayor's proposal includes \$80 million in cuts. He says his goal is to make neighborhoods more livable and to reduce crime.

By Noam N. Levey and Jessica Garrison
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Faced with a limited municipal treasury and dogged by a widening City Hall probe, Los Angeles Mayor James K. Hahn officially kicked off his campaign Tuesday to pass a \$5.4-billion city budget in what figures to be a test of his leadership as he prepares for next year's mayoral election.

The four-volume budget, which Hahn titled "Funding our Priorities," promises modest increases in police and neighborhood services, after-school programs and affordable housing.

It also calls for nearly \$80 million in reductions — some to popular programs that the mayor said the city could no longer afford, including the DARE anti-drug education program, the library's bookmobile and the bulk garbage drop-off centers.

"We were forced to make some tough decisions," Hahn said in a detailed and at times spirited explanation of his proposed 2004-05 city budget.

Hahn spent the day looking like a political candidate, speaking to TV cameras in the morning, posing with firefighters in South Los Angeles and then holding an evening meeting with neighborhood leaders whom the mayor credited with helping to assemble his fiscal plan.

Plugging his budget proposal, Hahn said over and over that he was working to deliver what city residents wanted — chiefly lower crime and more livable neighborhoods.

"There is no more important document in L.A. politics than the budget," said Fernando Guerra, director of the Center for the Study of Los Angeles at Loyola Marymount University. "It forces the mayor to go out there first and say, 'This is what I'm about.' ... what he values and what his vision of the city is."

Last year, Hahn failed to convince the City Council of his vision; the council killed his plans to hire more than 300 new police officers in the \$5.1-billion budget they approved for 2003-04.

As this year's budget campaign begins, the mayor labors in the shadow of investigations into possible links between city contracting and political giving. Hahn also is under pressure from state leaders who are taking hundreds of millions of dollars of local property taxes to help balance the state's books.

And in the 11 months before next March's election, Hahn faces mayoral challengers on the council who could try to undermine his efforts to portray himself as a responsive municipal leader who fills potholes and keeps libraries open. A majority of the 15-member council must

approve the budget by June 1.

City Councilman Bernard C. Parks, who has launched an exploratory bid to unseat Hahn and also heads the council's budget committee, said he could not comment on the mayor's budget until he had read it. But Parks on Tuesday questioned whether Hahn's budget priorities reflected what the people of L.A. really wanted.

"What I sensed in talking to the public was that they talked about quality of life, safety and prevention programs" with "almost identical" importance, the former Los Angeles police chief said, adding that he did not get the sense that public safety "was head and shoulders above these other issues."

Others, including City Councilman Antonio Villaraigosa, who is also considering a run for mayor, expressed caution about the mayor's plans to balance the budget with nearly \$200 million in a one-time transfer from city reserves and from the Department of Water and Power.

Hahn downplayed what could be a tough budget battle. "Obviously some people may want to turn this into political football," he said. "I can't do anything about that."

As he has done for months, Hahn said his financial plan would satisfy what 3.8 million Angelenos want City Hall to do for them. That has been the centerpiece of his approach to both crafting this year's budget and preparing for his reelection campaign.

Hahn is proposing to expand the Los Angeles Police Department by 30 officers, a reflection of what the mayor has said is his top priority: making Los Angeles the safest big city in America.

He also has proposed more street repairs. And he plans to maintain funding for LA's BEST after-school program and a housing trust fund created to subsidize new affordable housing.

"Every decision that was made in this budget was based on priorities," the mayor said Tuesday. "To make this a safer city, to improve the quality of life in our neighborhoods, increasing mobility in the city, growing the economy, providing more housing."

The focus on basic services plays to Hahn's strengths as a technocrat, said several political observers who have criticized the mayor for not being bolder.

"He's a very tactical guy," said Harvey Englander, a local political strategist. "He's a mayor who believes that potholes need to be filled."

The mayor laid the groundwork for his budget campaign months ago. Hahn invited community members to rank city priorities and said he had built his budget around that list.

Tuesday evening, Hahn invited neighborhood council leaders into his City Hall office to explain his plan. He also gave out a 71-page "Neighborhood Council Budget Summary" that outlines how his budget would pay for tree trimming, sidewalk repairs and other small projects requested by residents.

Hahn has courted support from the city's largest public employees union, which backs his plan despite the proposed elimination of 300 city positions.

The mayor also has become an outspoken opponent of Sacramento's plans to use property taxes to close the state budget deficit. In an animated moment Tuesday, Hahn said he would not tolerate further use of so-called local money by Sacramento.

To build council support, Hahn included money for initiatives dear to individual members. Councilwoman Jan Perry, whose district includes downtown, said she was delighted to hear the mayor talk about shelters for the homeless. Councilman Eric Garcetti, whose district includes Hollywood, Silver Lake and Echo Park, applauded the expansion of the housing trust fund.

Other council members, meanwhile, remained skeptical about being able to work with Hahn, whom many city leaders have accused in the past of being too aloof.

"I think there was ample opportunity to give input, but how much of it was taken or not taken, we'll evaluate," said Council President Alex Padilla, who was part of the council majority that defeated Hahn's efforts last year to hire more police.