

WEST U ESSENTIALS MAGAZINE – DECEMBER 2019

WEST UNIVERSITY MAYOR INSIGHTS

FINANCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

What is Fair to All Taxpaying Homeowners

By Mayor Bob Higley

Since June of this year, your City Council has been hard at work representing the West U community and its taxpayers. The Council members have remained on point, applying a fresh set of eyes to the City's Annual Budget to ensure that our actions remain financially responsible and benefit all West U taxpayers. There were some outside factors that changed this year – changes that have affected the way this Council and future Councils must look at the budget.

First, the Texas Legislature has been slowly assaulting local cities' ability to chart their own destinies. The motives of the State Legislature became even clearer after the story broke concerning Texas House Speaker Dennis Bonnen's disdain for local government. In 2020, Senate Bill 1152 will strip approximately \$95,000 in franchise fees from West U's revenue, and, in 2021, Senate Bill 2 will take effect, which establishes a 3.5% cap on the amount of revenue collected from property taxes.

Taking these items seriously, your City Council members tackled their first budget process like seasoned professionals. Each member carefully reviewed all City expenditures, while asking themselves two very important questions: How does each expenditure benefit the City, and what does it cost the West U taxpayer who is funding these expenses?

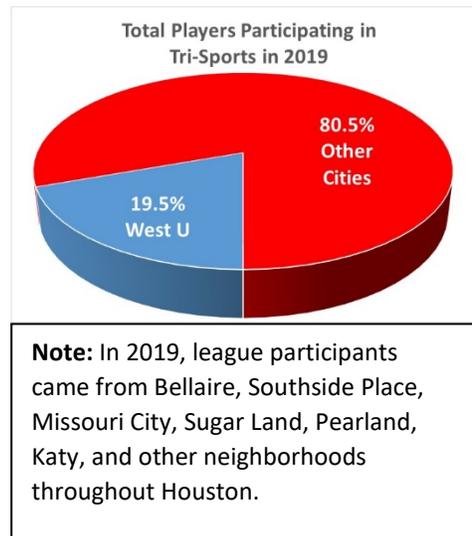
The City Council has now adopted West U's operating budget for 2020. Among the notable actions approved in this budget, West U will be:

- Lowering its tax rate from \$0.3168 to \$0.3092 per \$100 assessed value
- Increasing the base pay for police officers and 911 dispatchers to help fill long-standing vacancies and to ensure that public safety levels are maintained
- Increasing the annual budget for maintaining the City's infrastructure (including storm drains, water, sewer, roads, and sidewalks)
- Funding a position to actively seek grants and centralize purchasing in order to increase the City's revenue and purchasing power
- Establishing a five-year Community Improvement Plan that allows the City to plan for future projects
- Funding projects to replace aging equipment at the Recreation Center and Colonial Park Pool, renovate the Poor Farm Ditch pedestrian bridges, make improvements to the City's water and sewer services, and provide alternative options to stormwater detention
- Continuing funding for the Buffalo Speedway road-surface replacement and drainage improvements, and for Phase I and Phase II of the Virtual Gate Project
- Modifying West U taxpayer support to the Tri-Sports organization from approximately \$250,000+ to \$130,000+ a year, as more than 80% of participants in Tri-Sports are now located outside West U in neighboring cities within Harris, Brazoria, and Fort Bend counties.

We agree that sports are an important fabric of any community, because the lessons, values, and memories created for players and families can last a lifetime. While this recent decision has been criticized by some and praised by many in our community, the simple fact is that the financial life of Home Rule cities has changed and our adopted Budget has changed to meet those challenges.

The main issue regarding the City's traditional support of Tri-Sports is that, currently, more than 80% of the players live outside of West U. Consequently, every West U taxpayer has been subsidizing these players to play in youth sports leagues that now extend well beyond our city limits.

Tri-Sports has experienced exponential growth since its creation in West U in 1987. Today, softball has no boundaries, with players coming from as far west as Katy and soccer has players coming from 136 zip codes. West U Little League participation is one of the largest in the nation – and its boundaries now extend from Highway 59 south to Alt. 90, and from the western railroad tracks east to Alameda Road. The Tri-Sports organization that we remember fondly in its youth has grown up, and we should all be proud of that accomplishment.



Unfortunately, there are some who have characterized West U as having turned its back on Tri-Sports – but that is not the case. As part of the 2020 Budget recently approved by the Council, West U has offered the following continued support to Tri-Sports:

- At **NO COST** to Tri-Sports, this organization will have continued priority/sole use of the West U Recreation Center fields (an annual estimated value well in excess of \$100,000).
- At **NO COST** to Tri-Sports, West U will provide **IN-KIND** services for water, electricity, trash services, and room rentals, which cost the West U taxpayer approximately \$30,000 annually.

Due to the changing political, financial, and legal environments, the West U City Council, in all fairness, has chosen to eliminate the \$125,000 cash contribution to Tri-Sports, and to allocate that money to all West U taxpayers. Providing the use of the sports fields at no cost, coupled with our in-kind contribution of services (together valued in excess of \$130,000), seems quite fair for the time being, all things considered.

Lastly, I'm proud of this Council for how it has tackled this difficult issue, and for reviewing all expenses objectively, to ensure that our City remains financially sound – while still providing the superior services that are valued by all City taxpayers. In the end, the adopted 2020 Budget will be fair for all taxpaying homeowners in West U.