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## Mayor proposes 4.6% boost in spending

Stetson library stays; 45 new cops funded

By Mark Zaretsky, Register Staff

NEW HAVEN — Mayor John DeStefano Jr. unveiled a \$465.99 million budget Thursday night that would increase spending by 4.61 percent.

The budget would provide modest increases for education and public safety while continuing to maintain the library system — including the Louis Stetson Branch Library, which DeStefano previously talked about closing.

He presented the budget in a room at the main downtown Ives Memorial Library to a wary crowd of about 100 people, about two-thirds wearing stickers on their chests that read, "I Support Stetson — a Library With Purpose."

The budget now goes to the Board of Aldermen.

The biggest percentage increases are things the city has little control over, including 10.9 percent for utilities, 9.3 percent for debt service, 8.45 percent for pensions and 5.85 percent for increased health care costs.

Education would increase by just 2.65 percent, public safety by 1.85 percent and other city expenditures by 3.63 percent, he said.

Among other things, the budget would fund the hiring of 45 police officers, implement the report on ways to reform the Police Department in the wake of the arrest of police Lt. William White and two of his detectives on federal corruption charges, expand efforts to deal with issues related to the re-entry of formerly incarcerated residents into the community, \$1.2 million in neighborhood commercial facade improvements and a host of youth initiatives.

What's in the budget "is not everything we want to do because we can't afford to do everything we want to do," DeStefano said in a presentation that laid out the pinch New Haven is in between the large amount of tax-exempt property and shrinking state aid.

He urged residents to get involved and express their opinions to their legislators and other officials in Hartford. He pointed out that the largest chunk of New Haven's budget, 48 percent, comes from the state government, versus 44 percent from property taxes.

Faced with a groundswell of opposition to his earlier suggestion of closing the Stetson library, in the heart of the predominantly black Dixwell section, DeStefano's only mention of the issue prior to being asked a question on it was to say, "Libraries, we will continue to own and ... operate all libraries."

He said later that he found a number of ways to close a projected \$17 million budget gap. He made it clear throughout his presentation that he thought one excellent way would be to convince the state to hold to previous pledges regarding funding for payments in lieu of taxes on New Haven's abundant tax-exempt schools and hospitals.

DeStefano said privately later that the proposal to close Stetson, which is the branch closest to downtown, grew out of the fact that "a month ago, the budget was looking really ugly" and it made sense, rather than make lots of little cuts, to find a few big ones.

DeStefano called it "healthy and good" to consider it and said of the response, "a lot of people coming out for public services, I think that's a good thing."

Among the things he is counting on to close the funding gap are \$1.5 million in savings by renegotiating health care benefits, \$1.5 million he believes the city can



raise by updating personal property tax levies and \$2 million in smaller cuts from various city agencies, he said.

Carolyn Baker, who grew up in Newhallville and spent a lot of time at the Stetson Library as a child, wanted to be absolutely sure she heard DeStefano right. So near the end of his budget presentation, she asked him outright if Stetson would remain open.

"At this point in the budget process," it would remain funded, he answered. "I don't think the Board of Aldermen is going to change it," he said as several aldermen in the crowd laughed and shook their heads.

Baker said later that she was "very pleased" to hear that.

"I think every community needs a library," she said. "I think it's a vital resource that we can't afford to lose."

Had DeStefano, now in his eighth term, opted to close the library, it would have chipped away at some of the bedrock upon which his mayoral career was built. He visited the main library on his first day in office in 1994 and used restoring lost library hours and services as an early symbol of his intention to restore New Haven in a broader sense.

"I think library services are a fundamental public service," DeStefano said early in his second term in office. "I think they're an essential element of community well-being."

Just in case he needed to be reminded of that, organizers collected more than 800 signatures in just a few days, and longtime Dixwell resident Mae Gibson-Brown, a retired teacher and a foster mother, presented them to the mayor.

"You can't rip out the heart of a city and make believe it doesn't exist," said Gibson-Brown, who quickly organized Concerned Citizens for the Stetson Branch, which conducted the drive. She said she'll believe the Stetson Library is safe when she sees it printed in the final budget.

DeStefano's predecessor, former Mayor John C. Daniels, was among those in the audience after earlier sending a letter to the New Haven Register regarding the Stetson idea.

Daniels, who made history in 1990 by being elected New Haven's first African-American mayor, said he doesn't usually come out these days for budget addresses, but "I'm particularly interested in this one." In addition to the library, "I'm concerned about how he's going to deal with that \$17 million gap."

Daniels said what DeStefano should do is "stop the abuse of overtime that goes on in the Police and Fire departments."

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