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Throwing money at New Haven's problems is not the solution

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By Jeffrey Kerekes

THE goal of the New Haven Citizens Action Network, as residents and taxpayer advocates, is to ensure we have a sustainable, livable and affordable city. We expect an efficient and effective city government.

However, any observer of this year's budget process in New Haven senses that most taxpayers clearly don't feel they are getting value for their tax dollars and that large property tax increases (60 to 100 percent across the last nine years) combined with creative and troubling debt financing cannot be the default ATM that allows this lack of performance to continue.

We have spoken with one voice across 30 wards. In an unprecedented show of solidarity, hundreds attended the public hearing on the budget where previously, less than 20 people took the time.

We believe it is possible to trim 10 percent this year. More than 1,000 people agree with us and more are joining the cause every day to fight Mayor John DeStefano Jr.'s proposed tax hike of 9 to 20 percent this year.

For the past few years, the city has balanced its budget by selling capital assets and shifting debt off its balance sheets.

This year, we have the most egregious attempt to mask excessive spending: Convert 25 years of future parking meter revenues into a lump sum loan. The proceeds will be used to artificially absorb operating expenses for the next five years in order to keep property taxes from escalating even more rapidly. It's reckless and irresponsible and will exacerbate structural imbalances in the budget.

It is clear that with education, police and fire accounting for 80 percent of the total general fund budget, we must see cost reductions here.

Since education is the largest cost, we must understand expenditures and what the public is getting in return. That may seem like heresy to those with a singular benchmark these past 16 years: The budget must increase year over year regardless of outcomes.

The truth is taxpayers statewide have been unstinting in their support for education in New Haven. Billions of dollars have been expended in operating, capital and special funds budgets. But, what about outcomes, such as New Haven schools nationally recognized as dropout factories and cooked graduation rates?

After years of denial, shoot the messenger comments and unsubstantiated claims of progress year after year, everyone finally agrees we have serious problems in education. This, in itself, is an admission of failure.

What has not changed is our diagnosis of what is wrong and the belief that money will fix most of it. Enormously expensive new school construction has not made a dent in performance, which remains in the bottom 10 percent of all school districts in the state. Graduation rates, dropout rates, performance on basic reading and math tests are all now recognized as extremely poor, despite some bright spots of excellence and for the most part, a dedicated cadre of teachers. But, if huge increases over decades has resulted in no improvement, is it not time to look for new approaches, to re-examine how we are spending our money rather than mostly worrying about getting more of it?

Educators argue that's what the current "reform" effort is all about, but the term is cheapened by a messianic belief the schools must have even more resources if reform is to be achieved. They never ask what's effective or efficient, nor do they know what the full reform plan includes, what specific outcomes will be achieved and what it costs.

This unhealthy fixation on money at both the Board of Education and City Hall is a convenient and disingenuous method of avoiding the reality of true accountability of value versus cost.

The fact is 90 percent of the fire department calls are medical, not fire; and, our Police Department is 35 percent larger than the national average.

The education budget is robust, but enrollment is dropping and the state budget is hopelessly in the red. We have 14 percent unemployment, decreased middle class incomes and rampant foreclosures by the city and lenders. Now is the time to shrink spending to reflect the times and to embrace what's effective, efficient and bears fruit. If not in the face of a crisis, when?

It is critical that the education budget share in the cuts to spending envisioned by taxpayers. Like police and fire, it simply controls too much of the budget to avoid it.

We urge the citywide PTO to join in forming a Citizens Education Audit Committee to make sure the cuts will not negatively affect classrooms. New Haven public school officials say they will cut teachers, paraprofessionals and programs directly benefitting children if it doesn't get what it wants.

Our mission is to make sure that doesn't happen and that we have a vibrant, sustainable and affordable city for which we can all be proud.

Jeffrey Kerekes is co-founder of New Haven Citizens Action Network. Readers may write him at 43 Lyon St., New Haven 06511. His e-mail address is jeffrey.kerekes@gmail.com.

Reader Comments

The following are comments from the readers. In no way do they represent the view of nhregister.com.

Cliff wrote on May 16, 2010 8:11 AM:

" Historically, cities take a larger share/burden of indigent people and this will not change not matter what mayor is in charge/leadership. But when you have a LIBERAL mayor like DeStefano, you sooner or later are going to pay more for it, especially when he encourages illegal aliens to live in the city and with no laws or restraints on ID cards.

Hey, New Haven is also a criminal haven; all high speed chases come and end in New Haven (if they can make it without crashing)! How much of the extra costs found in New Haven's education, health, calls for service are illegal immigrants? Maybe New Haven needs an Arizona law too? How much of our tax burdens pay for all the shooting victim's ER/ED/healthcare that survive their wounds, not to mention Yale New Haven Hospital's cost budget? A serious shooting victim costs all of us approximately \$300,000 each (surgery(s), medical supplies, ICU care, therapy, post care etc). Some times, the victim is nursed back to health only to be shot again, you know, minding their own business at 3 AM in the morning (of course some are truly victims of bullets gone wrong).

How much business is lost in New Haven due to these shootings??? Who wants to shop in New Haven? Only near the downtown area close to Yale will you see a thriving business (a sense of safety there and decent people).

60% plus agree with the Arizona law, but take out all Hispanic votes from the statistics/vote, it probably is closer to 90% agree. Profiling is NOT illegal. ILLEGAL PROFILING is when profiling is the only reason police question or stop people.

When is DeStefano going to be indicted for some illegal activity? I am sure he will not make the end of his term without controversy. I do not know what his crimes or how many... but long term reigns, entitlement and cockiness usually encourages criminal activity.

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