

City to try new crime-prevention tool

■ **City Council members also agreed to cut employee pensions, and tentatively approved next year's budget.**

BY PATRICIA SAGASTUME
Special to the Miami Herald

North Miami Beach will try out a new anti-theft product called **SmartWater**.

SmartWater is a liquid that can be applied to valuables, where it leaves traces not visible in ordinary light. But police technicians, using ultraviolet light, can detect the traces. And traces from each bottle of SmartWater have a unique signature, enabling police to identify the owner of stolen property.

North Miami Beach will be the first city in Miami-Dade County to test SmartWater.

The City Council unanimously approved using

\$156,000 from the city's criminal asset forfeiture program to fund the pilot program and other programs. Three other task forces will receive forfeiture money to increase police presence during the holidays, improve surveillance in the gang/fraud unit and promote domestic violence awareness.

According to SmartWater's website, the company normally sells its product, along with a three-year license and support services, for \$349 per household. But the police will have 500 kits to make available for free.

BUDGET APPROVED

Also on Wednesday, the City Council tentatively approved a 2014 budget of \$116.7 million.

The tax rate will remain at \$6.60 per \$1,000 in taxable property value. That means

longtime homeowners can expect to pay about 1.7 percent more in tax because of rising assessed home values.

Council members were effusive in their compliments of new City Manager Ana Garcia, who is the third person in the position in three years. On the job for nearly two weeks, the council members praised Garcia's early efforts reaching out to groups and citizens.

Even Councilwoman Barbara Kramer, who didn't approve Garcia's hiring, was won over.

"I see light at the end of the tunnel. I mean, I don't even see a tunnel anymore," she said.

The council will hold a final budget hearing at 5:30 p.m. on Sept 24 at City Hall, 17011 NE 19th Ave.

PENSION CHANGES

The council also ap-

proved a reduction pension benefits for the city's non-uniformed employees.

Among other things, the new plan will give future retirees a pension payment equal to 2.5 percent of their final working salary per year of service, down from 3 percent. For example, a retiree with 20 years of service would get 50 percent of his working pay, rather than 60 percent.

Employees will keep any benefits they already have earned, however. So a worker who already has been with the city for 10 years could retire after 20 years on 55 percent of working pay — 3 percent per year for the first 10 years and 2.5 percent per year for the next 10 years.

Also, workers would have to stay with the city for at least 10 years before being vested, up from the current

six years. And the minimum retirement age would increase to either 62 years old with 10 years of service or 60 with 25 years of service.

The city's actuary says the plan will save taxpayers \$736,000 per year.

"This is the second step of three steps toward pension reform on all three of our pensions. This is what was bargained with collectively," said Assistant City Manager Mac Serda.

Some members of the workers' union, AFSCME Local 3293, complained about the changes, saying they had not given up the right to vote on pension changes, which previously required approval of two-thirds of union members. The city says the union agreed to give up that right.

"I stand here this afternoon, just to make this perfectly clear, we the members

of AFSCME Local 3293 voted on our contract," said Hubert Rose, the union's vice president. "We did *not* vote to give up the right of the 66 2/3 vote for the general employee pension."

But City Attorney Darcee Siegel read statements from the city's pension lawyer, James Linn. In the letter dated June 28, 2010, Linn's opinion states that the amendments do not need approval from the "66 2/3 vote for the general employee pension" because "it is an improper delegation of the city council's legislative powers," Siegel said.

The city's position is that the retirement plan, which was created by an ordinance adopted by the council, can only be amended by an ordinance of the city council.

The amended version goes into effect Oct. 1, the start of the new budget year.