

Sharp drop in fees collected affects budget

Jeff Piorkowski *Special to Sun News*

The COVID-19 pandemic has been costly for Lyndhurst Municipal Court, and therefore things will be a bit more costly for the communities it serves — and that contribute to its budget.

During Monday's online Mayfield Village Council caucus, Finance Director Ronald Wynne told council members that, due to a large drop in the number of traffic citations being issued within Hillcrest communities, the court has seen a big decrease in court cost receipts.

The six communities the court serves — Lyndhurst, Mayfield Heights, Richmond Heights, Gates Mills, Mayfield and Highland Heights — help support the court based upon the percentage of cases each community contributes to the court docket during the previous year.

In Mayfield's case, the decrease in parking and speeding tickets will lead to an extra payment to the court for the first six

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months of the year of \$31,835.

"The (court's) deficit for the first six months was approximately \$200,000," Wynne said.

Each July, finance directors meet with the Lyndhurst Municipal Court judge and court staff to review the court's budget for the first six months of the year.

"We (finance directors) went over it with the judge (Dominic Coletta), and he said traffic enforcement is the heart of their operating budget, and it's taking a hit this year," Wynne said.

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MAYFIELD VILLAGE

Suspicious activity *Beta Drive*

A Holiday Inn employee went to a room July 21 and discovered drug paraphernalia. The room was rented to two adults and a child, who had been staying there for several nights but were not present at the time. They were advised to leave when they returned. The room was in the name of a 24-year-old Cleveland woman. Charges are pending.

Suspicious person *SOM Center Road*

Officers located some youths on bikes near Deacon's auto dealership around 3:30 a.m. July 28. They were returned to their home on Kenwood Court and their parents were advised that the children could be cited for a curfew violation if it happens again in the future.

Police Blotter

Juvenile complaint *Hardwood Court*

A resident expressed concern at 10 p.m. July 26 regarding an estimated 10 youths playing in the street near Hanover Drive. Officers spoke with a few of them and confirmed that they were just spending time together and would be leaving shortly.

Disturbance *Derby Drive*

Officers responded to a complaint of a loud party at a home around 11:45 p.m. July 25. The homeowner was told to shut off the music and keep the noise down if the guests remained outside the home.

Theft *Wilson Mills Road*

A coach from Mayfield High School reported July 23 that various items had been stolen from a locked office at the school. An estimated total of \$400 in items were reported stolen and included shoes, swimsuits and other athletic gear. No suspects were identified.

Court

FROM A1

"He said all the communities, rightfully so, have significantly cut back on their traffic enforcement, and that's impacting the fees the court's realizing and resulting in the operating deficit."

Wynne said the court had hopes that, for the second half of the year, enforcement would increase, but the recent rise in COVID-19 cases has kept the number of tickets issued to a minimum.

"They're projecting right now for the second half of the year a potential deficit of \$300,000 to \$400,000," Wynne said. "Our (Mayfield) portion of (paying) that would probably be \$60,000.

"The court, in general, has run an efficient operation," Wynne said. "The last time (Mayfield) had to pay into their operations was back in 2006. So, since 2006, they've been self-sufficient and operating very efficiently."

Wynne noted that, with the coronavirus shutdown, fewer people are driving and that police departments are seeking to reduce exposure to the virus by stopping fewer drivers.

Coletta, who did not take part in the Mayfield caucus meeting, was reached by phone at its conclusion. He provided figures that detailed how the citation and dollar numbers have fallen.

"Every governmental agency is hurting right now," Coletta said. "My attitude has always been show up to work every day, handle these cases — and not continue cases — and the court's finances are going to be fine. And that held true for (his first)

two years (on the bench).

"And then this year came and I had to start really digging into, 'Geez, how does the court get funded?' It's funded with court costs, and the great majority of cases that come into the court are traffic and criminal cases."

As for the numbers, Coletta said that in April 2019, combined traffic citations from police departments in the six communities totaled 830, compared to April 2020's total of 29 — a 97 percent decrease.

In May 2019, there were 817 citations issued, compared to 155 this May, a decrease of 81 percent. In June 2019, there were 712 citations issued, compared with 173 this June, a drop of 73 percent. And, through July 26, 2019, there were 830 traffic enforcement tickets issued, while this year, through the same date, there were 129 — an 84 percent decrease.

Coletta said that, from January to July, traffic citations are down from 2019 by 59 percent.

COURT ADDITIONS

Coletta said there are some positive things happening at the court. In December and January, court staff were trained on new case management software, which was purchased with the help of a \$100,000 grant from the Ohio Supreme Court.

The Lyndhurst Municipal Court paid the remainder of the \$195,000 cost for the software, which was activated in late February.

"With that new case management software, we now take e-payments," he said. "We've really tried to work on refining our collection processes. So, in July, although citations were down 84 percent, our traf-

fic/criminal court costs were only down 59 percent during that same time period."

"We've been sending out more reminders to people who have past-due notices, but also having the ability to take electronic e-payments."

Additionally, the court received a \$60,000 grant, again from the Ohio Supreme Court, to enhance its video conferencing.

"With that money, we have put three new video conferencing units in the courthouse (located at Lyndhurst City Hall), one in each courtroom and one in the prosecutor's office," Coletta said. "That's three, but we got funding for seven.

"We also put one in the Lyndhurst jail, the Mayfield Heights jail and the Highland Heights jail and the Cuyahoga County jail."

Coletta said having video conferencing equipment installed in the Lyndhurst jail, also located in City Hall, is a help, in that it takes two police officers to escort a prisoner to court for a hearing, and one of those officers is usually called in from the road to do so.

"And," he said, "it's always dangerous to transport a prisoner."

With the new system, prisoners can see and speak with Coletta from jail, and the prisoner's lawyer can also be brought into the conference from his or her office.

Conferencing also allows those who aren't in jail to speak with the judge from their own computer. The conferencing equipment is being installed in the jails this week.

Another grant, this one for \$25,000, will allow, by fall or winter, for the court to accept electronic citations from police departments.