

NEW HAVEN INDEPENDENT

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Budget Watchdogs Release Plan

BY MELISSA BAILEY | FEBRUARY 28, 2008 8:32 AM | [PERMALINK](#) | [COMMENTS \(10\)](#)



Melissa Bailey Photo

No more handouts to Tweed Airport, the Shubert Theater, or the Peace Commission. Sell the city skating rink. As the mayor prepares to unveil a proposed new city budget Thursday night, those are some recommendations from a group of citizen watchdogs.

The [New Haven Citizen's Action Network](#), a grassroots group of taxpayers who united over tax-bill fury and taught themselves the language of city finances, has released its budget recommendations for FY08-09.

The group offered a slew of long-term ideas but only \$2.5 million in specific cuts with specified dollar amounts. [Click here](#) to read

the group's proposal, discussed over tea at the home of Jeffrey Kerekes (pictured above at left) this week.

"We're spending more than we can afford," said Kerekes, a week after Mayor John DeStefano announced the city's facing a \$17 million budget shortfall heading into Fiscal Year 08-09.

The mayor is expected to unveil his budget proposal Thursday at the New Haven Free Public Library on Elm Street at 6 p.m.

Kerekes, a psychotherapist who lives in Wooster Square, has been leading the fight for citizens to get involved in the budgeting process. The group acknowledged some recommendations may be "naive" or implausible, but said the point is to get the dialogue going.

[Click here](#) to read about the work the group did last year. This year, the group is diving in early in the process to try to make more headway in tough budgetary times.

The Chopping Block

Combing through projected expenses of \$469.28 million, the group found only \$2.5 million in specific cuts. The amount is not nearly enough to fill the city's \$17 million budget shortfall, Kerekes acknowledged, but it's a start.

The cuts come from elective subsidies that get examined on the aldermanic chopping block each year. The biggest sum is a \$900,000 subsidy to keep the Tweed-New Haven airport going. The item caused a flurry of controversy last year, with [frustration bubbling up over how long Tweed is taking](#) to become self-sufficient. Aldermen ended up [shaving off](#) \$100,000.



"It doesn't affect a lot of people" said Pat Taylor (pictured) of Tweed. "It affects a select few." She and her husband Bill (pictured at right with Kerekes in top photo) are retirees living on fixed incomes. Their tax bills have prompted second careers as neighborhood activists and budget watchdogs.

Pat Taylor said she and her husband were not political until they got hit with a 2006 tax bill. Then they started paying attention to City Hall. Now they're active in block watch groups, management teams and even local Democratic races for **positions they had never heard of before.**

"This is what grassroots democracy is all about!" beamed Bill Taylor as Kerekes got into the nitty gritty of the proposal.

Kerekes calculated the Tweed subsidy of \$800,000 comes to only \$12/flight. Other subsidies the group wants to cut (figures are from FY 07-08):

- The Shubert Theater, at \$410,000
- The Pilot Pen Tennis Tournament, at \$135,000
- Grove Street Garage, \$458,000
- Small Business Initiative, \$219,000

The group also advocates stopping city financial backing of **the downtown trolley**, which is funded by a newly passed commercial parking fee. The group suggested funds from those fees should go to another cause.

So Long Skating, Golf?

Skeptical of the risk involved in running the city skating rink and golf course, both of which operate on their own revenues, the group advocated selling or leasing both to a private company.

As for the rest of the massive budget, Kerekes acknowledged that "it's a pithy \$2.5 million if you cut this stuff. If you want to cut something substantive," he said, you have to look at long-term and personnel costs. Costs associated with personnel made up 64 percent of the city's general fund in FY07-08.

Kerekes' group sat down last week with a few members of the aldermanic Finance Committee, including Aldermanic President Carl Goldfield, to talk about their ideas.

Goldfield welcomed the input, but said "I think that they are under some misconceptions" on the city's structure and what it can and can't do by law.

Some suggestions — such as consolidating City Plan, Building, Livable Cities and Economic Development departments in the name of efficiency — were struck down as "misguided." Those departments are already consolidated and answer to one boss.

Others, such as zeroing out the budget of the Fair Rent Commission, hit a gray area of the law. State statute 7-148b stipulates the way in which a commission should be created, but doesn't speak of dissolution.

"The Peace Commission has completed its work," wrote NHCAN, taking the axe to the panel's \$3,150 budget. ("No wars in New Haven for a long time," the group quipped.)

The group also advocates renegotiating union contracts to get a defined-contribution instead of defined-benefit pension plan; looking at part-time contract positions in the Board of Ed; slowing down

school construction; and implementing a police overtime policy that would prevent a patrolman from racking up \$175,000 in a single year.

Tough Choices

Would the group support a wage freeze, which the mayor put on the table to unions last week?

"It's hard to get the unions to give you a wage freeze when you just gave yourself a **\$16,000 raise**," Kerekes replied.

What about the mayor's assertion that New Haveners need to lobby Hartford if they want to solve the city's budgetary woes?

"It's just my other pockets that are paying for that," Kerekes replied. "We can't hang all our hopes on that, without looking at what we can cut."

Taking that logic to its conclusion, the mayor has posed that the city could cut the **Stetson Library**. Kerekes said more analysis needs to be done, based not just on circulation numbers, to see if that makes sense.

The one cost the group would like to add to city personnel would be for an inspector general, to actively investigate waste and mismanagement of funds within city government.

Alderman Goldfield called the meeting "productive." He said the group had a lot of good ideas. The specific cuts, such as Tweed and the Shubert, would be discussed as they are every year, he said.

"We're going to be continuing to talk to them," Goldfield said. "It's really positive these people are coming to these meetings and offering suggestions." The dialogue may also "help them better understand the handcuffs on us," he said, in terms of union contracts and state requirements.

Comments

POSTED BY: BEN | FEBRUARY 28, 2008 10:09 AM

The city's golf course is self sufficient.
Why would you shut it down?



POSTED BY: CEDARHILLRESIDENT | FEBRUARY 28, 2008 10:13 AM

BRAVO Jeff and gang! These are all great ideas! My guess is that there others out there that know of more ways to help cut the budget! Now is the time to speak up! If you don't want people to know that it was your info. you can contact Jeff and friends at there web site.
<http://www.nhcan.org/> I am sure many know about Waste and jobs that should not be. Let them know and they will be your voices!

Or come tonight, the mayor is unveiling his budget proposal at the New Haven Free Public Library on Elm Street at 6 p.m.



POSTED BY: CEDARHILLRESIDENT | FEBRUARY 28, 2008 10:18 AM

We also need a Hiring freeze!

POSTED BY: 2ND AMENDMENT | FEBRUARY 28, 2008 10:48 AM

How about the bloated bureaucracy at the Board of Ed? Make 'em re-interview for their jobs and fire the dead wood. Outsource city public works functions, get rid of teacher unions, etc.

POSTED BY: NESTOR MAKHNO | FEBRUARY 28, 2008 12:07 PM

With the average price of a home somewhere around \$400K, I would expect property taxes in

Wooster Square to be fairly high. Do the the tax woes of the bourgeoisie really justify any of these cuts?

POSTED BY: NED | FEBRUARY 28, 2008 12:45 PM

Nestor, are you preparing for the "dictatorship of the proletariat"? LOL. That's what I love about the NHI forums: "Let a hundred flowers bloom, let the hundred schools of thought contend." And to all the people "repping" their neighborhoods, remember: "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun"!



POSTED BY: CONCRENEDWESTVILLERES | FEBRUARY 28, 2008 3:26 PM

While the areas highlighted by NHCAN are a start they would have minimal impact on the property taxes. I believe that the Mayor said that there are about 55,000 housing units in New Haven. These cuts would save a total of about \$22-\$23 per taxpayer. That is insignificant when you look at some of the benefits the city gets. For example, the Shubert Theater. When there is a performance, especially of a popular show or group, the city receives an economic impact. There is parking in the lot next door, a meal at a downtown restaurant, and maybe dessert somewhere downtown. Before cutting the Shubert subsidy, we should analyze the economic impact of keeping the Shubert open and whether the economic impact is enough to justify the subsidy. The Pilot Pen Tennis Tournament also brings in an economic impact with tennis fans coming to the city and spending money. Does it offset the \$135,000? I hope someone will do a study. The Grove Street Garage seems ridiculous and I don't see any impact there. Maybe it can be sold to Yale as they are looking for parking. The tradeoff would be the loss of tax generating property. In any case, before choosing to cut or eliminate the subsidies city leaders need to examine the impact.

The Mayor has a huge task before him as does the BOA. With a \$17 million shortfall this year and a declining economy, how should the city balance the needs for services vs. the burden on taxpayers. Tax collections are at an all-time high as a percentage, so delinquencies are not the issue. The Board of Education may be bloated but is there enough that can be cut so as not to affect the improving quality of education. What can be done about the "dumping" of convicts in New Haven when released from prison because New Haven can provide the services? How can we improve the economics of the city when at least 25-50% of people working for large employers in New Haven don't live in the city and provide little economic impact?

It is easy to look and say that this should be done or that should be done. Yet for every action there is a consequence. Whether the consequence can be minimized is the question. I encourage everyone who reads this site to make your voice heard at the Budget meetings. I know that the Mayor and Aldermen are as interested in keeping taxes as low as possible, but they need input from the average citizens. Together the citizens of New Haven can make a difference and increase the quality of life without damaging our ability to live.

POSTED BY: MINDOFLEN | FEBRUARY 28, 2008 3:34 PM

From one blogger to another: I am glad citizens are banding together to hold the city's feet to the fire. But, I fear, we can get carried away. At the same time, a hidden political genius has a great idea for a presidential ticket. Please see the latest Len's Lens at mindoflen.blogspot.com here <http://mindoflen.blogspot.com/2008/02/law-of-diminishing-returns.html>.

POSTED BY: CHARLIE | FEBRUARY 28, 2008 4:25 PM

Tweed needs to be expanded if the economy is going to survive here.

I'm not sure how the subsidy plays into its continued operation, but it may be necessary as a procedural expense (to have our say in how it gets expanded, we may need to pay a bit for it).

Most of the airport funding comes from the state and federal government, so the \$800-900K city subsidy each year may actually be greatly outweighed by the direct benefits of state and federal

funding -- even before you consider wider economic benefit (such as jobs, business retention, expansion etc).

The first place funding should be cut is the Superintendent's city-funded \$90K gas guzzling SUV (which he has to be able to "safely" get to the schools during snowstorms... in other words, so that the students, teachers and everyday city residents, and not the superintendent, will die if his 8000 pound car happens to run into them). I honestly don't see what is wrong with CT Transit.



POSTED BY: [JEFFREYKEREKES](#) | FEBRUARY 29, 2008 7:16 AM

I encourage you to read our [full document](#). If you don't have time, be sure to check out our [executive summary](#). The benefit of the full document is that it tries to put some of the recommendations in context. We are trying to avoid draconian cuts to city services by identifying places we can cut now so as to avoid more harsh cuts later. The city is BILLIONS of dollars in debt which we need to repay. Those billions are on top of an increasing city budget. Its like living on credit cards. Soon, more and more money goes to paying debts and you start wondering where the money will come from to pay for food (or for the police officers and firemen you need every day.).

Last year's full city budget was \$717 Million dollars and only \$191 million came from property taxes. \$526 Million came from either debt or the state. That makes us EXTREMELY beholden to others. We know the Federal Government is spending more that it can afford so we need to be aware that they will start cutting money to States and Cities. The mayor presented last night all the places the State is cutting money on PILOT, for Magnet Schools. We also just had a \$17 million dollar shortfall from the State. We need to be prepared for more cuts to our budget just from these change. What then will we do?

If we start making intelligent cuts now -- without duress -- we can avoid cutting off much more later. This is essentially why we are working hard to try to find places we can make cuts without changing the level of services and eliminating some services if they are redundant or cut subsidies we cannot afford -- especially if they can easily be absorbed by the organization receiving the subsidy.

Please call me if you are interested in hearing more about our recommendations of if you would like us to do a presentation to your group or organization. Perhaps you can get a few people together and we can present and then discuss possible options to move to a more sustainable financial picture for the City. My number is 203-676-0880.

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