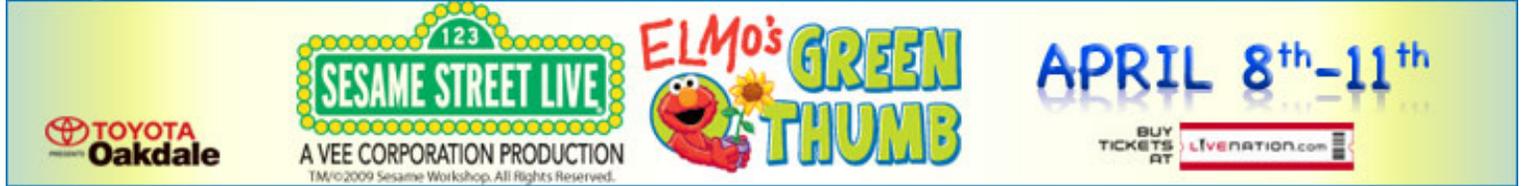


New Haven Register

Serving New Haven, CT



[Import](#)

Tax watchdog group gets noticed with in-your-face approach

Published: Sunday, October 7, 2007

[No comments posted.](#) | [Email to a friend](#) | [Print version](#) | [ShareThis](#) | [RSS Feeds](#)

By Angela Carter

Editor's note: This is the first in a series of occasional stories profiling individuals and grassroots groups trying to make a difference in government, public policy or their communities. The Register welcomes suggestions on people to highlight in the future. Call reporter Angela Carter at 789-5614 or e-mail acarter@nhregister.com.

NEW HAVEN - The Board of Aldermen's review of the city budget started out this year with the usual workshops featuring city departments and public hearings for citizen comment.

But then something unusual happened.

Residents came out to observe the process and give testimony, but a small group of them went three steps further.

They started to meet with each other regularly. They identified areas of the 2007-08 budget for potential cuts and submitted a proposal to the aldermanic Finance Committee. Then they formed the volunteer New Haven Citizen Action Network, which has emerged as a feisty organization more than willing to tangle with aldermen over its key issue: taxes and spending.

NH CAN Steering Committee members Mona Berman, Harry David, Jeffrey Kerekes and Richard Lee live in the downtown/Wooster Square district, Ken Joyner lives in Newhallville and Gary Doyens in Westville.

"This year it went out of control. This is when it hit the fan," Lee said of a phased-in revaluation scheduled over five years, combined with a tax increase.

"As a result of our interest in the taxes, that got us all together," Berman said. "We kept seeing each other at the meetings."

The grass-roots organization has launched a Web site, www.nhcan.org, to inform taxpayers of the activities of elected officials and government employees, and to raise awareness of fiscal responsibility and restraint. It is a work in progress, mainly by the hands of Kerekes, and eventually will have white papers posted, as well as voting and attendance records of each of the 30 aldermen.

"We want to make a difference," David said.

In early August, Joyner requested that the full board send an item regarding salary range increases for non-union managers back to the Finance Committee for public comment, because the committee did not take comments the night it passed a favorable recommendation.

But Committee Chairman Sergio Rodriguez, D-26, of Westville, said he opened the floor for public comment at a previous meeting, but no one spoke and the item was tabled.

After the board reduced the mayor's proposed tax increase by only 1 mill and subsequently rejected Joyner's request, the group decided to jump into the political fray and endorse some incumbents and challengers in 10 primary races on Sept. 11.

"After sitting through the meetings at the Board of Aldermen, we decided the only way to solve this problem is to work on the elections," Lee said.

All incumbents survived their challenges.

"Because we're nonpartisan, we decided to help some incumbents and some challengers to get a board that's more independent," David said.

Lisa Hopkins, who unsuccessfully challenged Dixwell Alderman Gregory Morehead, D-22, said she hopes NH CAN will become more visible.

"We need to have opportunities to conduct information sessions. They put things in laymen's terms and they help people understand the budget. I think it's wonderful," she said.

Republican mayoral candidate H. Richter Elser said a common theme in the primaries was that neighborhoods need an independent voice in government and NH CAN is doing a good job of making information available and digestible.

"Standing up for good government is not political," he said.

Alderman Rodriguez said he met with NH CAN during the spring budget season but feels the group "closed the door" because Doyens wrote a critical opinion piece and the group sent a letter to the federal U.S. Office of Special Counsel, questioning whether Rodriguez is in violation of the Hatch Act by working for the Housing Authority.

The act restricts political activities of workers paid with federal dollars, to prevent use of their positions for political gain. An investigation has been opened but a finding has not been announced. Rodriguez said he is paid with private endowment dollars.

NH CAN endorsed Rodriguez's opponent, Alan Felder, but Felder lost the primary.

"How does that (calling for an investigation) encourage me to work with them? I was open to their ideas but I told them not all of them could be done this year," Rodriguez said. "I was called a rubber stamp. That's antagonism. That's not the way to build a bridge."

Rodriguez said he remains open to meet with any citizens of the city, particularly on developing a strategy to lobby the General Assembly for reforms to the property tax structure and payments in lieu of taxes, or partial reimbursements given by the state to municipalities on tax-exempt properties.

Doyens said if Rodriguez wants to argue that PILOT payments are insufficient, he should stop supporting projects that take taxable sites off the rolls, such as construction of a city school and the relocation of Gateway Community College from Sargent Drive to downtown.

Most of the aldermen will run opposed in November, but there are four cross-party races and three Democrats are running as write-in candidates. Mayor John DeStefano Jr. has two opponents, Elser and Green Party candidate Ralph Ferrucci. NH CAN plans to evaluate upcoming contests and make a new round of endorsements.

"I hope people are willing to stand up for their convictions," Berman said.

Angela Carter can be reached at 789-5614 or e-mail acarter@nhregister.com.

Reader Comments

The following are comments from the readers. In no way do they represent the view of nhregister.com.

Submit a Comment

We encourage your feedback and dialog and ask you to follow a few simple guidelines when commenting on stories on nhregister.com.

- 1) Please post responsibly.
- 2) Be polite.
- 3) Don't hate.
- 4) If you object to someone's post, use the "Report Abuse" button and we'll review it.
- 5) Users who don't play by the rules will be blocked and won't be allowed to participate.
- 6) Self-promotion of businesses or advertisements of anything for sale are not permitted.

By posting here you agree to abide by our terms and conditions and privacy policy which can be viewed by clicking [here](#).

Name:

Email: (optional)

Comments:

Image Verification: (Case sensitive)



Post Comment