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Taxpayers demand lower budget

Angela Carter, Register Staff
04/20/2007

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NEW HAVEN — Spirited taxpayers filled the Aldermanic Chamber Thursday and repeatedly took the microphone telling aldermen to send the administration's proposed \$445.2 million budget, for fiscal 2007-08, back to Mayor John DeStefano Jr. for spending reductions.

"Please send this budget back to the mayor and let him know it's too much for the residents and taxpayers to handle," Westville resident Mary Falkner said during the aldermanic Finance Committee's final public hearing on the proposed package.

A group of citizens submitted a 12-page proposal highlighting areas of the budget they believe should be trimmed, starting with a decrease in all departments of 10 percent.

"What I'm interested in helping is to foster a dialogue," said Jeffrey Kerekes, a social worker who spoke on behalf of the group.

Many of the recommendations focused on environmentally friendly ideas, such as installing energy-saving bulbs in streetlights, transmitting documents electronically whenever possible to reduce the use of paper and avoid delivery fees, adding hybrid vehicles to the city's fleet and using online postage services.

The document also suggests increasing health care co-pays for city employees and offering 427 savings plans instead of pensions for new hires, capping raises at 3 percent or using cost-of-living adjustments for nonunion workers.

Residents are reeling from tax increases driven by state-mandated property revaluation. DeStefano based his budget proposal on phasing in the impact five years to soften the blow.

Four speakers representing local businesses and the tourism industry encouraged the aldermen to sustain the \$900,000 subsidy to Tweed New Haven Regional Airport.

Steve Paganelli, president of the Greater New Haven Convention & Visitors Bureau, said the region is losing \$1 million in conference and convention activity because of inadequate air service.

"Large corporations, major corporations make decisions about locations based on the ability to get to communities and around the globe," said Leonard Smart, associate director of the Greater New Haven Business and Professional Association.

But residents said Tweed's limited offer of destinations is a disincentive when they need to fly.

"I've lived in New Haven all my life and I really don't even know how to get to Tweed New Haven Airport," said Newhallville resident Ken Joyner.

Robert Pellegrino of Westville, a lawyer, suggested a moratorium on adding exempt properties to the tax rolls and investigating current ones to make sure they still meet the criteria for exemption.

Peter O'Connell of Westville called for "an immediate moratorium on school construction projects in the design or planning stages."

The city receives state reimbursements for new and renovated schools and finances most of its portion through bonding. The city's debt service, which includes school construction and capital projects, would increase 13 percent under the mayor's proposal from \$51 million to \$57.7 million.

David Cameron of East Rock said the mayor proposed little change to the Board of Education's request and it should be reviewed again.

Alderman Alexander Rhodeen, D-13, of Fair Haven Heights, asked the crowd how much of a reduction would be sufficient for them. "There are things to cut and there are efficiencies to be gained," he said. "What becomes the line where we've done our job in your eyes? That, I think, is the most crucial information."

An audience member shouted, "Ten percent across the board" and Joyner suggested 5 mills, which would amount to about \$20 million less.

DeStefano has proposed a modest tax rate reduction from 44.85 this year to 43.29 next year.

Speakers also complained that they do not receive good quality services for their tax dollars.

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