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Baton Rouge mayor pitches big raises for police — paid for with money currently for libraries

BY PATRICK SLOAN-TURNER | Staff writer

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Mayor-President-Elect Sid Edwards speaks before the 2025 Metro Council Inauguration at City Hall on Thursday, January 2, 2025.

Javier Gallegos

East Baton Rouge Mayor-President Sid Edwards wants to ask voters to raise salaries for Baton Rouge Police Department officers — and to pay for it by cutting the budget for libraries.

The plan, announced Thursday via a news release, would move the library, which currently has its own property tax, into the city-parish general fund, said Edwards' communication director, Falon Brown.

Money that currently goes to the library would then be rededicated to police and other initiatives.

The proposal would raise average starting pay for BRPD officers from \$40,900 to \$58,000. The raises would be the highest ever for BRPD officers, the mayor said, ranging from a 15% bump to 41% depending on rank.

"Without a doubt, I am committed to making this city safer while increasing the efficiency of taxpayer dollars and preserving the quality of publicly funded institutions," Edwards said in the news release. "Careful consideration has been made to ensure that we will maintain the best publicly-funded library system in the state. I am looking forward to working with the EBR Metro Council to better prioritize how the city-parish spends valuable taxpayer money."

Edwards said the library is collecting more money from taxpayers than it needs, creating a surplus — which he called "overtaxation."

Library officials push back

Assistant Library Director Mary Stein called Edwards' statement "misleading" and that calling their fund balance a "surplus" was "incorrect."

"What we have is a fund balance, because we pay as we go," Stein said.

The library plans to have a \$92,771,880 fund balance at the end of the year, different than a surplus, Stein said, because that money is purposely saved and used to pay for maintenance, renovations and development in the same way you would pay for something in cash. The library's 2025 budget of \$61.1 million is funded separately from the parish general fund.

"We get our revenue from the property tax, and right away we start saving it," she said.

Brown did not have a number for how much the library's budget would be cut, but said the mayor "is dedicated to preserving the integrity of our local libraries and understands the value they bring to the community." Stein said the library already was planning to propose a reduction of their millage rate from 11.1 mills to 10.5 mills at Metro Council next week.

A mill is a dollar of tax on every \$1,000 dollars of assessed property value.

Library leadership was not part of conversations that went into Edwards' proposal, Stein said.

Funding for police officers

Edwards, who took office last month, made hiring more BRPD officers a central plank of his campaign last year.

BRPD's budget was cut this year by about \$9 million, from \$98 million to \$107 million, largely due to lost sales tax revenue that was transferred to St. George.

Brown said the initiative would add \$13.5 million dollars to the annual budget for BRPD, but "not all of that money is being taken away from the library system."

BRPD has struggled for years to fill vacancies in its ranks, and department leaders have frequently blamed pay that is lower than other law enforcement agencies in the area.

Police Chief Thomas Morse praised Edwards' goals of raising officer salaries. He said the agency is operating under a shortage of around 100 officers.

"I definitely appreciate the mayor being forward thinking and wanting to get us more money," Morse said. "More money is going to be the number one way that we can fix our staffing issue."

Not just police officers

Edwards' proposal also includes additional funding for infrastructure and economic development, as well as more funding for Metro Council members' district projects.

"Careful consideration has been made to ensure that we will maintain the best publicly-funded library system in the state," Edwards said. "I am looking forward to working with the EBR Metro Council to better prioritize how the city-parish spends valuable taxpayer money."

According to the mayor's office, Metro Council members will vote on the proposal in March. If it passes, the initiative will be added to voters ballots in October.

District 9 councilman Dwight Hudson had yet to see the details of the rededication proposal, but liked how it sounded.

"It seems like it's in line with what I've been calling for over the past several years," Hudson said. "I look forward to going through the plan and seeing the allocations in detail, but I'm optimistic in that it seems like a serious proposal to reprioritize city-parish spending."

District 5 councilman Darryl Hurst said that, while he is for the mayor finding a way to pay BRPD officers some of the highest wages possible, just nine officers graduated the academy this year after the former mayoral administration gave officers the highest raise in agency history just a couple years ago.

"Money alone does not fix the local problem of people not wanting to be in BRPD. It's the perception of the law enforcement agency which has to change," Hurst said.

Hurst said he likes the direction Edwards' leadership is leading the parish, but feels he needs to "challenge" the mayor on this proposal, citing the many other city-parish workers in departments like public works and maintenance who are forced to work multiple jobs to make ends meet. He said these workers need raises just as much as BRPD does.

"311 is as important as 911," Hurst said. "311 gets the roads unflooded. 311 gets the snow out of the road. 311 gets the tree out of the road, so that 911 can come to your doorstep."

Baton Rouge leaders have tried before to re-route some library funds for other purposes.

In 2021, some metro council members attempted to redirect 1 mill from the library's 10.52 millage rate and .25 mills from the 1.06 mills for Mosquito Abatement and Rodent Control. The money would have beefed up funding for the parish's flood protection system.

But the council rejected the measure amid an outcry from library supporters.

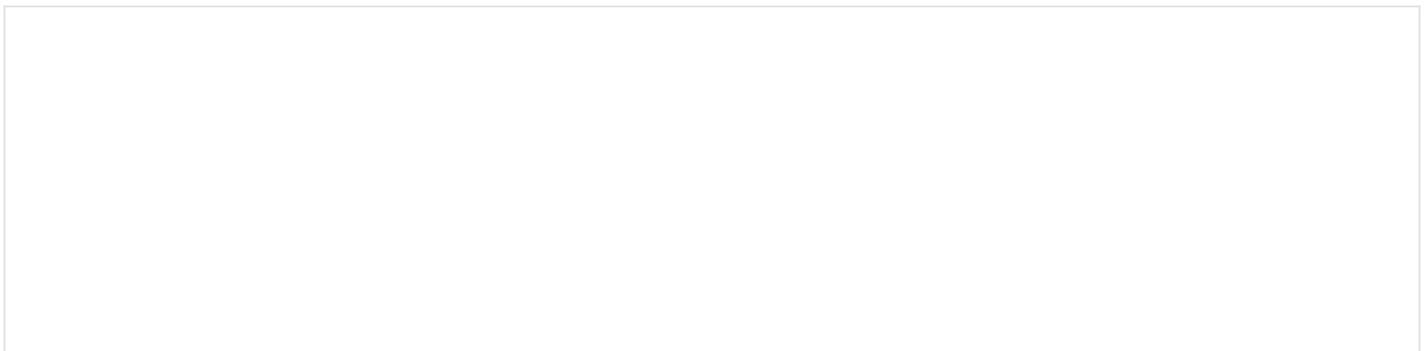
In 2015, some Baton Rouge leaders unsuccessfully attempted to persuade the library board to shrink its tax millage so that money could be raised for a mental health treatment center.

Stein said redirecting library taxes has failed repeatedly, pointing to the common "we love our libraries" signs in front yard throughout Baton Rouge.

"We all want to do our part, and we think we're doing our part by helping to build literacy to prevent crime," she said.

This is a developing story.

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