

Dallas Morning News, The (TX)

June 21, 2010

Before break, a grand finale *RUDOLPH BUSH*

It's the same story every year.

With time running out before the Dallas City Council takes its annual month-long break in July, it schedules a breakneck meeting in late June to get all its unfinished business done.

But even by historical standards, this Wednesday is shaping up to be a doozy.

It's not just that the council has a 1,500-page agenda as thick as a phonebook, but that it has stacked the last meeting with a series of controversial items that members have struggled to find common ground on for much of the year.

City Manager Mary Suhm summed it up in typical her deadpan style.

"Bring your sleeping bag," she said.

On Friday, Mayor Tom Leppert decided to have Wednesday's council meeting start at 8 a.m. instead of 9 a.m. to give members a jump on what many expect to be a long day, if not a long night.

"We've got some big issues. We have all of the things that the staff throws in there because they don't have us for a month. And then for whatever reason - at least more than what I've seen in the last couple of years - we've just delayed a bunch of things," Leppert said.

No one can say how long the meeting will last. That depends on how much debate goes into the various items that the council takes up. And there are several items certain to spur significant, and probably prolonged, discussion.

Big issues

First among those will be two no-bid concessions contracts at Love Field. Those have drawn scrutiny in part because they reward companies tied to U.S. Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson, D-Dallas, state Rep. Helen Giddings, D-DeSoto, and longtime political donor Gilbert **Aranza**.

Leppert has slammed the contracts as simply bad deals for Dallas no matter whom they involve.

The council is closely divided, largely along racial lines, on the no-bid deals. Most of the council's minority members have staunchly supported the contracts, saying city staff and independent consultants vetted everything.

The council will also have its hands full with a final vote on an expanded homestead-tax exemption for seniors and the disabled. The council has twice delayed a vote to add \$6,000 to the \$64,000 exemption.

A third controversy, over an ordinance that would streamline the city's ability to demolish blighted structures in historic areas, is also set to come to a head.

Finally, and for good measure, the council will hold a two-hour briefing on the grim state of the city's upcoming budget. That briefing will include details on Suhm's plan to furlough police officers and firefighters for five days - something sure to go over badly with some council members.

Even with all of the things on the council's plate Wednesday, there's little chance the meeting will be the

longest, or even close to the longest, the council has ever held.

Years ago, the council scheduled its briefings on the same day as its voting agenda, meaning most meetings lasted well into the night. Suhm recalled one meeting in the 1990s that didn't end until after 2 a.m.

And despite her joke about bringing a sleeping bag, she doesn't think Wednesday's meeting will become Thursday's meeting by carrying past midnight.

"If everything takes as long as it could, you could be there until 9 or 10 o'clock at night. If it goes right, it could be 5 or 6," she said.

How long is too long?

Some council members, and some residents, have complained that the last agenda before the July break is always too long - and that it prevents elected officials and the public from being able to closely examine all the items that are being voted on.

But Suhm said any suggestion the staff tries to slip things past the council the last June meeting is simply untrue.

"You get your teeth kicked in doing something like that," she said.

The agenda is full because the council leaves for all of July and parts of June and August, she said.

"I have about six weeks with no ability to get anything approved by council. You have to get those things that are time-sensitive on there," Suhm said.

As many at City Hall prepare for a long, grinding meeting, the council member with the most experience at the horseshoe doesn't seem worried about missing supertime.

"I would say we'll probably finish around 5 or 6. From my perspective, everybody's going to try to get to the message and get to the point. I don't think there's going to be a lot of surprises," said council member Steve Salazar, who has spent 13 years on the council.

Time will tell whether that's the wisdom of experience or wishful thinking.

And Salazar added that Wednesday's meeting will be different in one important respect.

"Normally there's not very much controversy in the last meeting, it's just long," he said.

AT A GLANCE

What's on agenda

The Dallas City Council is poised for one of its longest and most intense meetings of the year Wednesday. Among the items to be considered:

* Two no-bid concessions contracts at Love Field that have drawn scrutiny in part because they reward companies tied to U.S. Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson, D-Dallas, state Rep. Helen Giddings, D-DeSoto, and longtime political donor Gilbert **Aranza**.

* A briefing on the grim state of the city's 2010-11 budget.

* A twice-delayed vote on expanding a homestead-tax exemption for seniors and the disabled from \$64,000 to \$70,000.

* An ordinance that would streamline the city's ability to demolish blighted structures in historic areas.

* A vote to set a November election on whether to eliminate "dry" areas for beer and wine sales in Dallas.

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