

Observer Report

Community Budget Meeting

May 5, 2011

Observer: Betty Hayford

This was a special meeting to explain and begin the budget consideration for FY 2012. Wally Bobkiewicz chaired the discussion. Rainey, Fiske, and Burrus attended. Jane Grover arrived late. Many city staff were present. The meeting lasted from about 7:00 pm to about 8:30. Eleven citizens spoke.

The core of the meeting was a slide presentation by the City Manager outlining the budget expectations and issues and the plans to review all city services. Some of the presentation had been shown before, showing that using current assumptions, revenues were projected to increase by 2% in coming years, and expenses would increase more, resulting in an anticipated deficit of \$1.4 million for 2012 and \$3.2 million in 2013.

The report also pointed out that maintaining public infrastructure is critical, particularly streets, fleet vehicles, parking lots, play grounds, athletic facilities, etc. The backlog needs to be addressed, and the debt level is already too high. He recommends transferring funds from the general fund to capital investment and maintenance, which would increase shortfall.

The city will undertake a thorough review of all city services. They will review how current programs meet the goals of the Strategic Plan and the Council's Thirteen Goals for Evanston. They will also prepare a worksheet on each program including the costs, revenues, trends in demand, and whether the program is essential or non-essential.

Bobkiewicz outlined the schedule for budget deliberations:

- This week has had this meeting plus opportunities for citizen input at various locations around the city and on the web.
- May 16 meeting will review these citizen responses.
- August 8, a meeting will release data on the breakdown of current services, community comparisons that are being made, and recommendations for program reductions
- September council meetings,
- October 7, staff will present a balanced budget to Council, to be discussed for November adoption.

Eleven citizens commented, primarily regular participants in council meetings. John Zbesko said he is happy to see new measures of programs. He asked about differences in revenue/expense ratios in different recreation programs. Wally replied that this may lead to council policy decisions, such as subsidizing youth recreation programs but looking for self-funding from adult recreation programs. Junad Rizki spoke at some length, saying city is not showing real costs of programs and questioning accuracy of staff figures. City needs to revise organizational charts; utility department needs to be looked at; many expenses are not justifiable. Kevin O'Connor questioned the 3-1-1 system, questioned many expenses, expressed concern about the low turnout at the meeting, and proposed reducing the salaries of the city manager, the mayor, and aldermen. Mike Vasilko made requests for future meetings: that state representatives are invited to talk about pensions; that NU representatives talk about town/gown relationship; and more information on labor negotiations.

A young African American man whose name I didn't get talked about the need for the city to create jobs, perhaps in the green energy area, and the need to improve public transportation. Kate Mahoney emphasized the need to prioritize mental health services. Peggy Nelson, a resident of Glencoe, pointed out the link between city values and city businesses, specifically the contributions made by the arts to city businesses as well as quality of life. She recommended the city develop a plan and vision for the arts. Carl Bova asked that the city identify all city owned property and its uses, and recommended multi-year analysis of operations, especially in variable areas like snow removal and yard waste, in order to better predict costs. Marge Anderson expressed concern about sidewalk cafes obstructing public sidewalk access, and proposed higher fees for sidewalk use.

Ron Blickman urged that in making comparisons with other cities we not only consider actual services and costs but the satisfaction that residents express with their services. Jeff Smith emphasized the need to keep investing in the future. We should invest in what draws people to Evanston, including the arts. We have intellectual capital and human energy that can be mobilized. John Zbesko spoke again and urged that public safety services also be carefully evaluated. This is a large part of the budget and needs better information.

There was modest commentary by the three aldermen before adjournment.

.