

Spa City council delays vote on budget

Revised plan maintains property tax increase; Meeting on for tonight

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SARATOGA SPRINGS -- Here we go again.

That's the way Finance Commissioner Ken Ivins introduced his presentation of a revised 2009 city budget Monday, the latest in a string of spending proposals city officials have considered since he first introduced a plan in early October.

Ivins' latest budget -- which officials will take up again tonight during a special City Council meeting at 6:30 -- calls for the city to spend \$37.3 million in 2009, a \$1.5 million spending decrease from this year.

Despite the cut, the proposal still demands a 3.5 percent property tax increase for city residents, an uptick city officials said they didn't like having to implement but called necessary, given the financial tumult the city is currently experiencing.

It also marks an improvement from the 8.64 percent tax increase passed last year, they noted.

"Any tax increase is difficult for those struggling to get by, but this is low by comparison," Mayor Scott Johnson said in an interview after the meeting.

The most recent revision to the city budget was prompted by a Nov. 12 proposal from Gov. David Paterson to strip the city of half the funding it expected to receive next year for hosting the Saratoga Gaming and Raceway.

The city originally budgeted \$3.78 million in revenue, but has drawn the number down to \$1.89 million, an amount city councilors said they negotiated during a visit to the governor's office earlier in the day.

Commissioners Ron Kim and Anthony "Skip" Scirocco said accepting the cut -- which requires the approval of the legislature and may not be voted on until next year -- would send the message that the city could go without, essentially sealing its own fate.

"I was under the impression that we were going to continue negotiating and not lie down," said Scirocco, the public works commissioner.

Johnson, however, said the city was "not abandoning the issue by any means" but that "we can't simply ignore what's happening in front of us."

Ivins -- who said he's heard overwhelmingly from citizens in favor of cutting spending rather than raising taxes -- also suggested removing all but five capital projects proposed for next year. That means deferring efforts to further the city's proposed recreation facility and waterfront park.

Officials will still consider a trio of public safety facility proposals they heard last week, and may select a design in the next 60 days. However, no money was set aside to bond the project.

Additional proposals from Ivins include implementing a one-year freeze on salaries for all appointed city personnel -- a move that would save just \$13,000 but send a "symbolic message" -- and passing a one-year hiring freeze.

The new budget also takes \$800,000 from the city's \$4 million reserve fund.

Accounts Commissioner John Franck suggested the city take another \$546,000 from the fund in order to pass a budget with a zero percent tax increase.

"Why not give our homeowners a stimulus package?" he said.

The city has also revised its sales tax expectations, changing the projected 2009 revenue from \$9.725 million, a 3.8 percent increase from this year, to \$9.225 million, a decrease from this years \$9.3 million take.

Commissioners, many of whom were seeing the budget for the first time at the meeting, said they needed more time to consider its implications before taking it to a vote.

The spending plan must be adopted by Sunday, or the original budget proposed by Ivins will automatically be adopted. It can be amended, but a final tax rate is due to the county by Jan. 1.

The levy cannot be revised after it is submitted, and future amendments would require a balancing of the budget.

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