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News

City passes 2009 budget

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By ANDREW J. BERNSTEIN, The Saratogian

SARATOGA SPRINGS — The City Council's second meeting in two days was not without drama, but it ended with the adoption — by unanimous vote — of a budget that avoids increasing property taxes and reduces spending from 2008 levels.

Commissioner of Finance Kenneth Ivins Jr. began the meeting by explaining several changes made to the budget since Monday's presentation. Chief among these was the re-allocation of \$648,887.29 of contingency funds to various budget items to avoid an increase of property taxes.

Ivins also removed an additional \$568,000 from the expected property tax revenue to compensate for the flat tax rate.

The city's total operating budget for 2009 will be around \$36 million.

Commissioner of Public Works Skip Scirocco was the most vocal in his objections to Ivins' proposed budget. As proposed, the budget would have cut \$249,835.87 from the Public Works budget.

The council room was crowded Tuesday, with numerous DPW employees turning out to express their disapproval of proposed cuts.

Scirocco pointed out that DPW employees fill an important role in keeping the city safe.

"If you cut the street line, these are the people who are out there before the police and before the fire engines," he said. "How can you put a price on safety?"

Scirocco elicited cheers from the crowd when he said he would direct complaints to his colleagues supporting the budget.

"When they call, I'm going to give them your number, your number and your number," he said, indicating Mayor Scott Johnson, Commissioner John Frank and Ivins.

Later in the meeting, Franck suggested transferring \$120,000 from a state-mandated reserve line to the labor line in DPW. The money is held each year to settle lawsuits stemming from assessment grievances.

The council agreed that the funds in the reserve line would need to be replenished from new revenues early in 2009, possibly from the sale of the Lillian's lot, which occurred in 2007.

Although still seeing cuts of about \$130,000 from his budget, Scirocco indicated that he could work with the additional revenue to maintain most city services.

The council did not vote to impose a one-year hiring freeze because the resolution was not yet complete, but Ivins said the

council would consider it at its next meeting.

Although the council met its goal of adopting a budget by the Nov. 30 deadline, Ivins said there were numerous points in the budget that gave him pause.

"I'm not comfortable with the entire budget. I think we need to make more cuts, but I couldn't find a place to do it," he said.

During the meeting, Ivins said the city should start thinking now about the 2010 budget.

He further pointed out that the contingency fund used to forestall a tax increase had been set aside to compensate for a possible contractual pay increase for union employees. Six of the city's seven unions are now in the process of negotiating their contracts, although Ivins would not comment on the status of the negotiations.

"The city is going to be looking at tougher financial decisions a years from now," Ivins said.

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