

Municipal budget: Montclair proposes tax levy increase of less than 1 percent



The Montclair municipal budget is anticipated to go up by 2.3 percent in 2015. The municipal tax levy, however, is set to increase by a more modest .88 percent.

The Township Council unanimously approved to introduce the \$79,996,437 proposed budget during its Tuesday meeting. Councilman-At-Large Rich McMahon was not present.

In presenting this year's proposed budget, municipal consultant Robert Benecke attributed a \$600,000 increase for snow removal costs, \$79,000 in police salary increases per a contractual salary guide and a \$67,000 increase in taxes associated with library for the overall budget increase.

Medical and insurance costs also increased, but were "tempered" according to Benecke. Per a worksheet provided to The Montclair Times, medical insurance costs for the township increased by over 8 percent from \$5,834,445 in 2014 to \$6,340,000 proposed for 2015. Other insurances such as property and casualty also spiked from \$2,035,994 in 2014 to \$2,479,643 proposed for 2015.

To help offset the costs, Benecke said that a recommendation in the proposed budget is to use \$3,025,000 in surplus budget revenue - the same surplus generated in 2014. In 2014, Montclair used \$2,408,946 in surplus as anticipated budget revenue, according to Benecke.

Montclair's debt reduction efforts have also paid dividends in its budget, according to Benecke. From the end of 2009 to the end of 2014, the township has reduced its debt from \$226,263,253 to \$194,074,757.

In addition to providing the township with financial flexibility, the debt reduction has also decreased the amount the municipality pays in debt service, Benecke said. In 2013, Montclair paid \$10,292,456 in debt service with reductions down to \$8,735,580 in 2014 and \$8,063,000 anticipated for 2015.

All together, the proposed budget will represent a tax increase of \$39 for the average assessed home in Montclair, Benecke said. Acting Township Manager Timothy Stafford told The Montclair Times that the average home in Montclair is assessed at about \$500,000.

As reported, last year's municipal budget featured a flat tax levy.

This year's budget is scheduled to be published in The Montclair Times on May 14 and have a public hearing on June 16, according to Township Clerk Linda Wanat.

Later in the meeting, the Township Council introduced an ordinance to exceed the municipal budget appropriation limits and establish a CAP bank. The ordinance allows for the municipality to increase municipal appropriations by 3.5 percent from the 2014 budget, \$1,870,504.48, with any amount not appropriated to the 2015 budget able to be carried over to either of the next two budgets.

Stafford explained to The Times that such ordinances are a prudent measure to prepare in case of a future emergency.

Extended

The Township Council renewed the liquor license of Rorry Inc., better known as Richie Cecere's Restaurant and Bar during Tuesday's meeting.

After some questions about the renewal during the council's April 7 conference meeting, Township Attorney Ira Karasick reported back that the company has received a special ruling from the state to be able to renew the license.

Though the council has the discretion to impose restrictions before renewal, it could not deny the renewal, Karasick said.

Second Ward Councilwoman Robin Schlager described the former restaurant site as "unkept" and detrimental to the Walnut Street community. Karasick said that he did not believe that the council would be permitted to impose conditions on the license that the property be spruced up.

An attorney representing Rorry Inc. approached the council and asked for the license to be renewed without delay as the building is regularly maintained and the Montclair Fire Department is expected to inspect the building next week as his client looks to reopen.

Mayor Robert Jackson suggested giving the company the benefit of the doubt and approving the renewal - which is for this past year. A renewal for the license will come before the council again in June.

Snow Buddies

John Gouwar, a Life Scout working toward his Eagle Scout with Troop No. 8, provided the council with a presentation on the pilot Montclair Snow Buddies program that he organized this past winter.

Based off of the Snow Buddies program established by Volunteers of America, Montclair Snow Buddies featured seven volunteers that were paired with local seniors. The volunteers were committed to clearing snow from the front and walkways of the seniors' homes following snow events.

Having spoken with Senior Citizens Advisory Committee Chair Ann Lippel and Health and Human Services Director Sue Portuese, the clearing of snow is a primary concern for local seniors, Gouwar said.

Having established a handbook for the program, Gouwar said that he hoped that houses of worship, students, Boy Scouts and other community groups will help expand the program in the coming years.

Lippel told the council that she believed that the program that Gouwar established is sustainable. Portuese said that her hope is to expand the program.

A lot of proclaiming

Earlier on in Tuesday's meeting, Gouwar was honored for his efforts as a Scout - one of nine proclamations read during the evening.

During Tuesday's meeting proclamations were read in honor of Robert and Barbara Constable for their volunteer efforts in the community, the Montclair Women's Club for celebrating its 100th anniversary, Michael Aron who will be honored at this week's NJTV fundraiser and the Montclair Film Festival.

Proclamations were also read declaring May Mental Health Awareness Month and Preeclampsia Month as well as May 3 through May 9 Municipal Clerk's Week.

A memorial proclamation was read in memory of local musician Christopher Wesley White.

Waiting for a call back

During council reports, 4th Ward Councilwoman Renee Baskerville voiced concern regarding the smell of natural gas in her ward, telling her colleagues that she was told by PSE&G that Montclair has among the most gas leaks in the state.

As reported, the scent of natural gas, which began late this winter has had residents along Orange Road concerned.

Stafford recommended that, should residents smell natural gas, they call the Montclair Fire Department. If PSE&G is failing to respond to residents promptly, he asked to be notified.

Baskerville said that initial response has not been an issue as PSE&G crews have come out to inspect areas of the ward, but follow-up communication has been lacking.

Jackson recommended having a PSE&G representative attend a council meeting next month.

Bridging the gap

The Montclair Township Council approved on second reading an ordinance approving the granting of an easement to 491 Bloomfield LLC to construct a pedestrian bridge over municipal property to the Fullerton Parking Deck.

Back in the fold

The Township Council, via resolution, awarded an arborist services contract to First Mountain Arboriculture for the year with an option to extend the contract for an additional year.

In a separate resolution, an electric services contract with Trico Electric LLC was renewed for May 15, 2015 to May 14, 2016.

A proposal

During public comment, resident Al Weller asked for the council to look into unfunded mandates and to establish a

task force with the school district to determine how much money could be saved in the event that such mandates were funded or eliminated.

Specifically, Weller was interested in the computers purchased by the school district to administer PARCC testing.

Weller opined that, by addressing unfunded mandates, the township would either get more value for its tax dollars or a tax decrease.

Out there

Stafford reported to the council that a request for proposal for a consultant to conduct the township's parking study is circulating, with a return date of June 2.

A success

First Ward Councilman Bill Hurlock reported that his Third Annual 1st Ward Beautification Day was a success, with 210 members of the community participating, including about 60 from Montclair State University.