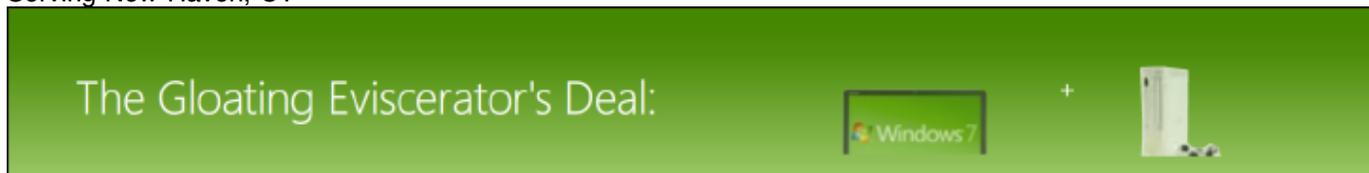


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New Haven watchdog group wants leaner budget, zero tax hike

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By Abbe Smith, Register Staff
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NEW HAVEN — The New Haven Citizens Action Network is hardly a new kid on the block.

But the 3-year-old watchdog group has waged a particularly high-profile campaign this year to oppose Mayor John DeStefano Jr.'s proposed \$476 million budget. The spending plan would increase the average homeowner's tax bill by about 8.8 percent.

NHCAN and certain aldermen want to see that figure cut to nothing. Others seek a more middle-of-the-road approach that would give some tax relief to residents but also maintain a respectable level of city services.

NHCAN is sticking to its guns on the issue.

"We want them to have no tax increase in the worst economy since the Great Depression," said NHCAN founding member Jeffrey Kerekes, who lives in the Wooster Square area.

In the past, NHCAN members engaged in the typical activities of a grassroots tax watchdog group: They spoke at meetings, created a website and posted comments to articles published on local news websites.

But this year, NHCAN has stepped up pressure on city government and is rallying residents around the idea of cutting the budget 10 percent across the board. They've gathered signatures from 1,000 people who agree with their mission.

"The galvanizing thing this year is the economy coupled with the mayor seeking an extraordinary amount of new taxes on top of taxes that already have doubled across the last seven years," said NHCAN member Gary Doyens of Westville. "It's a wake-up call for those of us who want to live in New Haven and love New Haven."

The 10 percent goal is viewed as too drastic by DeStefano and many aldermen, who argue the cuts could lead to unsafe and unwise levels of city services. Union leaders have said they support some trimming of the budget, but warned that too many cuts would result in layoffs.

NHCAN was born three years ago, when the city was getting ready to implement the first year of the 2006 revaluation. Kerekes and his neighbors started talking — and worrying — about how the new assessments would affect their tax bills.

"We decided to put our voices together" and formed NHCAN, Kerekes said.

"One of the first things that we did was to get a list of ideas about how the city could save some money and generate some extra revenue," Kerekes said.

The ideas started small, suggestions for where to trim \$10,000 here or \$30,000 there, drops in the bucket of a \$476 million budget, but the idea was to make small cuts across the board. One of the first ideas thrown out by NHCAN was to cut \$30,000 set aside in various department budgets for bottled water. Kerekes said the aldermen scoffed at the idea. "They thought it was chump change," he said.

Rebecca Turcio, an NHCAN member from the Cedar Hill neighborhood, said she represents lower-income residents of the city, some of whom will be forced to move because of the proposed tax increase.

"My neighbors cannot afford it, and they can't go to meetings because they are working second-shift jobs or three part-time jobs," she said.

Kerekes said he has seen improvements in the budget process over the past three years. He says aldermen have been asking tougher questions about the budget, and some are making more of an effort to listen to residents. But he believes the city's financial woes are far deeper than the budget gap DeStefano is seeking to fill with a tax increase. The city has hundreds of millions of dollars in pension and health care liabilities that will burden the city budget for years. He would like to see more conversations about the city's long-term financial condition.

DeStefano acknowledges the city is burdened by pension and health care costs both now and in the future. He said pension and health care costs account for most of the increases in the budget. Regarding the future, DeStefano said the city will take "a very aggressive posture" on pension and health care benefits during current and future labor negotiations. He said he is concerned about structural changes to those systems.

In the meantime, DeStefano said NHCAN's goal of 10 percent across the board is unreasonable and would result in layoffs and a drastic cut in city services.

"I think that NHCAN, when they talk about a 10 percent cut, does not talk about where those cuts will take place," he said.

Doyens disagreed with the mayor's claim and said NHCAN solicited ideas from their members and the public and submitted to aldermen 316 ways to cut the budget.

"If they want to find the cuts, they could find the cuts. They have every thing in there from water to snacks to private cars," he said.

Doyens also points to 43 new jobs in next year's budget that should go.

City spokeswoman Jessica Mayorga said the actual amount of jobs budgeted for next year is 19, or a net of 14 new positions.

"However, as cuts are considered, these new positions are being reviewed as well," she said.

Contact Abbe Smith at 203-789-5615.

Reader Comments

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

Cedarhillresident wrote on May 17, 2010 6:36 AM:

" A few notes:

First they are hiring them now so tech. they will not "Next Year" nice play with words PR woman.

no suggestions?

Citizens suggestions

<http://www.nhcan.org/docs/spreadsheets/citywidebrainstorm.pdf>

Managements suggestions

<http://www.nhcan.org/docs/budgets/ibb-brainstorm-handout.pdf>

Employee suggestions

<http://www.cityofnewhaven.com/Mayor/budgetSuggestions.asp>

And this is not including the alderman suggestions!! "

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Doyens wrote on May 17, 2010 6:51 AM:

" It really is offensive when Mayorga twists the truth. In the 2009-10 budget year, there were 4,987 city employees and under the 2010-11 budget there are 5,030 employees, a difference of 43 employees which is found on page 2-62 of the city's own budget, Summary of Positions. These include General Fund and Special Fund employees. As she well knows, 24 of those positions are police officer paid for with a grant this year and which the city is required to retain after the grant expires.

Ironically, she didn't pick up on a real mistake I made and that's the debt service - up \$3 million from last year. I've been saying \$62 million - It's really \$65 million and Mayorga didn't correct the \$14 million in new taxes the mayor and I said he was raising with this double digit tax increase. It's actually more than \$16 million in new property taxes.

Those who won't search and find significant cuts to spending always want to talk about an "unacceptable cut in services." Why not make significant cuts in non-service areas of this budget first? Mayor's staff? Travel? Memberships? Tweed? LCI? Economic Development? Building? Planning? Cars?Lobbyists? New positions?

But in the end, if services must be trimmed, cut. If this budget is imposed people will lose their homes, others will move, rents will increase and all of us will have fewer resources for our children and our businesses. Our quality of life will be diminished. What city services? "

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joey wrote on May 17, 2010 7:11 AM:

" Thanks for the good work people of Citizens Action Network. Accountability,transparency in our Govt is what we need more of.
It is appreciated Mr. Kerekes. "

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ray wrote on May 17, 2010 7:15 AM:

" my new haven home has a fair market value of around 275,000 - my new haven tax bill is 7,200-is that not enough? in milford a similar property vslue would be taxed at 4500, a significant savings; on top of that i pay federal/state income tax and untold numbers of excise taxes which do not include subsidies to the gas and electric company to prevent shut offs and to finance solar and wind energy; it must stop and now is the time; for me a 8.8% increase would send me straight to florida where the cost of living is much less and the weather fine "

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grundle wrote on May 17, 2010 7:31 AM:

" i just love how the city can not think of ANY possible way to save money, and the only solution to their problem is to raise taxes 8.8%. how about cutting the wages of your unionized workforce? how about cutting back on overtime? how about getting rid of all your illegal aliens that cost the city money?
three quick ideas just to start, and not one of them suggests raising taxes for people who work hard to live in

new haven.

the mayor and all of his cronies are a joke!! no wonder the city is turning into the armpit of CT "

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Cedarhillresident wrote on May 17, 2010 7:44 AM:

" I just got hit with a bunch of calls...here are a few comments.

"he wants to raise taxes to push us out"

"The Mayor has been doing what ever he wants for so long and he does not like that people are standing up to him. Instead of working with the people he is going to continue to push his budget on us"

" Why is he not cutting from the top down that will not effect city services? He goes after the workers as a scare tactic"

" I can not believe the city does not care about the working class!"

Many other things but these are ones that stuck in my head.
The people are scared and our leader is not doing the right thing! "

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Get your voice heard wrote on May 17, 2010 7:51 AM:

" Call your Aldermen and let them know that you cannot afford another tax hike! Let them know that they're killing the city from the inside out. There is so much fat in this budget and so little creativity from this administration that it's embarassing. I'm actually embarassed to love new haven. Of course the first thing the mayor sill cut will be the most "in your face" item - the fireworks. He'll be quick to destroy that which makes new haven great in order to keep that which makes him powerful. Leadership? Awful. Cannot wait until we can let him know how we feel next year. "

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Alderman contact list wrote on May 17, 2010 7:58 AM:

" "Get your voice heard"
this is the link to their phone numbers
<http://www.cityofnewhaven.com/aldermen/index.asp>
Call them ALL "

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Anon wrote on May 17, 2010 8:23 AM:

" I cannot believe that a small group of ego centric people are going to push my alderman into voting for a budget that actually cuts important services. Who are these people anyway? They only care about themselves they dont care about the rest of New Haven. "

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anons response wrote on May 17, 2010 8:40 AM:

" anon: understand that this city is overspending and bankrupting itself. we have over \$1.5 billion in debt and unfunded liabilities. "these people" are spending hundreds of hours of their own time trying to get our city government to answer real and valid questions about their budget. and the city cannot answer questions. the city hasn't been open and accountable in their dealings, and certainly not in their budget. "these people" are doing citizenship and democracy the right way. they have tried until their fingers are sore to get the PUBLIC documents necessary to get the real picture of what is going on in the city's finances, and time and time again the city snubs them and tries to pull the wool over their eyes. i am not a member of NHCAN, and i have been

watching with interest this dedicated group of citizens time and time again ask for the simplest of ideals: open government, accountable government, fiscal stewardship. and our city time and time again rejects those premises and martyrs these citizens. "

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Harry David wrote on May 17, 2010 8:41 AM:

" WE seem to be enjoying the fruits of heavy duty permanent Mayors whose continued incumbency permits this dangerous level of arrogance, secretiveness, micromanagement and insouciance (I thought that one up myself!!).

Because the Mayor has had insufficient opposition during 8 terms he may have concluded that the public will acquiesce to whatever he deems they should have and that the few sqwaks from those cannot pay more in taxes will soon die down.

The City spends taxpayer money and negotiates contracts with unsustainable and unrealistic promises as if it is dealing with OPM -- Other People's Money. It is amazing that contractual promises for huge pensions and benefits are made and accepted without regard to whether or not then can ever be paid based on the underfunding in the pension and retire benefit funds -- about one Billion dollars at last count and using silly assumptions about rates of returns, etc. The retiree medical fund is almost totally unfunded. The City now has just above one active employee paying for each retiree. The bill is coming due.

WE urge the Mayor to get an epiphany on the way to Damascus -- he did manage this epiphany in the area of Education! --and stop using PR skills, scare tactics and divisiveness rhetoric to address this serious issues. It is time the City makes serious efforts to run the City more effectively and providing City services that taxpayers can afford.

Fiscal gimmickry -- such as the parking meter monetization which will hand over 25 years of parking meter revenues in return for a 8% loan of \$50 million as a way to evade the ordinances bond borrowing to pay for operating expenses -- and financial engineering have had their day and it is time for the City to get the public on it's side and work together to address an issue which is only going to get worse in the next few years, as he himself claims to recognize.

Harry "

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DUDE wrote on May 17, 2010 8:42 AM:

" Anon
The group consists of many..you single out the organizers...but the email list is in the thousands... 1200 have signed the petition...online and off line. The is not a small group. You have been spamming NHCAN for years. Because of some personal grip you have with someone. Cut it out. "

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Disgruntled wrote on May 17, 2010 9:25 AM:

" How about taking cops off of construction duty? These are off duty cops working extra duty (and it counts as income toward their pension). They just stand around talking with the construction workers, or anyone else hanging around. They don't direct traffic or do anything useful, but are paid their hourly wage plus benefits.

They are paid for by the construction companies, but of course this extra expense is tacked onto the cost of the project, and the taxpayers end up paying for it anyway.

It is much cheaper for the construction companies to provide their own flagmen, but the police union demands these gravy jobs for their members, at taxpayer expense. "

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George wrote on May 17, 2010 9:40 AM:

" New Haven is a disaster. I feel horrible for all the hard working tax payers. There is no end in sight. For the amount of taxes you pay, the schools should be top notch and the services for the working class people should be plentiful. Not just services for the poor... "

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Ken wrote on May 17, 2010 10:13 AM:

" I want to join this group--every homeowner in New Haven should also join. For many homeowners, the property tax exceeds the mortgage payment to the bank (owning a late model car is also taxed excessively) and a lot of people are losing their homes because of this. The services the city provide, including Police, will never make up for the amount of taxes paid to the city by homeowners. The new trick the city uses is to raise the assessment of your house so that they could get more money at the same milrate--ray's assessment numbers sound correct. Try selling your house for the assessed value and a realtor will think you are crazy. I do not care what they cut anymore (schools, Police, Fire) because I simply cannot afford to hand money over to the city every month. Expensive school construction the last few years and increased busing (have kids walk to school) killed the budget; however, the alderman stood by and said nothing instead of protesting the high cost--they saw it as a perk for their neighborhood instead of looking at the costs. "

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NHCAN wrote on May 17, 2010 10:19 AM:

" Ken and any one else interested our web site is
nhcan.org
email is on the sight would love the help

our online petition is
http://www.petitiononline.com/mod_perl/signed.cgi?NewHaven&1 "

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S.Campion wrote on May 17, 2010 11:29 AM:

" Volunteering with NHCAN's Budget Work Group in 2010, I have witnessed an extraordinary process- over a 1000 New Haven residents from neighborhoods across our city united to offer the city a reasonable, fair, and just alternative to the Mayor's 2010-11 budget. New Haven residents owe the founding members of NHCAN their appreciation for their tireless effort over the past several years to bring transparency, accountability, and sustainability to the city's fiscal management. Residents have posted to the Brainstorm Initiative many solid and effective budget mitigation options for the administration's consideration. Union workers, PTO members, and other municipal employees joined the initiative by contributing outstanding ideas for budget reductions.

The time for debate on various line items, questionable revenue sources like the Parking Monetization plan, polarizing arguments, and small changes on the proposed budget is over. It is time to follow the example of city businesses, public and private agencies, and households-Reduce spending. The reality of the times demands no half measures.

On May 18 th the Finance Committee will vote on its budget proposal and on May 27th , the full Board of Alders will exercise its legislative authority to vote on the city's 2010-11 budget. The choice facing each Alder is - Will I support the Mayor's budget proposal, or Will I stand with New Haven residents and vote against unjust and devastating taxation. I believe that many Alders know that following the same budgeting policies will continue to undermine our economic viability as a city and will inescapably crush the public trust in the process.

NHCAN has tapped into a new and vibrant energy for citizen participation and engagement, which will continue to grow. It may be that NHCAN's most successful action in this process was to recognize and to respect the needs of city residents. NHCAN refused to participate in the administration's old tactics of pitting one group against another in the "We win- You loose" outcome. NHCAN has worked hard to achieve a WIN/WIN" outcome to the present fiscal crisis. Ultimately, the best solution is the community's solution. We are all in this together! "

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TheDude wrote on May 17, 2010 3:04 PM:

" Get the illegal Mexicans and every other illegal out of the city! "

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alexey wrote on May 17, 2010 7:52 PM:

" ray,

You write that your home is worth \$275K in New Haven. What do you think your home would be worth if it were plunked down in Milford or Orange or North Haven? It may be worth more, so the actual tax bill may not be all that much different. I believe that in my case, my home would be "worth" up to three times as much in a "lower tax" suburb, so the net taxes paid might not be all that different. I realize that every property is unique, but it is something worth considering in trying to compare tax rates from town-to-town. An interesting exercise might be to look at other towns to find homes very similar to yours in as many ways as possible and see what their tax bills are. You might also consider that some towns with lower tax rates don't have staffed, paid fire houses, rapid-response police, or proximate emergency rooms. But, they may have other amenities you value more. It's a complicated equation and not one-size-fits-all. Certainly not as simple as applying another town's tax rate to your home's valuation in New Haven. Each person must make a value judgement about the taxes they pay for the community in which they live. If you should decide to move, I wish you the best. As for Florida, watch out for hurricanes, alligators, boa constrictors, sharks, drug-runners, con artists, elderly drivers, drunken students on spring break, and the new, edgier Mickey Mouse. "

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What future do you want for New Haven wrote on May 18, 2010 10:39 PM:

" After 70 years of Democrats have you fools had enough? An educated, hard working community, a once beautiful city reduced to a crime ridden zoo starved for any economic activity. Schools are total failure, no businesses with any high value jobs. The path forward is very simple - cut spending, reduce taxes and enforce the laws . . . or vote Democrat if you want more taxes, more union corruption, more social programs handing out your money to scum which repay the favor by creating a state of fear. Enjoy the death spiral. "

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Rosa wrote on May 23, 2010 4:04 PM:

" It is really offensive that Mayor Destefano wants to raised our property taxes because of the budget. He is complaining about the budget but he keeps building more schools. We have enough schools to last an eternity. Crime has increased in areas such as the hill sections, dixwell ave, etc,etc and nothing is being done about it. Mayor Destefano is forgetting that we are in a recession in which the tax payers of New Haven can barely keep a roof over their heads. "

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