UNEMPLOYMENT GOES PUBLIC

GOVERNMENT WORK IS NO SAFE HARBOR FROM THE RAVAGES OF THE ECONOMY

Since the Lafayette economy has faltered and tax revenues have decreased, governmental bodies in the parish have been freezing salaries and laying off employees.

The threat of salary or employee cuts extends through all levels of government in Lafayette—the parish government, city government, the school board, state offices and USL. Many of these governmental units hope they can avoid those cuts, but they make no secret that the cuts are nonetheless a possibility.

And if the cuts become a reality they will mean still fewer people spending still less in an economy already in deep recession. And it is cutting desperately for customers. Here’s a rundown of where local governmental units stand in their reviews of employees and salaries:

The City. Although the city of Lafayette plans to cut up to 14 percent of its staff in coming months, officials seem confident they can get the cuts through natural attrition rather than actual layoffs.

Already the 1986-87 fiscal year, which went into effect Nov. 1, has seen fewer authorized positions than the 1985-86 fiscal year. The old budget had 1,354 positions. The new one has 1,316. The reduction came from eliminating some positions that had been empty because of retirement, resignations, etc.

(Authorized positions are those that are either filled or intended to be filled even if they are currently vacant. “Authorized” employment may not reflect “actual” employment. For example, even though the city currently has 1,316 authorized positions, it has only about 1,295 employees now on the payroll.)

Also, in this year’s budget, the city froze salaries of all employees except firefighters, who must receive a 2-percent annual raise under state law. In the previous 1985-86 budget, the city gave all employees a 2-percent “cost-of-living” increase and awarded some employees merit raises totaling about 3 percent of the overall city budget.

Further cuts in employee expenditures may come early next year through the elimination of more positions. “We may abolish another 24 jobs,” says Gerald Domingue, the city’s director of administration.

To save money and help compensate for an expected $800,000 loss in federal revenue-sharing funds, the city plans to turn much of the work done by the Public Works Department over to private contractors, who would do things like repairing streets, cleaning ditches and mowing grass.

The city believes it will be cheaper to contract out those services on an as-needed basis rather than to keep full-time city employees on the payroll for a whole year. When this “privatizing” is implemented in January or February it is expected to eliminate the need for 24 positions.

The city is hoping it can cut those positions without cutting any employees. It will try to find jobs for the displaced Public Works employees in other departments with vacancies that must be filled. Also, some Public Works employees may be retiring.

Even so, Domingue acknowledges there “may wind up being” layoffs. But he adds, “By the time February comes around, I don’t think any people will have lost their jobs with the city.”

The Parish. Officials with parish government are less optimistic. Layoffs are “definitely a possibility,” says Barry Berthelot, the parish’s chief administrative officer. “We’re working on a proposal with that thought in mind.”

Parish government currently has about 200 employees for basic government operations (not counting agencies like the library, which come under the parish’s jurisdiction). The layoffs will likely come as part of a wholesale restructuring of several parish departments with the goal of cutting about $1 million in expenditures, Berthelot says. The administration’s proposal should be ready for the Parish Council’s consideration shortly, he adds. Council approval must come by the end of the month.

The School Board. Salary cuts are the major fear facing school board employees right now. The school board had been able to avoid cuts thus far, but it may only be putting off the day of reckoning.

Salaries for some 2,800 employees (including about 1,250 teachers) account for about 92 percent of the board’s budget. Although this year’s employee count is about the same as last year’s count, the board has left some vacancies unfilled during the past few years.

This year the board, which was able to avoid salary cuts in the 1985-86 school year, hoped that forgoing its share of the state’s annual “step” increase would be enough to bring the budget into balance for the 1986-87 term (although it has already passed on step increases given by the state).

But at its Nov. 5 meeting, the board debated whether more drastic action was needed. Superintendent Wayne Vasher recommended a 3-percent salary cut for this year to cope with Gov. Edwin Edwards’ recent decision to cut state aid to education by 5 percent, meaning a loss of about $1.7 million for Lafayette.

The board decided, however, that it would take a chance and put off the cuts until after a special session of the Legislature in December, hoping for some salvation from state lawmakers.

The State. Thus far most of the state’s layoffs—there have been close to 400 processed from January through October—have been eliminated in central offices in Baton Rouge. It remains to be seen what impact a new round of 10-percent budget cuts will have in the Lafayette offices.

Even now, however, the state’s influence on the local economy is less than it was a year ago when some positions have been lost through attrition.

In June 1985, the state had 3,499 total employees working in Lafayette Parish (including USL and the University Medical Center as well as offices of state departments), according to figures supplied by the state. At the end of last month, the count was 3,165.

The University. A combination of declining enrollments and state budget cuts may force USL to make some faculty cuts, but the university says most of those cuts will probably come through attrition and the decreased use of part-time or temporary faculty hired during enrollment increases.

Although USL has reduced its classified staff (those falling under civil service) by 27 employees since 1983 and kept its unclassified administrative staff about steady, it has increased full-time faculty by 29.

USL officials note that they have been able to maintain faculty strength in the midst of six state budget cuts since 1982 by using other sources of revenue, including tuition increases, funds from the USL Foundation and research grants or contracts.

In a statement released through USL’s public relations office, the university said, “Should enrollment continue to decline, however, some additional elimination may be taken. USL has 17 faculty positions and 41 classified positions “that will not be granted permanent status until after the 1987-88 budget picture becomes clearer,” the university said.

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