

After warnings of cash-strapped coffers, Jones gives city workers \$1.9M in bonuses

By NED OLIVER Richmond Times-Dispatch | Posted: Friday, December 16, 2016 10:30 pm

As a parting gift to city employees, outgoing Richmond Mayor Dwight C. Jones padded their paychecks with across-the-board bonuses totaling \$1.9 million.

The decision has raised concerns among the incoming mayor and some current and future City Council members, who recall how during budget deliberations six months ago Jones' administration resisted calls to increase funding for city schools while pushing through several tax and fee increases.

"I believe we should recognize and appreciate the hard work of our public servants, but I do not think this was a fiscally prudent decision given the challenges we face," Mayor-elect Levar Stoney said in a statement.

Jones announced the bonus in an email to city employees Tuesday titled "Mayor's End of Year/End of Term Thank You."

Full-time employees received \$500 extra in their paychecks Friday, and part-time employees received \$250. The bonuses did not extend to employees of the city school system.

"When I reflect on this time and the many accomplishments, as well as the challenges, I will do so knowing that Richmond's resurgence is due to many of the successes we've realized together over this time, successes that can now be built upon," Jones wrote.

Jones' press secretary, Tammy Hawley, acknowledged in an email that the administration resisted cuts to city departments during the budget season beyond a 12 percent cut to all departments' discretionary budgets, which cover expenses such as travel and office food.

But she said that as of the end of the first three months of the fiscal year, the city is projecting a surplus. She could not provide the exact amount but said it was enough to cover the bonuses.

The projected surplus represents a significant change in fortunes for the city, which administrators have portrayed as cash-strapped and fiscally constrained.

"I'm excited that people will be able to have some additional spending money at the holidays, but it's curious how they've found money all of a sudden," said incoming 2nd District Councilwoman Kim Gray, who served on the Richmond School Board at the time the budget was passed.



Dwight Jones

Richmond Mayor Dwight C. Jones delivered his 2016 State of the City address Jan. 28, 2016, at the Sara Belle & Neil November Theatre.

“When we were going through our schools budget battle and trying to get teachers’ salaries decompressed, there seemed to be a lot of concerns about city services being compromised. I’m excited to learn there’s this additional money, and I’d like to know moving forward what we plan to do with it,” she said.

In addition to pushing back against calls to increase school funding, administrators successfully pushed through \$9 million in increased fees they said were necessary to restore city services. The administrators had said those services were underfunded the previous fiscal year, leading to, among other things, the city drastically cutting back on cutting grass in public parks and medians.

For instance, city administrators said they expected to bring in \$1.5 million in new revenue by increasing the city’s vehicle licensing fee by \$7 annually, from \$23 to \$30, and increasing the cost of street parking from 75 cents to \$1.25 an hour.

Administrators also cut grants to community groups, including the Maymont Foundation, Sports Backers and CultureWorks, by 25 percent.

“I’m not opposed to people who are working hard for the public getting a bonus, especially at Christmastime,” said outgoing Councilman Charles R. Samuels.

“But, it does seem incongruous to cry poor all year when council wants to put money toward things the citizens need and then give bonuses at the end of the year.”