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Competing parties vie for New Haven budget panel's ear

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By Abbe Smith, Register Staff
asmith@newhavenregister.com

NEW HAVEN — As the budget crisis intensifies, competing parties are scrambling to have their message heard before the Board of Aldermen's Finance Committee deliberates next week on Mayor John DeStefano Jr.'s proposed \$476 million spending plan.

While almost everyone agrees some amount of tax relief can be found, there are disagreements as to how much the budget can be cut. As it stands, the proposed budget would increase the average homeowner's tax bill by about 8 percent. Members of the watchdog group New Haven Citizens Action Network, and certain aldermen, have said 8 percent is too much. NHCAN is pushing for 10 percent in cuts across the board, and a group of seven aldermen last week called for cuts that would result in no tax increase.

Union leaders are preparing to meet with aldermen Saturday morning to offer their own ideas about where to trim. Aldermen and city staff have until noon Monday to submit their proposed budget amendments.

DeStefano Thursday responded to calls for drastic cuts to his budget, noting a 10 percent cut would equal \$47 million and would largely result in cuts to personnel.

"That would translate to a level of service cuts that I don't think could sustain a safe city nor a city with a level of acceptable services," he said.

DeStefano said most increases in the budget come from health care costs and pension obligations. When he met with union leaders Monday, DeStefano told them 10 percent across the board would result in elimination of positions. Regarding Saturday's gathering of union leaders to air budget-trimming ideas, he said: "I do welcome any suggestions that are specific about cost savings from union officials or employees."

Larry Dorman, spokesman for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, Council 4, said union leaders are encouraging city workers to call aldermen and oppose drastic budget cuts.

New Haven Federation of Teachers President David Cicarella said 10 percent in cuts would mean a hit of \$17

million to the Board of Education. He said most of the budget consists of fixed costs so any drastic cutting would result in lost jobs.

"The 10 percent is absolutely unrealistic. It's simply impossible. Are you going to lay off 200 or 300 teachers and administrators to get to \$17 million?" he said.

DeStefano confirmed he asked Superintendent of Schools Reginald Mayo to find \$1.5 million in cuts to the education budget. DeStefano originally proposed a \$3 million increase for the district, so the proposed cuts would still leave the district with a \$1.5 million increase.

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Doyens wrote on May 14, 2010 8:11 AM:

" Homeowners are not facing an 8 percent increase, it's 9%. With phased revaluation added in, the increase is in the neighborhood of 12 - 15%. Some will pay more than 20%.

As for John DeStefano, he says the big driver in the budget is pensions and healthcare. Has he done anything to lower that? That's a direct function of employee head count. The mayor's answer? Add 43 more employees so that we employ more than 5,000 people including giving himself a full time receptionist. He also keeps his city owned car as do others in government, bottled water, snacks, cell phones, travel, memberships and more. Then there is the horrendous and growing debt that consumes \$62 million in debt service this year.

This is not an austerity budget. It's status quo. Business as usual. "Let them eat cake." Take their money and foreclose on their homes, take their cars - that's the mayor's message. He wouldn't give up not one of his perks. He's a taker.

This mayor has made virtually no cuts. While he was laying off union workers last year, he was secretly giving raises to his top people, the highest paid people on the payroll. That was after he demanded a \$25K raise for himself the previous year, eventually settling on \$16K.

As for the school board, the very idea there is nothing to cut is laughable. This is the same crowd who after 50 years of Head Start, still can't get it right and the PR person won't respond to reporters because she hasn't decided on a PR strategy yet. They can't even close the windows at Wilbur Cross in the middle of winter and have 7 assistant principals at \$100K each standing around the hallways with the truant officer.

This mayor has aggressively grown the size and scope of city government with dubious effectiveness. We have 11 unsolved murders and a pervasive don't snitch mentality in our troubled neighborhoods despite the largest police force in the state and one that far exceeds the national average. We have brand new schools at astonishing cost to the state and local taxpayers and yet, educational outcomes are in the bottom 10% in the state.

As for the unions fighting budget cuts, their indignation would mean something if more than 30% of them actually lived in New Haven and paid the taxes that pay their above market salaries (most of them) and 55% add on for benefits, compliments of the mayor's race for the governor.

It is astonishing that the mayor would even propose double digit tax increases in this economy. It shows a disdain for the middle class. Every year, "I can't" DeStefano says there is nothing to cut, no savings, no relief for tax payers. Same tired and untrue refrain this year. But his latest efforts to divide the people of this city are despicable in the face of his personal failure to lead in this time of crisis. "

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