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'Hard decisions' urged on city budget

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By William Kaempffer and Elizabeth Benton, Register Staff

NEW HAVEN — At a first public hearing for a proposed city budget that would raise taxes by about 9 percent, taxpayers urged aldermen to scrutinize revenue “assumptions” that might not materialize, and demanded “hard decisions” be made instead of further burdening already strapped residents.

David Cameron, a Loomis Place resident, asked members of the finance committee to push for more details in the plan to privately lease city parking meters for 25 years in exchange for a one-time infusion of cash.

The plan, which is under negotiation, could bring about \$50 million, which the city would spread out over five years. Cameron cautioned officials that the budget was counting the \$10 million and another \$8 million in savings through “innovation-based budgeting,” neither of which of guaranteed money, and possible “wishful thinking.”

Further, he questioned how much long-term revenue the city would be forfeiting in a meter deal in exchange for a short-term infusion of cash.

“It’s very attractive for us to get the money, but what are we giving up?” he said.

Mayor John DeStefano Jr.’s proposed \$476.3 million budget would raise spending by 2.64 percent in fiscal 2010-11, while offsetting expenses through \$1 million in labor concessions, \$8 million in what he terms “innovation-based budgeting” and \$10 million in revenue from the long-term lease of parking meters. His plan would phase in revaluation while dropping the tax rate by one mill to 41.21.

According to official calculations, the average homeowner would see an 8.8 percent increase in taxes. The average condo owner would see an increase of 15.1 percent. Average commercial property taxes would rise by 9.7 percent. Motor vehicle taxes would drop an average of 11.94 percent.

DeStefano’s plan does not call for layoffs and leaves most city services and departments intact. It would continue to seat new classes of police and fire recruits, and include money to renovate the Stetson and Fair Haven library branches.

In a wheelchair, David Hicks, chairman of the Commission on Disabilities, expressed concern about the potential impact on people “with the smallest voices and some of the biggest problems” if the city consolidates its disability and elderly services departments, which is an idea that was floated.

Jeffrey Kerekes, a budget watchdog with the New Haven Citizen’s Action Network, urged creativity in both identifying new revenue sources and potential spending cuts.

He put forth one idea: Tweed New Haven Regional Airport charges private pilots a \$2.50 landing fee, he said. The airport in Waterbury charges \$8.

If people can afford to fly a plane to Long Island for lunch, they can afford, say, a \$25 landing fee, which could generate upward of \$1 million, he estimated.

He also suggested freezing travel for city employees, at a savings of up to \$750,000.

A frustrated Andy Orefice, of Westville, said he's made unpopular and hard decisions to cut costs at his job and tightened the belt at home, keeping his thermostat uncomfortably low to the chagrin of his fiancée. When "push comes to shove" hard decisions have to be made, he said.

"I've made them. My fellow taxpayers have made them. I don't think the city has made them."

The budget incorporates \$8 million in savings through "innovation." DeStefano has suggested that could include staffing changes, privatization, greater reliance on volunteers and outside institutes and a shift to online services.

DeStefano's proposal freezes wages for nonunion staff, and seeks \$1 million in union concessions through decreases in longevity pay, furloughs and changes in medical benefit plans.

DeStefano is also seeking aldermanic approval to enter into a long-term lease of city parking meters to Gates Capital Partners of Cleveland, generating \$50 million to form a Property Tax Stabilization Fund. From that, \$10 million would be used to offset tax increases in fiscal 2010-11.

DeStefano's proposal also calls for increased enforcement of parking meters, and for an increase in parking rates from \$1.25 per hour to \$1.50. Meters would be replaced by pay stations.

Contact William Kaempffer at 203-789-5727. Contact Elizabeth Benton at 203-789-5714.

Reader Comments

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Mike wrote on Mar 10, 2010 9:55 AM:

" Pay stations are confusing and inconvenient. Just raise the meter rates. "

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Government Knows Best wrote on Mar 10, 2010 10:43 AM:

" So times are tight and you cut expenses at your home and business and are wondering why the city government can't do the same? The answer is simple: All of our programs are vital. Vital to keeping public employees unions well staffed and funded and keeping our cronies employed! Without the money donated by public employees unions to political campaigns and parties, the system would dry up and a lot of lobbyists, lawyers and consultants would be out of jobs. The same is true for our cronies, who also like to feed from the public teat. As anyone with half a brain can see, there is no fat to trim. We simply must raise taxes. It's not a big deal, you would only waste that money anyway! The best thing for you to do is shut up and take it. "

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i luv maobama wrote on Mar 10, 2010 11:55 AM:

" i be thinking that the property tax should go higher. all them homeowners should pay. they have the money. why should they have a house and all i get is public housing? my girlfriend's welfare check does not go far enough any more. and i8 do not have any money for child support so why should i bear the burden of paying for these city services. we should learn from antonio cromartie of the new york jets. he is the man!! did you see sundays papers. antonio--7 kids--6 different women in 5 states!! who pays when he stops playing and has no mo dollar\$? "

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