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Activist named to audit board

By Maria Garriga, Register Staff

NEW HAVEN — Mayor John DeStefano Jr. recently named one of his toughest critics to the city Financial Review and Audit Commission.

Jeff Kerekes, a psychotherapist who lives in Wooster Square, has been one of the lead activists with the New Haven Citizen Action Network, which has sharply criticized City Hall spending.

"I hope that by being part of the process, it will be easier to share our ideas," Kerekes said. "The financial situation of the city is pretty scary."

City officials are struggling to find ways to balance the annual budget, while dealing with union contracts and spiraling health care and construction costs.

City Hall said it welcomes his ideas.

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"The commission provides a good opportunity for Mr. Kerekes and other appointees to provide input on the city's financial matters and to continue to be involved. Kerekes has raised questions about policy decisions and has offered alternatives," said Jessica Mayorga, the mayor's spokeswoman. "While the administration does not always agree with his recommendations, public discussions on the issues are always healthy."

The commission gives recommendations to the Board of Aldermen but has no authority to implement the recommendations.

Citizen Action Network members said they support Kerekes' joining the commission but remain skeptical as to whether the commission can have an impact on the city's fiscal policies.

"They have a lot of commissions that do nothing. Do they even meet?" asked Harry David of New Haven, a network member who, like Kerekes, has spent hours going through the budget numbers to find alternatives.

"One can create the appearance of soliciting input without actually doing anything. We will wait and see," David said.

Kerekes said his top priorities would be to push for a budget document that would be easy for the public to understand; to make Form 106 a standard part of each budget (the form provides a detailed description of department budget requests); and seek to end many subsidies given by the city.

The Citizen Action Network's formal proposal argues that most of the city's budget is tied up in worker contracts, pension benefits, insurance and operating costs.

Mayorga, however, said in a statement, "We have worked diligently to cut costs and identify revenue sources as demonstrated in the balanced budget the mayor presented to the public at his community meeting on Feb. 28. Additionally, we've outlined alternatives for balancing our budget so that we have real and effective choices to work with."

To see the complete network proposal, visit www.nhcan.org.

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