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City's legal fees could top \$1 million

Attorney kept busy with contracts and suits

NORTH PORT City leaders have loaded their attorney, Rob Robinson, with work this year, and now the bill is coming due.

By summer's end, North Port could spend almost \$1.3 million on legal services for the year, ranging from contract negotiations with employee unions to lawsuits against residents who refuse to clean up their yards.

"You really can't blame Robinson, because a lot of these decisions were made by the commission," said Commissioner Vanessa Carusone, noting that Robinson and his Sarasota-based firm Nelson Hesse are treated more like a city department than a contracted service provider.

"It's not like he's out looking for extra money," she said.

The city attorney is a commission-appointed position that Robinson has held for the past seven years. Through Robinson, the city has access to Nelson Hesse's legal team at an hourly rate of \$175, an amount that has not changed since 2005.

The workload pileup has ballooned North Port's legal bills way beyond the \$675,000 the city planned on spending this budget year.

In fact, North Port's legal costs will more than double what the city spent just two years ago.

"Basically it's because a lot is going on," said Commissioner Fred Tower.

Robinson is defending the city's controversial construction traffic road fee, charged to builders for dinging up city roads. Builders say it is an illegal impact fee and want it overturned and refunded. The city has collected more than \$600,000 from the fee since its inception, money North Port will hold onto if Robinson can convince the courts it is legal.

In addition, Robinson has been asked to go after people who rack up more than \$10,000 in code enforcement fines. This has led to 27 current cases and \$35,000 in fines collected this year and another \$52,000 in outstanding judgments from the courts.

"While we do have several extraordinary matters, I believe the volume of work is typical of a growing city like North Port," Robinson wrote in an e-mail.
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